

## **Perception of Eco-Tourism among Urban Residents in India: An Exploratory Study**

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### **Abstract**

Ecotourism is considered as a form of tourism that is expected to boost conservation and socio-economic well-being of developing economies. For the sustainable development of tourism in destination areas, it is important to have responsible visitors with high pro-environmental orientation and a critical minimum knowledge of ecotourism. Most of the ecotourism destinations in India are in ecologically sensitive locations with bountiful environmental resources. Thus, understanding tourists' environmental orientation is critical for destination management. This study scrutinizes general perceptions towards ecotourism travel, the level of interest in it as a form of pleasure travel, and the obstacles involved in undertaking this type of tourism activity among the urban residents in India. Ecotourism help educate the public to protect and conserve the environment through travel, and create and maintain a sustainable environment for both residents and tourists. Yet, a lack of public awareness and positive attitude towards ecotourism and the environment is likely to lead to misrepresentation and misuse of the concept, and further depletion of the environment especially with mass tourism. The study finds that, with a sample of respondents who reside in urban areas, there is a low level of awareness and knowledge of ecotourism. More than half of the respondents are not aware of it and in case they are, they do not have sufficient knowledge about it. In spite of the fact that most are aware of its environmental aspects, little or no appreciation is given to the other aspects of ecotourism. In addition, most respondents also expressed indifference towards ecotourism and there is little chance that they would take such a trip in the near future. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for future research and managerial practice.

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**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Awareness, Perception, Urban, Environment

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### **Introduction**

Environmental issues began to gain pre-eminence by the late 1960s. With the rapid growth in tourism experience in the later part of the last century, concerns grew about the physical environments of tourism destinations. Subsequent to this realization, the concept of sustainable development became the leitmotif of scholarly debates. As stake holders became increasingly aware of the shortcomings of mass tourism, they searched for alternative tourism planning, management and development opportunities. As a

consequence, the idea of sustainable development came up as an alternative to the conventional neo-classical model of economic development. In this period, the fact that tourism development induces changes which can be negative began to get due recognition. The term sustainable tourism got wider recognition by governments, NGOs, the private sector, and academia towards the end of twentieth century. Owing to the evolving nature of the concept of sustainable tourism, it has been likened variously with ecotourism, alternative tourism, appropriate tourism, nature tourism, rural tourism, etc.<sup>1</sup> Among these, ecotourism turn out to be the most accepted term as it is supposed to echo our concern for ecological equilibrium vis a vis the global warming brought about by wholesale use of fossil fuel by the developed as well as the developing countries across the world, and other ways of polluting our environment.

Deficiency in community awareness and positive attitude towards ecotourism and the environment is liable to lead to weakening of the environment through mass tourism-the most popular type of tourism. In India, environmentalism is not a commonly accepted concept or phenomenon although it has been deeply entrenched in most developed countries for over two decades. In addition due to a lack of awareness and knowledge, Weaver<sup>2</sup> also argues that distortion of ecotourism is common place and that the reason for this is the public's lack of acquaintance with ecotourism criteria. Moreover, Ap<sup>3</sup> suggests that most people in spite of being in the tourism industry, do not understand what sustainable or ecotourism really means and as a result, misuse of the concept is prevalent.

### **Literature Survey**

Perception is immediate awareness. To perceive something is to become directly or immediately aware of it. For instance, through our senses we perceive or become aware of the objects, events, and people in the environment. Perception amounts to apprehension or intuition. How people perceive their physical and social environment is an important question for the contemporary eco-tourism operators. It has often been noted that it may be useful to think of human behaviour as being quite simple, but that most people live in very complex physical, man-made and social environments so their actual behaviour appears extremely complicated. The assumption that human behaviour is simple maybe very fruitful, just because it directs our attention to the environments in which people's lives are embedded. Since we are already controlling human behaviour, whether we realize it or not, we should recognize this explicitly so that any alterations in behaviour by manipulating the environment can be dissected to useful social ends. Foster<sup>4</sup> has

<sup>1</sup> D.B.Weaver, "Magnitude of ecotourism in Costa Rica and Kenya" in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 26, (1999) No.4, 792-816.

<sup>2</sup> D.B.Weaver, "Ecotourism as mass tourism: Contradiction or reality" in *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 42, (2001) No. 2, 104-112.

<sup>3</sup> Ap, J., Understanding the Asian Respondent When Conducting Tourism Research: Some Challenges, Pitfalls and Tips, San Fernando Valley, USA, in Nickerson, N., Neil Mosey & K. Andereck, June 11-14, 2000, 282-290.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, J., Provision for countryside and coast- National parks, Course on recreation and leisure, York institute of

taken the view that a deeper understanding of man's environment-interaction can be achieved by looking at the various psychological processes through which man comes to know the environment in which he lives, and by examining the way in which these processes influence the nature of resultant behavior. Human existence is mostly hinged on perception. Indeed, to be alive and active is to be conscious.<sup>5</sup>

According to Ebong<sup>6</sup> the answer to successful control of environmental problem lies in the planner's effort to grasp a whole range of problems inherent in people's perception of their environment and their attendant behaviour. Environment perceived sheds light on the notion that it is the human mind which not only impels the human body but shapes and moves the physical world, any change in man, his value, his attitude, his goals and aspirations, open to change by those who are trained and inspired to achieve that goal.<sup>7</sup> Mosley<sup>8</sup> says that the reason for different behaviours is the circumstance and the way in which things are perceived by us and others.

For eco-tourism project to be successful, more interest and attention should be given to the problems, attitude and the perception of both the elite and rustic dwellers. There is growing acknowledgment of the fact that, people respond not only to physical attributes of the environment but also to the psychological and sociological variables when they take decision on where they set up industrial establishment or how to make use of the earth's surface.<sup>9</sup> The perception of people mostly those of the elite class residing in urban areas and rural dwellers are quite dissimilar. The new viewpoint of the countryside developed because of the physical tribulations of urban living as the towns are heavily polluted leading to the evolution of the concept of ecotourism. Thomas<sup>10</sup> argues that the taste for pristine, uncultivated landscape was, to some extent, a reaction to this shift in the nature of the cultivated landscape. He surmised that the beginnings of contemporary concern with the conservation of rural environments can be thus discerned.

Ecotourism definitions are numerous and varied, although they have in common much of the fundamental philosophy of the concept. Most definitions concur on at least three of its prime components: nature-based, learning-centered, and conservation-oriented.<sup>11</sup> The extent to which these components are emphasized in ecotourism based research often depends more on the purpose of the study than holding to a generally

advanced architectural studies, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Ebong, M. O., *Mobilization of resources for rural development in Nigeria*, Wusen press Limited Publisher, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mosley, J. G., *The peak District National Park. A Regional Study of an Amenity Area*. Private Communication, University of Nottingham, Dept of Geography, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Saleh, F. & Karwacki, J., "Revisiting the ecotourist: The case of Grasslands National Park" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Volume 4, (1996) No.2, 61-80.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, K., *Man and the natural world*, London: Allen lane, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Orams, M.B., "Types of ecotourism", in *The encyclopedia of ecotourism*, New York: CABI, The encyclopedia of ecotourism. 2001, pp. 23-36.

accepted definition. However, even a perfunctory review of the literature discloses that most definitions are inclined to fall between two extremes: one where the contribution of ecotourism to the natural environment depicts humans as part of nature and another where the negative impacts of ecotourism represent humans as detached from nature and ecotourism as untenable in practice.<sup>12</sup> Ecotourism studies usually have grouped them based on the destinations they go to, the behaviours in which they engage the, tours that they undertake or in very limited cases, self-categorization by the travelers themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Of late and only in limited instances, research in this area has begun to address the question of identification of eco tourists depending on their psycho-social personal makeup of more stable and deeply embedded character traits responsible for directing visitor motivations and behaviors.

This approach adds on to the findings of the earlier studies, which reported on visitor motivations and perceptions. Yet, the way in which ecotourists have been in general identified is deficient by relying too heavily on token markers of behavior, destination, and/or circumstance. Although these are signs of possible ecotourists, at least on the surface, they do not guarantee these travelers being eco tourists without a doubt. Merely visiting ecotourism sites or engaging in behaviours normally associated with ecotourism (e.g. wildlife viewing) does not make somebody an ecotourist. Rather, getting at a traveler's potential to be an ecotourist based on his or her predisposition would be a more conceptually dependable way of depicting an ecotourist. It is important to identify the characteristics that constitute an ecotourist. Creating the distinction is particularly important because tourists characteristically participate in various activities presenting a range of experiences that they may find alluring to pursue, regardless of personal characteristics.<sup>14</sup> In the process of identifying and profiling ecotourists, it cannot be taken for granted a priori that their activities and destinations also delineate their travel expectations and experiences. It can be assumed that ecotourists have certain characteristics and attributes viz. attitudes, values, beliefs, motives, commitments, needs, desires, and interests that might predispose them to visit ecotourism destinations and engage in ecotourism-related activities. Consequently, these characteristics and attributes may be responsible to a considerable extent for shaping the travelers' nature-related interests. Presumably in certain instances, their predisposition might also contribute in shaping their commitment to protecting and conserving these interests, whether safeguarding the environments, conservation of native species, support of research, or the aspiration to volunteer.

<sup>12</sup> Chin, C.L.M., Moore, S.A., Wallington, T.J. & Dowling, R.K., "Ecotourism in Bako National Park, Borneo: Visitors. Perspectives on Environmental Impacts and Their Management" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Volume 8, (2000) No.1, 20-35.

<sup>13</sup> Ballantine, J. L. & Eagles, P.F., "Defining Canadian ecotourists" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Volume 2, (1994) No.2, 210-214.

<sup>14</sup> D.B. Weaver, "Ecotourism as mass tourism: Contradiction or reality" in *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 42, (2000) No. 2, 104-112.

## Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the urban residents' perception towards ecotourism travel and their level of interest in it. Specific objectives of this study are to assess the awareness and understanding of urban residents towards ecotourism, examine the perceptions of urban residents towards ecotourism travel in terms of the characteristics of ecotourism, residents' interest in it, and its importance, identify the hurdles faced by the urban residents in taking an ecotourism holiday and to test the following hypotheses:

H1 - Urban residents a) working in the tourism industry or b) studying travel and tourism have a better understanding towards ecotourism than those who do not;

H2 -Urban residents with higher education level have a better understanding of ecotourism;

H3 - Urban residents who are aware of ecotourism will have a greater interest in taking an ecotourism trip than those who are not aware of it

H4 - Urban residents who a) show interest in knowing more about ecotourism and b) who indicate interest in participating in an ecotourism trip will be more likely to take an ecotourism trip.

In a review of the relevant literature, few studies assessing the attitude of the urban community and visitors towards ecotourism travel have been found. Earlier research have mainly concentrated on the evaluation of ecotourism in different destinations in which achievement of specific conservation and development principles of ecotourism were dealt with,<sup>15</sup> while some have stressed on the definitions and/or impacts of ecotourism. Yet others have studied the roles and responsibilities of different players in the planning or promotion of ecotourism destinations.

Apart from a limited number of studies that profile eco-tourist and their motivations most studies concentrate on the supply side of ecotourism. Minute attention has thus been paid to the demand side, which look for insights of ecotourism from the tourists' standpoint as well as from a community perspective. This study embodies one of the initial attempts to examine urban residents' perceptions towards ecotourism travel. Ecotourism is defined in many ways in the tourism and environmental literature but a consensus on its definition is yet to be arrived at. One of the lucid and broader conceptualization of ecotourism has been proposed by Honey<sup>16</sup> who described ecotourism as the travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that attempt to be low impact and by and large small scale. It helps educate the travelers, makes available resources for conservation, directly contributes in the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and promotes reverence for different

<sup>15</sup> Ross, S. & Wall, G, " Evaluating Ecotourism: The Case of North Sulawesi, Indonesia" in *Tourism Management*, Vol 20, (1999), 673-682.

<sup>16</sup> Honey, M. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?*, Washington DC, Island Press, 1999, P. 8.

cultures and for human rights. The definition provided by Honey<sup>17</sup> will be used in this study to assess the community's perceptions toward ecotourism as it provides extensive coverage of its various aspects.

## **Methodology**

This study has made use of a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from a random selection of urban students and their parents. Owing to fund and time constraints, the survey was limited to Kolkata and few tier 2 and 3 towns of West Bengal and Jharkhand. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section I used a screening question to split respondents into who had heard about ecotourism and those who had not. Respondents who had heard about ecotourism were asked to complete a questionnaire pertaining to their knowledge and awareness of ecotourism and section II, which requested the qualified respondents to rate the importance of various aspects of ecotourism (using Likert type scaling) as defined by Honey. Section III was administered to all respondents and contained questions on the hurdles in taking an ecotourism trip and the respondents' level of interest in joining an ecotour. In section IV, information on demographic characteristics was sought. Data was collected randomly from students studying in colleges and universities selected on a systematic stratified basis. Data was also collected from travel and tourism students at two of the selected colleges so that a comparison could be made between those who had some knowledge about tourism and those who were not aware. Students received two sets of questionnaires. They were required to complete one set and to give the other to an adult relative or neighbor to complete. Collecting data through educational institutes is a time tested method for survey research to attain a reasonable response rate. The questionnaires were distributed and collected over a fortnight in April, 2013. In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics were reported for all items and to test the various hypotheses, Pearson's correlation, chi-square or the independent samples t-test were used, depending upon the type of measure used for the respective variables being tested.

## **Findings**

A total of 241 completed questionnaires were received, representing a return rate of 75%. It was found that, regarding ecotourism knowledge and awareness, little over one third of respondents (35%) had heard of ecotourism, 66% of respondents who were aware of ecotourism had never taken part in any ecotourism activities while 19 % had. For respondents aware of ecotourism, learning about the environment received the largest percentage of responses (47%) followed by building environmental awareness (32%), and the principle sources of information about ecotourism came from colleges and universities (24%), local newspapers or magazines (24%), and television (22%).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Regarding interest in ecotourism and hurdles, although all respondents were asked about their interest in ecotourism, almost 50% of the respondents (48%) gave a neutral response while more than one third (37%) indicated they were interested. Around half of the respondents were interested in a foreign trip in the near future when were asked if they would be interested in taking part in ecotourism. Fifty seven percent (57%) were either very interested or interested, but 35% gave a neutral response. For respondents who indicated interest in participating in ecotourism, the reasons given were a chance to get close to nature and a chance to understand the natural environment. For respondents who were not interested in participating in ecotourism, reasons given were lack of time, boring, and lack of information. The five most frequently mentioned hurdles in taking an ecotourism trip were: lack of information about the destinations; tour costs; safety; no companions interested in going with me; and lack of time.

### Relationships between Perceptions of Ecotourism and Various Independent Variables

Several hypotheses were tested in this study and the results obtained were mixed and are summarized as follows:

Hypothesis	Statement	Status
H1a	Urban residents working in the tourism industry have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who do not	Rejected
H1b	Urban residents studying tourism have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who do not	Rejected
H2	Urban residents with higher education level have more knowledge of ecotourism	Rejected
H3	Urban residents who are aware of ecotourism will have a greater interest in taking an ecotourism trip than those who are not aware of it	Supported
H4a	Urban residents who show interest in knowing more about ecotourism will be more likely to take an ecotourism trip	Supported
H4b	Urban residents who indicate interest in participating in an ecotourism trip will be more likely to take an ecotourism trip	Supported

### Conclusion

There is a low level of awareness and knowledge of ecotourism among urban residents. More than half of the respondents were not aware of ecotourism and even if they were, they possessed limited knowledge about it. While most were aware of its environmental aspects, little or no recognition were made of the financial, cultural, empowerment and human rights aspects of ecotourism mentioned by Honey. Most respondents also demonstrated some indifference towards ecotourism. Most were not interested in knowing more about it, and fewer than half of the respondents who were likely to take an overseas trip in the near future showed any interest in taking part in

an ecotourism trip. However, potential demand for ecotourism may exist with most respondents indicating they have not participated in any ecotourism activity before. It was proposed that residents working in the tourism industry or studying tourism subjects would have a better knowledge of ecotourism than those who had not, but the study found that this was not the case. In addition, it was thought that residents with higher levels of education would have better knowledge of ecotourism, but the findings did not confirm this. This suggests that even though the respondents may work or study in tourism field, their knowledge and information about ecotourism was limited and their knowledge was really no better than that of the general public. Further education on ecotourism for the public and within the industry is obviously needed. Hypotheses were also proposed to test if a relationship exists between awareness and knowledge (cognitive), interest (affective) and the likelihood to go on an ecotourism trip (behavioral).<sup>18</sup> Both awareness of ecotourism and interest were found to influence the likelihood of respondents joining an eco-tour. In conclusion, community awareness and knowledge of ecotourism is limited and this lack of knowledge will hinder efforts to promote ecotourism within the community. Unless further and appropriate education is provided, the community will not obtain a proper understanding of ecotourism and misconceptions about this form of tourism is likely to continue. It is likely that similar results would be found in other communities elsewhere around the world and it would be interesting to extend this study to compare community perceptions towards ecotourism with other communities.

The study does have its limitations. First, the study is limited to only two states in the eastern part of the country. Then, although a random sample have been used, the sample size was small (n = 241) and there is a bias in the profile of respondents with an over representation of female respondents and those in the younger age groups (15-19 years) compared to the profile found in the population census. The latter bias of younger respondents was given; having regard to the fact that college and university students were purposely selected for the sample. The rationale for using a student sample was within the community, they would be expected to have a greater awareness of environmental issues through education and represent the next generation of future pleasure travelers. Thus, the findings may not be representative of the general population and need to be interpreted with caution. Despite the limitations, the study does provide some useful insights on some community opinions towards ecotourism. A future study may be embarked upon taking care of the above limitations covering the entire country.

<sup>18</sup> Baloglu, S., "An Empirical Investigation of Attitude Theory for Tourist Destinations: A Comparison of Visitors and Nonvisitors" in *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Volume 22, (1998), No.3, 211-224.