

ECO TOURISM IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN AND CHALLENGES PERSPECTIVE OF STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted during 2006 to evaluate the potential and opportunities of Eco-tourism and the problems faced by the stakeholders (tourists, tour operators and tourist's guides) in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. For this purpose these stakeholders with the sample size of 10, 12 and 48, in three villages of upper Hunza were purposively selected. The data were collected through pre-tested interview schedule. The study revealed that 69% of the sample respondents were not satisfied with the existing policies and steps of government for tourism development. Thirty seven percent of the sample respondents described the role of NGO's as average in promotion of eco-tourism. The Karakoram high way was thought to be a source of attraction by the 53% of the sample respondents. Rivers and streams were also thought to be a major source of attraction by 74% of sample respondents, as for mountains 84% of respondents strongly agreed, moreover 63% of the respondents agreed that biodiversity of mountains is a source of attraction. Fifty six percent of the sample respondents agreed that climbing is the source of attraction in the area. Policy formulation and implementation was thought to be a major obstacle in the way of promoting eco-tourism in the study area as, 77% of the sample respondents strongly agreed. Most of the respondents (57%) agreed that the poor infrastructure is an obstacle, 81% of the sample respondents strongly agreed that security is also an obstacle. Moreover visa problem, flight problem and religious extremisms are also the major obstacle in promotion of eco-tourism in the area which should be addressed through its own decentralized tourism policy formation mechanism. Moreover visa extension facility, establishment of tourism training institute and the improvement in poor infrastructure especially the communication, transportation, operation of direct foreign flights to Gilgit and Skardu should be made available at minimum tolerable costs.

Key Word: *Attraction sources, Eco-tourism, Eco-tourism development, NGOs and tourism, Problems of eco-tourism, Northern Areas of Pakistan*

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INTRODUCTION

Eco-tourism is the travel to enjoy the world's amazing diversity of natural life and human culture without causing damage to either. A vital requirement is that visitors should show respect for both the environment and the people who live in it. Above all, the tourist industry has to remember a central precept (Crispin, 1994). World wide fund for nature Pakistan (WWF-P) is pioneer in introducing sustainable eco-tourism initiatives in the northern areas of Pakistan. WWF-Pakistan in Northern areas aims at making eco-tourism as sustainable, responsible and environment friendly. To this end, WWF-Pakistan is closely working with the communities, private sector and regulatory bodies for the last 13 years. WWF-Pakistan has been involved in organizing the first convention on sustainable Eco-tourism in 1999, formulation of NA's tourism development board, training of eco-tourists guides and porters, development and distribution of eco-tourism brochures and introduction and facilitation of sport hunting in the area.

The term eco-tourism has, in recent years, become a popular slogan used by tour operators all over the world. It could be defined as ecologically, environmentally and socially responsible tourism. The main aims of eco-tourism are to protect and preserve nature and to help provide the means to do so (financial and educational) by directly supporting local communities. Other aspects, such as the sustainability of local culture and history also form part of this low-impact approach to tourism.

Eco-tourism involves visiting natural areas with the objectives of learning, studying or participating in activities that do not bring negative effects to the environment, whilst protecting and empowering the local community socially and economically (Christina, 1996).

The Northern Areas (NA's) of Pakistan lies at the extreme North of Pakistan, officially named as Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA) comprised of six districts named as Gilgit, Ghzer, Sakurdu, Diamer, Ghanche and Astor. Northern Areas are known as the axis of Asia. Northern Areas are located between 35-37 N and 72-75 E, where it borders Xingiang province of China. Chitral lies to its west, Kalam, Kohistan and Kaghan valleys to the south; the newly independent Republic of Tajikistan is only a handshake away and to the East lies the occupied territories of Ladakh and Kashmir, the place where the three major parts of Asia i.e. Southern Asia, Central Asia, and South East Asia converge. Therefore it is also entitled as the roof of the world (NADP, 2003).

The Northern Areas spread over 72496 sq. kilometer and populated by about one and half million, indicating population density of 10 persons per sq kilometer in 831 villages scattered all over the area. The per capita land holding is 0.124 hectares, which is decreasing day by day, with fragmentation in the families and urbanization. Of the total area, only 69,480 hectares (0.96 pc) are under cultivation whereas, about 60,000 hectares of cultivable land lies barren while, rest of the area comprises rangeland, mountains, forests, lakes/rivers etc. (IUCN, 2003).

Pakistan remains a land of high adventure and nature. Trekking, mountaineering, white water rafting, wild boar hunting, mountain and desert jeep safaris, camel and yak safaris, trout fishing and bird watching are the few activities, which attract the adventure and nature lovers to Pakistan. Pakistan is endowed with a rich and varied flora and fauna. High Himalayas, Karakoram and the Hindukush ranges with their alpine meadows and permanent snow line, coniferous forests down the sub-mountain scrub, the vast Indus plain merging into the great desert, the coast line and wetlands, all offer a remarkably rich variety of vegetation and associated wildlife including avifauna, both endemic and migratory. Ten of 18 mammalian orders are represented in Pakistan with species ranging from the world's smallest surviving mammals, the Mediterranean pigmy shrew, to the largest mammal ever known the blue whale.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To identify various potentials for promotion of eco-tourism in the Northern Areas.
- i. To identify the problems in promoting eco-tourism in the area.
- ii. To suggest recommendations for improvement and development of eco-tourism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was designed to analyze the potential for eco-tourism and the problems faced by the eco-tourism in Upper Hunza, district Gilgit. Upper Hunza was universe of the study. With in it, three villages namely Passu, Ghulkin and Shimshal, located in Lower Gojal had been selected for the study, because large number of tourists visits Hunza valley and specially these villages. Moreover most of the populations were affiliated with tourism industry directly or indirectly for their livelihoods and also a large number of young people were tourist guides.

All the stakeholders connected with the tourism were potential respondents of the study. 100% of the population i.e. all the tour operators (12) and tour guides (48) and also (10) of the tourists were interviewed as potential respondents of the study.

The data were collected with the help of a pre-tested interview schedule. Before the collection of primary data the interview schedule was pre-tested in the study area and modified on the feedback from the polit survey. After the collection of data it was transferred on computer. The analyses were made through percentage and averages, because most of the data were quantitative in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Satisfaction of the Sample Respondents about the Existing Policy and Steps of the Government for Promoting of Eco-Tourism

Data presented in Table I shows the satisfaction of the sample respondents about the existing policy and steps of the government for tourism development in the area. When asked whether the respondents were satisfied with the existing policies formulated by the government for promotion of eco-tourism, only 31% of the respondents replied in positive, while majority (69%) of the sampled respondents were not satisfied with the existing policies and steps of the government for tourism development in the area.

Role of Non-Government Organization (NGO's) for Eco-Tourism Development

NGO's play vital role in the socio-economic uplift of the mountain community of the Northern areas. The data in Table II describes the opinion of sampled respondents regarding the role of NGO's with specific reference to the promotion of eco-tourism sector. Twenty percent of the sample respondents replied that NGO's have lesser role, while 37% described the role of NGO's as average, moreover 23% responded that NGO's have more than average role, while 20% observed that NGO's have no role at all.

Source of Attraction for Eco-Tourists

The data presented in Table III states the response of sample respondents as to whether they agreed, strongly agreed or disagreed and strongly disagreed with the given sources of attraction for eco-tourism. The eighth wonder of the world Karakoram Highway (KKH) passes through the mountains of Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindukush. The Karakoram was built on the ancient Silk Route, the gateway between south and central Asia. When asked about KKH as one of the attraction sources, 41% agreed, 53% strongly agreed, 6% disagreed. Eighty seven percent of respondents were strongly agreed that Glaciers are sources of attraction, while the remaining 13% just agreed. It was also found by Jurrgen (2005) that numerous glaciated peaks like the Karakoram range, the Nanga Parbat massif or the Rakaposhi peak are the major attraction in Northern Pakistan where complex interrelations between local community's agents and visitors occurs.

Many rivers, streams and main tributary of river Gilgit join Indus at various points. These rivers and streams are unique in nature due to topography and geography of the area and contribute to its scenic beauty. Rivers and streams were also thought to be a major source of attraction by respondents. Seventy four percent of the respondents agreed, 21% strongly agreed but 4% disagreed. Three of the world's largest mountain ranges - Himalaya, Karakoram, and Hindukush meet in the Northern areas of Pakistan. Five of the fourteen peaks higher than 8000 meters including the world's second highest peak K-2, 29 peaks over 7500 meters and 1010 peaks over 7000 meters are located in Northern Areas. As for mountains 84% of the sample respondents strongly agreed and 16% agreed. Biodiversity verify the life on earth. It includes all genes, species and eco-system and the ecological processes of which they are a part. The Northern Mountains of Pakistan are host to 45 species of mammals, 222 species of birds, 32 of reptiles and 6 of amphibians. So, 63% of the sample respondents agreed that biodiversity of mountains is a source of attraction, 31% strongly agreed but 4% disagreed. Andrew (2005) concluded that in Annapurna conservation area, tourism development is reliant upon the areas of biodiversity.

Lingual diversity of the area is also rich as is the culture and natural environment. While majority 60% of respondents agreed that the languages also attracted tourists and even 20% strongly agreed, however, 17% disagreed with it and 3% strongly disagreed. The archaeology is the evidence of the cultural and historical changes occurred in the area. Numerous sites from various periods depicting the rich archeological heritage have been discovered all over the area and there are many aspects of archeology yet to be discovered. According to the study, 50% agreed, 31% strongly agreed but 16% respondents disagreed and 3% were strongly disagreed. The result for pasture was that 63% of the sample respondents agreed, 20% strongly agreed while, 16% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. As for hospitality of host community, 53% of sample respondents agreed, 43% strongly agreed but 4% disagreed. Moreover, 54% of the sample respondents agreed that fresh air/environment is also a source for attraction, where 27% strongly agreed at the same time 17% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. Similar results were found when asked about greenery and villages as 66% respondents agreed, 19% strongly agreed, however, 6% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. Trekking which attracted most of the tourists, when asked respondents about trekking 55% of the sample respondents agreed that trekking is a major attraction for tourists, 47% strongly agreed while 3% disagreed.

Northern areas of Pakistan are said to be the paradise of climbers and trekkers as many of the world's highest peaks are housed here and are definitely a source of attraction for the expeditions as is evident from the results of this study where 56% of respondents agreed, 39% strongly agreed while 1% of the sample respondents disagreed. Northern Areas are home to wide range of globally threatened species including snow leopard, Himalayan lynx and Marco polo sheep etc. In the study 60% of respondents agreed, 39% strongly agreed but only 1% of the respondents disagreed. Mountain biking is also a source of attraction for the tourists. In this study, 64% of the sample respondents agreed with this point, 24% strongly agreed but 11% disagreed. The lush green valleys and hilltops offer ample opportunities for paragliding and hence a source of attraction. Among the respondents 69% agreed, 19% strongly agreed but 13% disagreed with this idea. The Hunza river presents a scenic view while flowing alongside the KKH down the country and provides the adventures with a life time challenge for rafting and related sports. During the study 60% of the sample respondents agreed, 29% strongly agreed and 11% disagreed. The snow covered mountains are the major source of attraction for those interesting in skiing, 64% of the respondents agreed with it, 29% strongly agreed and 6% disagreed.

Bottlenecks in the Way of Promotion of Eco-Tourism

Policy formulation and implementation was thought to be a major obstacle in the way of promoting eco-tourism in the study area. As shown in the Table IV that describes the bottlenecks in the way of promotion of eco-tourism, 19% of the respondents agreed, 77% strongly agreed, however 4% did not agree. Physical infrastructure plays an essential role in economic prosperity of any country. The remote areas need sound infrastructure to be connected to the outside world for projection and exposure of major tourists attraction. Most of the respondents 77%, as the study shows agree with the point and 30% strongly agreed. However 16% of respondents, on the other hand, disagreed.

IUCN (2003) reported that Northern areas are rich mix of natural and cultural heritage makes the region a particularly important tourist destination. However, tourism development has been hampered by the lack of policy guidelines, insufficient investment, inadequate tourism infrastructure, insufficient human resource development and weak marketing.

Security is of prime concern to every human being especially when he/she is none of an alien country. Although there was not any security problem in the study area but when the respondents were asked in the context of Northern areas, they thought it as main hindrance. Especially some of the fatal incidents that occurred in the northern areas, which was exaggerated and propagated in international and especially western media, had a negative effect on the flow of tourists to the area. So, 81% of the respondents strongly agreed, and the remaining 19% agreed. Marketing lies at the heart of attracting domestic and international tourists to any area. Unless there is a strong marketing campaign that exposes the area in focus through different media to different classes of tourism, the promotion of eco-tourism will remain a dream. In this regard, 63% of the respondents agreed with it. 31% strongly agreed while 6% disagreed as shown in the table. Tourism is a services-oriented industry, requiring skilled work force, there, the importance of human resource development and capacity building is obvious, lack of trained manpower results in poor quality of services offered to the tourists. In the Table IV 57% of the sample respondents agreed, 23% strongly agreed but 17% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed.

Most of the stakeholders especially in public sector are unaware of the importance of eco-tourism, which creates problem in its promotion. During the study 56% of the respondents agreed, 30% strongly agreed, while 13% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. The continued tourism infrastructure development without any land used planning and zoning that could destroy the natural beauty and the large amount of solid and human waste by the expeditions on all popular trekking routes and base camps are serious threats for natural environment. As shown in the table, 66% of the respondents agreed, 26% strongly agreed while 6% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed.

Northern areas tourists have participate in briefing and debriefing session at Islamabad which takes several days. Thus the overseas tourists have to stay in Islamabad for a couple of days which they considered the wastage of time and money. The data in Table IV also illustrates that 54% of the sample respondents agreed, 44% strongly agreed while 1% disagreed. The visa problem was rightly singled out by the respondents as an obstacle. The problem becomes graver when tourists entering Pakistan from China by road are required to get permission from Islamabad to reenter Northern areas to undertake treks. So, 54% of the respondents agreed and 46% strongly agreed. The flights to Northern areas especially Gilgit, heavily depend on the weather in the absence of an airport to accommodate aircraft of large

capacity than Fokker jets. So, the majority of respondents (50%) agreed and 50% strongly agreed. Religious extremism and the attitude of the local religious leaders towards tourists and especially foreigners has been a hindrance for promotion of tourism in the Northern areas. As Table IV shows 53% of the sample respondents agreed and 47% of the respondents were strongly agreed with this point. When we see the attitude of the religious leaders we have to see what the attitudes of the local people are, when we consult the respondents majority (69%) was agreed and 41% were strongly agreed. National parks and other protected areas apart from serving their primary purpose of conserving biodiversity and natural habitats can also play a major role as tourist destinations. There are several national parks but no proper identity. When asked about National park identity, 69% of respondents agreed with this point, 19% strongly agreed while 13% disagreed. Hunza river is famous for trout fish and for that they have to get fishing license. When asked this question from the respondents 59% agreed, 23% strongly agreed while 11% respondents disagreed. There is no proper information about the areas which are newly explored. When asked this question from respondents in reply 64% agreed, 24% strongly agreed, while 6% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident from the main finding of the study that the stakeholders are not satisfied with the existing policies formulated by the government for promotion of eco-tourism in the area. The major source of attraction towards the area for eco-tourism are the Karakoram Highway, Glaciers, rivers, mountains, biodiversity of mountains, pasture, hospitality of host community, free environment, mountain biking, traditional sport Polo and Silk rout festivals. While the main obstacles in the way of promoting eco-tourism are policy formulation and implementation, poor infrastructure, security concerns, lack of awareness, visa and flight problems, religious extremism and trekking permits and fees. The following recommendations are pointed on the basis of study findings:

Although an overall policy for development of tourism in Pakistan is formulated and implemented by the Ministry of Tourism. It is imperative that every region with its own distinctive requirements should have its own decentralized tourism policy formation mechanism in line with the specific requirements of the area with the broad framework of federal policy.

- i. An enabling environment should be created by the government where unnecessary rules and regulations, which create difficulties for the tourists, should be changed. The briefing and debriefing for foreign tourists and permit for all trekking and expedition groups should be held in Northern areas instead of Islamabad. Moreover, visa extension facility and license facility for the foreign tourists should also be arranged in Gilgit for the ease of tourists.
- ii. The state of poor infrastructure in the Northern areas should be improved especially the communication, transportation, operation of direct foreign flights of Gilgit and Skardu and power problem.
- iii. The Silk Route Festival should be made a regular annual event of the Northern areas.

Table I. Distribution of sample respondents on the basis of satisfaction about the existing policy and steps of the Government for Eco-tourism

Sample respondents	Satisfied		Not satisfied		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Tourists	8	36	2	4	10
Tour operators	3	14	9	19	12
Tour guides	11	50	37	17	48
Total	22	31	48	69	70

Table II. Distribution of sample respondents on the basis of role of non-government organization (NGO's) for promoting Eco-tourism

Sample respondents	Less		Average		More		Nil		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Tourists	2	14	5	19	-	-	3	21	10
Tour operators	8	57	1	4	-	-	3	21	12
Tour guides	4	29	20	77	16	100	8	58	48
Total	14	20	26	37	16	23	14	20	70

Source: Field Survey 2006.

Table III. Distribution of sample respondents on the basis of source of attraction for eco-tourists in the area.

Attraction source	Tourists				Tour operators				Tour guides				Total [No(%)]			
	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD
KKH (old silk route)	3	7	-	-	5	7	-	-	21	23	4	-	29(41)	37(53)	4(6)	0(0)
Glaciers	-	10	-	-	2	10	-	-	7	41	-	-	9(13)	61(87)	0(0)	0(0)
Rivers & streams	6	4	-	-	9	3	-	-	37	8	3	-	52(74)	15(21)	3(4)	0(0)
Mountains	1	9	-	-	-	12	-	-	10	38	-	-	11(16)	59(84)	0(0)	0(0)
Biodiversity of mountains	7	3	-	-	6	6	-	-	31	13	4	-	44(63)	22(31)	6(4)	0(0)
Languages	5	1	4	-	4	4	3	1	33	9	5	1	42(60)	14(20)	12(17)	2(3)
Archeological & built heritage	2	4	3	1	5	5	2	-	28	13	6	1	35(50)	22(31)	11(16)	2(3)
Pastures	8	1	1	-	8	3	1	-	28	10	9	1	44(63)	14(20)	11(16)	1(1)
Hospitality of host community	4	6	-	-	4	8	-	-	29	16	3	-	37(53)	30(43)	3(4)	0(0)
Fresh air/environment	3	6	1	-	5	6	1	-	30	7	10	1	38(54)	19(27)	12(17)	1(1)
Greenery/villages	7	3	-	-	8	3	1	-	31	13	3	1	46(66)	19(27)	4(6)	1(1)
Trekking	3	5	2	-	5	7	-	-	27	21	-	-	35(55)	33(47)	2(3)	0(0)
Climbing	4	5	1	-	8	3	1	-	27	19	2	-	39(56)	27(39)	4(1)	0(0)
Wildlife viewing	5	5	-	-	2	-	-	27	20	1	-	-	42(60)	27(39)	1(1)	0(0)
Mountain biking	3	5	2	-	8	4	-	-	34	8	6	-	45(64)	17(24)	8(11)	0(0)
Paragliding	5	3	2	-	9	2	1	-	34	8	6	-	48(69)	13(19)	9(13)	0(0)
Rafting	4	4	2	-	7	4	1	-	31	12	5	-	42(60)	20(29)	8(11)	0(0)
Skiing	4	4	1	-	7	4	1	-	34	12	2	-	45(64)	20(29)	4(6)	0(0)

Source: Field Survey 2006.
 A = Agreed SA = Strongly agreed
 D = Disagreed SD = Strongly disagreed

Table IV. Distribution of sample respondents on the basis of bottlenecks in the way of promotion of eco-tourism in the area.

Bottlenecks	Tourists				Tour operators				Tour guides				Total [No (%)]			
	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD	A	SA	D	SD
Policy formulation & implementation	4	3	3	-	2	10	-	-	7	41	-	-	13(19)	54(77)	3(4)	0(0)
Infrastructure	3	3	4	-	7	4	1	-	28	14	6	-	38(54)	21(30)	11(16)	0(0)
Security	1	9	-	-	2	10	-	-	10	38	-	-	13(19)	57(81)	0(0)	0(0)
Marketing	7	3	-	-	6	6	-	-	31	13	4	-	44(63)	22(31)	4(6)	0(0)
Lack of human resource development	3	3	4	-	4	4	3	1	33	9	5	1	40(57)	16(23)	12(17)	2(3)
Lack of awareness about eco-tourism	4	4	2	-	6	4	2	-	29	13	5	1	39(56)	21(30)	9(13)	1(1)
Environmental issue	6	2	1	1	7	4	1	-	33	12	2	1	46(66)	18(26)	4(6)	2(3)
Briefing and debriefing	3	6	1	-	5	7	-	-	30	18	-	-	38(54)	31(44)	1(1)	0(0)
Visa problem	3	7	-	-	4	8	-	-	31	13	-	-	38(54)	32(46)	0(0)	0(0)
Flight problem	3	7	-	-	5	7	-	-	27	21	-	-	35(50)	35(50)	0(0)	0(0)
Religious extremism	4	6	-	-	5	7	-	-	28	20	-	-	37(53)	33(47)	0(0)	0(0)
Attitudes of the people	6	4	-	-	8	4	-	-	34	14	-	-	48(69)	22(41)	0(0)	0(0)
National park identity	5	3	2	-	9	2	1	-	34	8	6	-	48(69)	13(19)	9(13)	0(0)
Fishing licenses	4	3	2	1	6	4	1	1	31	9	5	3	41(59)	16(23)	8(11)	5(7)
No proper information about the area	4	4	1	-	7	3	1	1	34	10	2	2	45(64)	17(24)	4(6)	3(4)

Source: Field Survey 2006.

A = Agreed SA = Strongly agreed

D = Disagreed SD = Strongly disagreed

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