STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION APPROACH TO ECOTOURISM IN INDIA

by

Bhimrao Ghodeswar
Professor of Marketing, National Institute of Industrial Engineering,
Vihar Lake, Mumbai 400087 India
E-mail: ghodeswar@nitie.edu, bmgswar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Paper examines some of the issues which confront operators of ecotourism programmes and the development of an ecotourism approach in working closely with various stakeholders for well being of the local community. The purpose of this paper is to identify relevant approach of stakeholder participation in ecotourism based on the practices adopted by tourism development organizations in India. Various initiatives taken by the tourism service providers have been studied and approaches to stakeholder participation have been delineated.

KEYWORDS
Ecotourism, Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Stakeholder Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism focuses on preserving and sustaining the diversity of the world's natural and cultural environments. In addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water reuse, and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of Ecotourism. The research by Insch (2011) revealed that tourists' perceptions of the environment would affect their intended length of stay. While the focus of ecotourism lies within natural resource protection, experiences, and education in natural environment (including cultural resources), sustainability refers to more inclusive issues (social equity, economic viability, and environmental protection) as well as diversified resources (Jamrozy, 2007). Many factors are driving the call for more sustainable forms of tourism and these include increased environmental concern, greater interest in protecting remaining vestiges of natural ecosystems, empowerment of members of the local community, and a significant rise in nature-based travel (Hing & Dimmock, 1997).

As tourism developers begin to concentrate more attention on providing a sustainable product, research study by Eccles (1995) concludes that environmental problems across the globe are actually getting worse and that such problems can be resolved by responsive tourism planning as well as by government and industry working towards sustainability. Ecological degradation has serious social and cultural impacts (Turner et al., 2012). The health of the ecosystem cannot easily be separated from the well-being of the society. Supporting the local community, enhancing their economic well-being and contribution to poverty reduction in a destination increases staff morale and satisfaction which results in improved services and later, higher customer satisfaction (Font et al., 2006). Many countries now derive both economic and social benefits from tourism, and use tourism revenues to develop regional infrastructure (Eccles and Costa, 1996).

ECOTOURISM

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." Ecotourists tend to expect businesses to be environmentally friendly and prefer services that are courteous, informative, and trustworthy. In addition, physical facilities that were environmentally appropriate and equipment that minimizes environmental degradation were found more important to the ecotourists (Khan, 2003). Better understanding of the motivations and behavior of particular market segments is gaining increased importance for tourism operators. Demands for more sustainable forms of tourism have helped to stimulate the development of ecotourism and nature-based travel (Hing & Dimmock, 1997). Environmentally friendly consumers tend to be more proactive and attempt to link to those companies supporting sustainability and sustainable practices.

If tourism communities strengthen their input sectors by using more local products and services, encourage more local investments and participation in joint ventures, stimulate philanthropy amongst its stakeholders, revise its product and focused its marketing strategy with a view to improving visitor average daily spend, then the economic impact of tourism on the community would improve (Nicely & Palakurthi, 2012). Development and implementation of sustainable tourism can result in an important dialogue and policy-making process about the type of tourism development, greater awareness in the business community of the needs and contributions of the local communities, and a shift in attitudes across sectors and generations (Bowman, 2011). According to study by Herbig & O'Hara (1997), ecotourism can generate the diverse impacts viz. economic, cultural, social, and environmental impacts.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Several initiatives have emerged on various levels, including multi-stakeholder partnerships, multilateral aid agencies, international businesses and conservation philanthropy. Some of these initiatives involve partnerships between local businesses, NGOs, communities, government and other actors from developing countries together with international corporations, aid agencies and financial institutions (Raufflet et al., 2008). Complexity and interdependency among stakeholders have resulted in the creation of many local tourism marketing alliances (Palmer & Bejou, 1995). When the product involves multiple suppliers and distributors, such as a typical tourism destination, strategic consistency and coordination between these people becomes critical to its success. Tourism supply involves the provision of goods or services to facilitate business, pleasure, and leisure activities away from the home environment (Yan & Murphy, 2009).

From a stakeholder's perspective, a destination can be seen as an open-social system of interdependent and multiple stakeholders. Networking, alliances, partnerships, collaboration and clustering turn out to represent more effective strategies than those embedded within the conventional business model (the stand-alone firm) (Francesca & Go, 2009). Affiliation is the most informal linkage among the tourism organizations and it reflects an initial level of trust and commitment among the tourism organizations (Youcheng & Krakover, 2008).

Locals need to be educated about sustainability to preserve the product that actually offers them a living (Eccles & Costa, 1996). In the local enterprise model, a community takes ownership of its surrounding ecosystem by formal community business incorporation. This is built upon the local community's deep knowledge of wildlife, including endangered species, their traditional culture that respects nature, and economic motivations to balance livelihoods derived from natural resources (Raufflet et al., 2008). Sustainable tourism, in the long run, has to be ecologically durable, economically executable, but also socially and ethically fair in relation to the local population (David, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The paper draws upon the secondary data sources and interviews of select service providers. In all, 10 interviews of the middle level managers of the tourism development corporations from 2 different states of India were conducted. These managers had experience of 10 to 15 years in ecotourism activities. For the purpose of the study, the information was obtained by telephonic interviews and the same is organized and presented in following paragraphs.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION APPROACH: INDIAN TOURISM PRACTICES

The general principal of ecotourism guiding the initiatives of the Ministry of Tourism of Government of India are: (a) involvement of local community leading to the overall economic development of the area, (b) identifying and minimizing the likely conflicts between resource use for ecotourism and the livelihood of local inhabitants, (c) compatibility of the type and scale of ecotourism development with the environment and sociocultural characteristics of the local community, and (d) tourism planning as a part of the overall area development strategy, guided by an integrated land-use plan avoiding inter-sectoral conflicts and ensuring sectoral integration, associated with commensurate expansion of public services.

Various stakeholders, viz. government agencies and their staff, tourism entrepreneurs, local community, and tourists need to be sensitized and engaged in responsible behavior towards the natural environment and the community. Specific action plans include capacity building of various stakeholders through training programmes, involving youth in ecotourism development, creating environmental awareness among all sections of the local community, harnessing resources (local, cultural/traditional) to ensure flow of benefits to the community, and multi-stakeholder partnership (government agencies, private enterprise, local community, etc.) in developing and operating facilities of ecotourism. To encourage the Stakeholders to promote and practice ecotourism practices, the Ministry of Tourism has instituted National

Tourism Awards in different categories such as "Best Eco-friendly Hotel", 'Best Responsible Tourism Project", "Best Eco-friendly Practices by Tour Operators" in various segments of travel, tourism & hospitality sector. The traveller's code of responsibility for environmental and cultural sustainability are framed and widely publicized by the agencies.

The Ecotourism society of India is dedicated to the promotion of sustainable development in tourism and to responsible best practices in and among the tourism fraternity. The Society had initiated efforts to spread awareness and educate tourism service providers as well as local govt. officials on the urgent need to ensure perpetually sustainable tourism practices. Madhya Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board was constituted with a view to conserve natural resources through ecotourism and with a mission to achieve sustainable forest management through ecotourism. The Board has taken initiatives in the destination development, capacity building, ecotourism activities and infrastructure development of ecotourism facilities. More specifically, some of the functions are: (a) encouraging public-people-private partnerships, (b) generating synergy among the different organizations, (c) capacity building of government staff, local community, tourism entrepreneurs and other stakeholders through regular training programmes, exposure visits, seminars and workshops, experience sharing etc., and (d) promoting involvement of youth, both urban and rural in various aspects of ecotourism development through incentives including internships, stipends etc.

Ecotourism activities and facilities undertaken for promoting an area as an ecotourism destination within the state of Madhya Pradesh are: nature camps (camping sites in natural surroundings), eco-friendly accommodation, trekking and nature, wildlife viewing and river cruise, adventure sports, angling, herbal ecotourism, urban ecotourism through eco-parks, conservation education, etc. The potential of Eco-tourism and wild life viewing has also grown with a constant increase in number of vacationers visiting parts of the state of Rajasthan. Involvement of community, local artists, and craftsmen have been at the forefront in promoting tourism in Rajasthan. Some of the activities are: music and dance, handicrafts (pottery, metal craft, wooden artefacts, leatherware), stone carving, and nature cure centres, etc. to name a few.

Tourism organizations and operators implemented various initiatives that make a positive contribution towards securing the future of local communities, environment and economy. The primary emphasis is on minimizing negative impact on the culturally and ecologically sensitive areas of tourism sites/destinations.
   a) Employment: Hire as much local staff as possible and support their personal and professional development with training on various aspects in hospitality.
   b) Local Sourcing: Most of food, materials and general supplies are sourced locally; supporting local crafts and occupations, generating direct income for the villagers without compromising their way of living.
   c) Infrastructure: Adopting local techniques and styles with the help of the experienced local craftsmen.
   d) Electricity Generation: Sustainable sources of energy (e.g. solar energy) for electricity needs ranging from small to a greater extent
   e) Waste Management: A very strict 'no-litter' policy for staff and tourists alike, work closely with villagers to reduce litter, work closely with local municipal bodies to collect waste.
   f) Supporting the Local Culture: Cultural traditions that of song and dance with financial support for costumes, training and transportation, help to sustain the local skill as well as train the younger artists in the making
   g) Social Responsibility: Use resources to add value to the lives of the people in the community, viz. cooks, domestic helps, drivers, watchmen, delivery boys and the less privileged service providers.
   h) Eco-Development Committee (EDC): Camping facilities are managed and maintained by the EDC. EDC members get trained for catering, service, reception, security & guiding, etc.

CONCLUSION

Thus, environmentally friendly measures such as tourists' sensitivity toward the environment, recycling, reusing, and reducing of resources; training of contact personnel, a feeling of trust and confidence among the staff and tourists, etc. can be implemented to make the ecotourism successful. With the growth in environmental awareness and interest in conservation measures, there is an increasing scope for ecotourism growth in future. In conclusion, the paper reports innovative initiatives in promoting ecotourism that could inspire future approaches in ecotourism development in India as well as other emerging nations.

REFERENCES

Bowman K.S. (2011), "Sustainable Tourism Certification and State Capacity: Keep it Local, Simple and Fuzzy", *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 269-281.

David L. (2011), "Tourism Ecology: Towards the Responsible, Sustainable Tourism Future", *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 210-216.

Eccles G. (1995), "Marketing, Sustainable Development and International Tourism", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 7, No. 7, pp. 20-26.

Eccles G. & Costa G. (1996), "Perspectives on Tourism Development", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 8, No. 7, pp. 44-51.

Ecotourism Society of India - http://www.ecotourismsocietyofindia.org.

Font X., Tapper R. & Cochrane J. (2006), "Competitive Strategy in a Global Industry: Tourism", *Handbook of Business Strategy*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 51-55.

Francesca D. & Go F.M. (2009), "Tale of Two Cities' Collaborative Tourism Marketing: Towards a Theory of Destination Stakeholder Assessment", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 30, pp. 429–440.

Government of India, Ministry of Tourism - http://tourism.gov.in.

Herbig P. & O'Hara B. (1997), "Ecotourism: A Guide for Marketers", *European Business Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5, pp. 231-236.

Hing N. & Dimmock K. (1997), "Contemporary Tourism Issues in Asia-Pacific Journals 1989-1996: A Thematic Perspective", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 254-269.

Insch A. (2011), "Conceptualization and Anatomy of Green Destination Brands", *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 282-290.

Jamrozy U. (2007), "Marketing of Tourism: A Paradigm Shift Toward Sustainability", *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 117-130.

Khan M. (2003), "ECOSERV: Ecotourists' Quality Expectations", Howard University, USA, 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Nicely A. & Palakurthi R. (2012), "Navigating Through Tourism Options: An Island Perspective", *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 133-144.

Madhya Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board - http://mpecotourism.org.

Palmer A. & Bejou D. (1995), "Tourism Destination Marketing Alliances", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 616-629.

Rajasthan Tourism – http://www.rajasthantourism.gov.in.

Raufflet E., Berranger A., & Gouin J. (2008), "Innovation in Business-Community Partnerships: Evaluating the Impact of Local Enterprise and Global Investment Models on Poverty, Bio-diversity and Development", *Corporate Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 546-556.

Turner K.L., Berkes F., & Turner N.J. (2012), "Indigenous Perspectives on Ecotourism Development: A British Columbia Case Study", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 213-229.

Youcheng W. & Krakover S. (2008), "Destination Marketing: Competition, Cooperation or Coopetition?", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 126-141.

Yan Z. & Murphy P. (2009), "Supply-chain Considerations in Marketing Underdeveloped Regional Destinations: A Case Study of Chinese Tourism to the Goldfields Region of Victoria", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 30, pp. 278–287.