

# Eco Tourism and Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

*The issue of development has been highly debated and crucial among development experts and policy makers world over. Economic development in itself cannot be viewed to be the only measure of development. Although, as countries make foreign exchange by exploiting and exporting the bio-diversity and other natural resources, these may be considered as legitimate measures to better the country, these activities may cause irreversible and irreparable damages to the ecosystems. Unsustainable models of development, followed by rapid industrialization of the countries, have caused serious environmental issues especially in the highly industrialized countries that have triggered the urgency of offering alternative development models. Sustainability in this regard has already become a holistic concept that combines the environmental protection with economic and social growth. Sustainable tourism is a positive effort, focused on reducing the tensions and the stresses, which occur between the tourism sector, tourists, the natural environment and the host communities. The world tourism organization (WTO) defines ecotourism as having a responsible visit on relatively undisturbed natural environments in order to enjoy nature and wildlife and cultural features related to it. Environment-friendly tourism aims to balance the trade of tourism between the natural and social ecosystems and also focuses on reinvesting the trade to environmental conservation and community welfare. Canadian Environmental Advisory Council (CEAC) also outlines ecotourism as an educational and nature-based traveling experience that aims at conserving the ecosystem and upholding the cultural integrity of the host communities. This view emphasizes the even allocation of benefits between four sources, namely the natural resources, the tourism industry, the host communities, and the environment. On this basis, ecotourism is a critical aspect of sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Eco-tourism, Sustainable Development, Environment, Community Participation, Conservation.

## Introduction

The development is one of the most controversial notions in the modern social, economic and environmental discussion. During several decades, the development was considered to be the process of economic growth, industrialization, and the rise of material production. Countries aimed at fast development strategies which are characterized as maximization of production and income at the

expense of the environment and social factors. Although these strategies led to better infrastructure and living standards among some parts of the society, they have caused environmental degradation, climate change, loss of biodiversity and increase of social inequalities. Negative impacts of unmanaged development have led to a lot of concern among policy makers, researchers and environmentalists. The developed or First World countries commonly known as industrialized countries have been facing serious environmental problems as a result of over exploitation of the natural resources. In their quest to grow, the developing nations are faced by a dilemma of ensuring that they harm the environment to grow or harm their economies in the name of growth. In this regard, the ideology of sustainable development is another paradigm that focuses on ecological sustainability and social equality in the long term. Tourism is a fast growing business in the world and it plays a big role in economic development, creation of employment and earnings of foreign exchange. But mass tourism has been known to damage the environment, wipe out the culture, and cause social friction in the destination countries. To overcome these challenges, eco-tourism has become an important concept of tourist activity and tourists are turning to be responsible and sustainable. This paper focuses on eco-tourism as a sustainable development strategy and evaluates its conB>>+>.>0?1?23A3A3C

### **Concept of Development**

The development concept has changed considerably with time and it can no longer be limited to economic measures like gross domestic product (GDP) or the income invested per capacity. However, as much as economic growth is still considered as a constituent part, true development is a wider concept that deals with a wider array of factors that contribute to human well-being as a whole. They are a rise in the quality of life, education and healthcare access, and poverty and inequality decrease, social justice, and environmental resources protection. Development is therefore a multidimensional process that is geared towards improvement of both material and non-material life of human beings. It is becoming clearer among the development scholars that economic development is not sufficient to secure sustainable human progressive because it is applied on the basis of environmental degradation and mining out natural resources. The high rate of global challenges caused by uncontrolled industrialization and overexploitation of natural resources include deforestation, defilement, biodiversity extinction and global warming. These environmental impacts do not only endanger the ecological balance, but deter long-term economic and social stability. The conventional models of development were mainly aimed at the maximization of production and consumption without attaching due significance to the ecological boundaries and social effects. This growth based strategy has not been sustainable. Subsequently, there has been the emergence of the realisation of the necessity of the holistic development framework that incorporates economic growth with the social equity and environmental sustainability. This combined view has given consideration to the responsible use of a resource, equity between generations, and sustainable development, which is the backbone of sustainable development and alternative develop/01

### **Sustainable Development: Meaning and Importance**

Sustainable development can be described as a form of development that meets the needs of the present generation, without any form of compromising the capacity of the future generation to fulfill their needs. This idea was widely known after the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987, which emphasised the significance of also considering intergenerational equity and environmental responsibility when planning development. Sustainable development implies combining economic growth, social equality, and the environment in a way that a balance is found to guarantee the

well-being of humanity in the long run. Economic sustainability aims at encouraging growth and development followed by efficient and responsible utilization of natural resources, which will in turn prevent the depletion of such natural resources. Environmental sustainability emphasizes the need to protect and conserve ecosystems, biodiversity and natural resources in order to ensure a sustainable ecological environment. Social sustainability will seek to accomplish social justice, cultural identity, quality of life, and the proper well-being and involvement of communities in the developmental process. These three dimensions are highly interdependent and complementary and failure to focus on them may jeopardize the sustainability on a large scale. To have meaningful development in the long term, there is a need to have a balance between these dimensions so as to have an inclusive growth. It is in this regard that tourism and especially sustainable and eco-tourism have a major role to play as they create economic opportunities, aided environmental conservation, in addition to social development through participation in community activities. Tourism can become a powerful instrument of attaining sustainable development when it follows the principles of sustainability and maintains both natural and cultural resources in order to send them to the future—

### **Tourism and Its Environmental Impacts**

Tourism has a major role in development, both national and regional, because of its contribution in the creation of employment, generation of income, and earnings of the country in foreign exchange. It enhances the development of related industries like the transport industry, hospitality industry, handicrafts and domestic services which in turn economically develops these economies. Notable however are the environmental and social negative impacts posed by unplanned and unmanaged development of tourism. The problem of excess flow of tourists generally results in overexploitation and exhaustion of such resources as water, forests and energy. The activities associated with tourist activities lead to land, water and air pollution either by disposing of waste improperly, vehicle emissions and more construction. In addition, the growth of tourism facilities often leads to the destruction of the wildlife environment and ecological imbalance. Besides the environmental degradation, mass tourism has extensive social effects such as commodification of cultures whereby the local traditions and the cultural practices are modified or commodified to suit the tourism needs. Tourism development has also in most instances resulted into the displacement of the local people

The mass tourism models in most cases tend to focus on the short term economic benefits at the expense of the long term environmental conservation and social subsistence, thus resulting in unsustainable exploitation of the destinations. The increasing pressures have prompted the call to develop non-traditional forms of tourism that in turn focus on environmental conservation, culture, and involvement of the community in this process resulting in the development of eco-tourism as a sustainable form of tourism development.

### **Theory and Meaning of Eco-Tourism**

Eco-tourism is a type of responsible and sustainable tourism which focuses on protecting of natural environments and improvement of social and economical life of local population. Unlike the mass tourism, eco tourism advocates low impact tourism and supports rich experience among the tourists and natural and cultural environments. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) shows us eco-tourism as a form of travel to relatively undisturbed natural scenery with the aim of observing, appreciating and enjoying natural landscapes as well as other wildlife and related cultural aspects. The definition emphasizes the significance of the experiences with nature, as well as respectful attitude to ecological integrity. Equally, the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council

(CEAC) identifies eco-tourism as an educative and nature-based traveling experience, which brings direct contribution to the protection of the ecosystems and the preservation of the cultural values and traditions of the communities which receive them. The two definitions also highlight the importance of education as the factor which helps tourists create the environmental awareness and responsible attitude to the nature. Community involvement is also emphasized on eco-tourism with the realization that the local population is included in the decentralization of tourism planning and will have an economic share of the tourism activities. The easiest way of describing the eco-tourism concept is by incorporating the three concepts of conservation, education and community development, so as to bring a balance between the tourists, the environment and the host societies. Eco-tourism is therefore a productive instrument of ensuring sustainable development by facilitating conservation of biodiversity, protecting cultural heritage as well as encouraging socio-economic benefits in lon

### **Principles of Eco-Tourism**

Eco-tourism follows a series of principles which make tourism activities sustainable in the environment, socially, and economically. Among the main beliefs of eco-tourism is the reduction of impact on the environment through the implementation of low-impact tourism practices, controlling the number of visitors, and ensuring the proper use of the natural environment. This assists in protecting delicate ecosystems as well as maintaining an ecological balance. The other principle is the conservation of biodiversity in which eco-tourism helps to conserve wildlife, forest and natural habitats by conserving them and ensuring that they are managed in a sustainable manner. Adherence to the local culture and traditions is also a tenet belief and eco-tourism promotes tourists to appreciate the indigenous culture, heritage as well as social norms and practices which means that cultural exploitation is avoided and cultural preservation is enhanced. Another crucial nature of eco-tourism is that, it incorporates the community in the planning, decision making process and management of tourism activities in the area, to make them feel a sense of ownership and leverage. Another principle, which is important in providing environmental education through tourists, is the awareness surrounding environmental problems, conservation actions, and responsible actions during travel. Lastly, eco-tourism focuses on making sure that there are fair economic gains to the local communities through creating job opportunities and sustaining local ventures and livelihoods. These principles make eco-tourism to be beneficial in the conservation of the environment, social development and economic development. With its capacity to strike a balance between the interest of the tourists, host communities and the natural environment, eco-tourism stands out as a viable model of tourism in that it is sustainable, enabling all parties and protecting the resources to be used by the fóló

### **Environmental Conservation and the Tourism Industry**

Conservation of the natural environment and sustainable management of ecological resources is one of the overall goals of the eco-tourism. Eco-tourism fosters good utilization of the natural resources through promoting low impact forms of tourism which has a minimal negative effects to the ecosystem. Eco-tourism aids in preserving vulnerable nature like forests, wetlands, coastal, and mountain ecosystems by restricting the movement of people and ensuring that environmental infrastructure is sensitive. The money collected by the eco-tourism projects is frequently pumped back into conservation programs, such as habitat rehabilitation, wildlife protection projects, and conservation of the preservations. Eco-tourism has come to mean a lot to national parks, nature reserves, and bio-spheres which rely on it as a means of generating financial help in conservation as well as lessening their reliance on government funding only. Besides providing direct financial

assistance, eco-tourism is also significant in making the tourists more aware about the environment. Eco-tourism assists in increasing awareness of ecosystems, biodiversity, and preservation significance by offering educational experiences, assisted nature walks, and interpretive programs to the visitors. The awareness motivates the tourists to participate in environmental responsible behavior when they travel and in their day to day lives. Consequently, eco-tourism does not only lead to environmental conservation at the local level but also at a global level, and it makes conservation a way of thought among tourists and key stakeholders.

### **The Eco-Tourism Contribution to Community Development**

Eco-tourism has a significant contribution in the development of communities through the empowerment of people and a fair distribution of tourism benefits. On the other hand, eco-tourism as compared to mass tourism which is mostly run by outside investors has an emphasis on local ownership, involvement and management of tourism activities. This would generate job opportunities of the local population in the form of nature guiding, hospitality, transport, handicrafts and eco lodges, which would also improve the income level and the livelihood security of the local people. There is a strengthening of the social cohesion and development of the local capacity through community involvement in the planning process and in decision-making processes. The conservation of indigenous knowledge, traditional skills, and cultural heritage is also a part of eco-tourism where the local customs, traditions, and practices are appreciated as the tourist experience. The economic gains that may be realized as a result of eco-tourism contribute to poverty reduction along with the enhancement of access to education, medical care, and basic services within the rural areas and ecologically sensitive parts of the country. In addition, the community who derive real returns on eco-tourism are likely to be more accommodating by conservation and prevent any activities that destroy the environment like deforestation, poaching as well as resource over exploitation. Therefore, eco-tourism can be a beneficial instrument to inclusive and sustainable development.

### **Environmental Tourism and Economic Sustainability**

Eco-tourism has its role to play in ensuring economic sustainability since it supports economic activities as it earns revenue but at the same time, it preserves the natural and cultural resources. It encourages small and locally owned businesses like eco-lodges, homestays, guiding services, and handicraft industries hence boosting the local economies. Eco-tourism keeps a lot of economic gains within the host communities instead of turning into a drain to other stakeholders by focusing on localized work and entrepreneurship. The revenues that are collected in eco-tourism can be used in the reinvestment of vital social services like education, health services, developing infrastructure and environmental protection programs. Contrary to extractive industries that exploit the natural resources in pursuit of the economical benefits in the short run, eco-tourism relies on maintenance of ecological environments and biodiversity. This dependency produces a direct economic incentive to conserve the natural resource, therefore, the value of natural resources under protection is greater than its exploitation. Eco-tourism promotes sustainable management of resources and long term economic capacity, by creating linkages between livelihoods and conservation outcomes. Additionally, the eco-tourism diversifies the local economies, decreases dependency on agriculture or resource exploitations and increases the ability to sustain economic lows and instabilities. Therefore, eco-tourism is a sustainable economic model, which is both income-generating and environmentally responsible and helps to lead to sustainable development and the ecological stability of the future.

### **Difficulties in the Implementation of the Eco-Tourism**

The problem of adequate application of eco-tourism has various challenges, despite its possible advantages. One of the biggest challenges is the ignorance of tourists, local populations and other stakeholders and this may lead to irresponsible tourism activities. The lack of proper infrastructure such as lack of transport, waste management facilities and friendly environment accommodations also limit sustainable development of eco-tourism sites. Unregulated tourism is generally as a result of poor planning and weak regulatory frameworks that exert a lot of pressure on the already damaged ecosystems. The other major risk is over commercialization which ultimately can water down the very essence of eco-tourism and cause the environmental degradation and cultural commodification. The lack of participation in the decision-making processes in the community can lead to the unequal distribution of benefits and local support in achieving conservation. Moreover, tension is always a problem between conservation priorities and development priorities especially in the ecologically sensitive lands where economic gains and the environment protection are at loggerheads. Devoid of proper planning, monitoring and management, eco-tourism is likely to recreate the bad effects of mass tourism. These are the problems that should be addressed, in order to make eco-tourism a real strategy of sustainable and responsible development.

### **Plans to Enhance Sustainable Eco-Tourism**

The strategic measures that are adopted to enforce eco-tourism as the viable sustainable development tool need to embrace the environment, community involvement and economic sustainability. To begin with, there should be good policy frameworks and regulations that will steer the development of eco-tourism, implement environmental standards, and curb overexploitation of the natural resources. Governments should establish proper guidelines on tourism activities, land use and conservation practices and also provide strict guidelines to be followed and strictly enforced. Second, there should be the encouragement of community based tourism projects to empower the local communities and to enhance inclusive development. Eco-tourism can bring about fair benefits and enhance ownership, through engaging communities in the decision making and the planning processes. Both the local stakeholders and tourists equally need environmental education and capacity building. Conservation practice and sustainable tourism management awareness programs, training workshops, and skill development initiative might be improved to increase awareness on the same. To help in the infrastructure and the marketing of eco-tourism, public-private partnerships can supply resources including financial resources, technical expertise and innovative solutions. Secondly, there ought to be proper monitoring and evaluation systems that will be put to trace the environmental and societal effects of tourism in ways that will ensure that eco-tourism is viable in the long term. Lastly, eco-tourism ought to be incorporated as part of the local development plans, a way of harmonizing tourism with other objectives of the community such as community wellbeing and resources protection. The ability to facilitate the co-operation between the governmental agencies, Non Governmental Organization, the business, the local

### **Conclusion**

Eco-tourism is an alternative and a more viable alternative to the traditional type of tourism and growth-based types of development that tend to focus on profits, ignoring the environmental and social well-being of the environment. The eco-tourism presents the solution to a balanced form of development by ensuring environment conservation that integrates economic development and the social equity to the benefit of the nature and society. It advances responsible travel, helps in the protection of biodiversity as well as providing income to the local communities due to

the sustainable tourism activities. Eco-tourism when well planned and managed can conserve the vulnerable ecosystems, facilitate interaction and participatory efforts of the community, and benefit the livelihood of the local populations by providing them with jobs and aiding small-level businesses. Eco-tourism helps the tourists to have meaningful and pedagogic experiences, which make them environmentally conscious and members of responsible behavior. Eco-tourism offers a level of sustainability in achieving the development objective without the need to violate the purity of the natural resource in an era where the speed of environmental degradation and climatic change is quite high. It teaches communities and other stakeholders to treat conservation as a good economic resource instead of seeing it as an obstacle towards development. Thus, eco-tourism is also significant in facilitating sustainable development by maintaining the harmony of the ecosystem, protecting the culture of a community, and securing the future generation and those of the current generation.

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