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Impacts of Responsible Tourism in Environmental sustainability issues: A Case Study in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Integrating tourism and sustainable practices will enhance positive impacts to visitors and the local community. It is an innovative mantra for improving the quality of life through increased socio-economic benefits and improved natural resource management. Green growth is a new paradigm to develop a resource-efficient, cleaner and more resilient sustainable development. The paper describes the positive impacts of responsible tourism initiatives in environmental sustainability. The case study focuses on providing better insights into the existing tourism initiatives in Kerala. By integrating the green growth concept with tourism helps to address the gaps of sustainable development. The research adopted qualitative research methodology to collect data from the tourism stakeholder's through participant observation and interviews. This aims to integrate the tourism industry with green growth concept to minimize the negative impacts of tourism development on the environment.

Keywords: Tourism, Responsible tourism, Green growth, Sustainable development, Quality of life,

Introduction

In this 21st era tourism industry is considered as one of the most contributing industry in economic development and can even contribute a sustainable and inclusive growth in the every socio-economic sector of the economy (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Hunt & Rogerson, 2013; Williams & Shaw, 1991). Moreover, tourism represents a framework which includes the people from all credentials can engage in the sector, be that as a tourist, entrepreneur or locals at the tourism destinations or even tourism stakeholders (Black stock 2005; Reed 1997). Tourism can promote local business opportunities and plays a major role in improving the quality of life through increased socio-economic benefits and improved natural resource management (Frey & George, 2010).

Tourism should focus on addressing the sustainability challenges in destination by inspiring the visitors, local community and tourism stakeholders to be more responsible with their activities. *“Tourism hides its unsustainability behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it appears so sustainable. We too easily imagine that tourism as the embodiment of sustainability, when in reality it may represent unrealized hopes and desires for the world we want to live in, the environments we want to inhabit, and economy we want to participate in”* (Hollenhorst, Houge-Mackenzie & Ostergren 2014, p. 306). Responsible tourism considers economic, social and environmental aspects as the three pillars of tourism initiatives in the

destinations. The academic literature has focused on developing a conceptual framework with the socio-economic and environmental impacts which is strongly influenced by local community, infrastructure and availability of natural resources in the destinations. Green growth is highly appealing concept for rethinking the growth strategies to mitigate the sustainability challenges. It considers bio diversity conservation, reducing the carbon emissions, green technology and climate change. Tourism is an interdisciplinary industry which can integrate innovative practices of green growth to foster sustainable development. It means ensuring the natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Responsible Tourism initiatives in Kumarakom in resolving the environmental sustainability issues in the destinations. To evaluate the positive and negative impacts, a case study approach with qualitative methodology was adopted to understand the perceptions of the local community, government officials and tourism stakeholders. By integrating tourism initiatives and green growth can contribute a better understanding in the area of environment sustainability and helps in transition to a sustainable development.

Background Information

The World Commission on Environment and Development states that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without comprising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 29). The responsible tourism is a local movement and it tries to resolve the existing local socio-economic and environmental issues in the destination for sustainable development. Responsible Tourism is about ‘making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit’ (Cape Town Declaration, 2002). The word "responsible" means a way of being truthful about the fact that all tourism has impacts, which is often difficult to measure. The definition of the responsible tourism also sharpens the conceptualisation of the core elements “Responsible tourism complies with the principles of social and economic justice and exerts full respect towards the environment and its cultures. It recognizes the centrality of the local host community and its right to act as a protagonist in developing a sustainable and responsible tourism. Responsible tourism actuates to foster a positive interaction between the tourist industry, the local communities and the travellers”, defined by Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile (AITR) members in 2005 (Miryala & Gade, 2016, pp. 39-40). It focuses on minimizing the negative economic, environmental and social impacts, enhancing the well-being of host communities and participating the local people in decision making that affect their lives. Furthermore, it also looks into the betterment of tourist experience and conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Tourism is one of the most promising industry to enrich the sustainable growth of the world economy and key to driving the defining trends of the transition to a green economy (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013). According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) green growth for developing countries defines green growth as “A matter of both economic policy and sustainable development policy which tackles the two key imperatives

together: the continued inclusive economic growth needed by developing countries to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing; and improved environmental management needed to tackle resource scarcities and climate change for the betterment of future generation” (2012, p. 1). The ‘Green Growth’ paradigm as an approach has a wider scope in expanding the sustainable practices in tourism industry and development which, which emphasizes decarbonization, the efficient use of natural resources and management of environmental impacts (Jacobs, 2012; UNEP, 2011). The Finance Commission of India articulated green growth as involving “rethinking growth strategies regarding their impact(s) on environmental sustainability and the environmental resources available to poor and vulnerable groups” (Thirteenth Finance Commission & 2007, p. 3.15). Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will still increase by a multiple of about 3.5 in 2030 compared with 2005 levels of carbon dioxide equivalent (Sathaye, Shukla, & Ravindranath, 2006; Vörösmarty, Green, Salisbury, & Lammers, 2000). In the Green Growth vision 2050 by Terry DeLacy and Geoffrey Lipman human beings have the duty to conserve the earth’s resource, by decoupling emissions growth from economic growth, preserving biodiversity and efficiently managing the resources more carefully and wisely for meeting the future needs (Lipman & Vorster, 2011). The Table 2 summarizes the green growth outcomes.

Economic Outcomes	Increased and more equitably distributed GDP production of conventional goods and services
	Innovation, access and uptake green technologies
	Increased production of unpriced ecosystem services or their reduction prevented
	Economic diversification
Environmental Outcomes	Increased productivity and efficiency of natural resources use
	Reduced adverse environmental impacts and improved risk management
	Natural capital used within ecological limits
	Other types of capital increased through use of non-renewable natural capital
Social Outcomes	Increased livelihood opportunities, income and/or quality of life, notably of the poor
	Decent jobs that benefit poor people created and sustained
	Enhanced social, human and knowledge capital
	Reduced inequality

Table 1: Green Growth Outcomes, *Source: OECD Green Growth for Developing countries 2012*

Overview of Tourism in Kerala

Kerala is becoming one of the top holiday destinations in the world with its spectacular and rich 2000-year-old cultural history and scenic beauty (Sreekumar & Parayil, 2002; Vasudevan, 2008). Kerala is known as ‘God’s own country’ and a prime tourism destination on the national and international map and is considered as the tour leader in India (Ebitu, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2006). It is a beautiful and ideal destination with pristine beaches, coastal plains, hill stations, backwaters and the highlands for a relaxing holiday. Figure 1 clearly highlights the location of state Kerala in Indian political map and major tourist destinations in Kerala.



Figure 1: The Indian political map and the location of the state Kerala and major tourist destinations in Kerala.

Tourism initiatives have to redefine agenda to minimize the negative impacts on the environment and to preserve the cultural integrity. The first tourism policy of the state was announced in 1995 underlining the importance of Public-Private Partnership. The Tourism Vision 2025 states "To make Kerala, God’s Own Country, and an upmarket high-quality tourist destination through rational utilization of resources with a focus on integrated development of infrastructure sector, conserving and preserving the heritage and environment and enhancing productivity, income, creating employment opportunities, alleviating poverty, thereby making tourism the most important sector for the socioeconomic development and environment protection of the State" (Department of Tourism, 2012). The report released by Kerala Tourism Department shows that the international tourist arrivals during the year 2017 were 10, 91,870. It clearly shows a drastic increase of 5.15% of international tourist arrivals as compared to 2016. And the domestic tourist arrival to Kerala during the year 2017 was 146, 73,520 (Department of Tourism, 2017). The responsible tourism initiatives were implemented in four tourist destinations namely Kovalam, Kumarakom, Thekkady and Vythiri in Kerala in 2007 within a tag name ‘Better Together’. In the second International

Conference on Responsible Tourism 2008 held in Kerala Goodwin highlighted both public and private initiatives can contribute more to people in tourist destinations by the implementation of innovative practices and policies for the betterment of livelihoods (Frey & George 2010).

Kumarakom has become a very popular tourist destination after the implementation of Responsible Tourism initiatives. For this study we are considering the environmental impacts of responsible tourism initiatives in Kumarakom destination. The setting in the backdrop of Vembanad Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Kerala has gifted the destination with panoramic views. The village of Kumarakom enchanting backwater destination with houseboats and fishing make a fabulous experience for the visitors.

Research Methodology

This research has made an attempt to examine the environmental impacts of responsible tourism with local communities, service providers, government officials and local business units. It identifies the expectations of local communities, effectiveness of supporting services and community engagement in environmentally sustainable activities. This paper is based on a case study of environmental impacts of responsible tourism and holistic insights of tourism stakeholders in environmental sustainability. The study used qualitative research methodology incorporating interviews and focus group discussions to seek experience and themes within a case study approach. The data were collected in the period of September to December 2017 by face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 27 respondents constituting local government authorities (5), responsible destination coordinator and local people (7), village life experience package participants (7), police and security officers (3), hotels (3), and academic field (3) and two focus group discussions with boating and community development society members provides more clarity about the environmental sustainability challenges in Kumarakom. The data collected were recorded in tapes and notes, lasted between 45-90 minutes in length. The collected data were coded and analysed using NVivo software. The findings highlight positive impacts of responsible tourism in addressing some sustainability issues. The following section describes the major findings and outcomes of innovative responsible tourism initiatives.

Finding of the study

From interviews and focus group discussions its evident that, in initial stages of tourism being introduced in Kumarakom the local community welcomed tourism industry with expectations of employment opportunities, income generation and appreciation of land value. But as tourism developed the accommodation sector including resorts and hotels hired most employees from outside Kumarakom. As well the clustering of resorts on the banks of backwaters was a major hinderance to access by the local community for fishing, shell collection and other household activities (P. Mathew & Kumar, 2014). Hence the local community started to protest the tourism industry with strikes and placards. In 2007, a Responsible Tourism initiative was commenced focused on generating positive impacts on economic, social and environmental sustainability. Table 2 shows the number of participants

included in the initial stages of developing the responsible tourism framework. Responsible tourism has created a great impact on the economic, social, cultural, political and environmental landscape in Kerala. Researchers assert the need for responsible tourism as it not only benefits the locals by enhancing the well-being of host communities but also makes tourism a more eloquent experience for tourists through meaningful linkages in understanding cultural diversity of the destination (Blackstock, 2005; Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Reed, 1997).

Table 2: Details of initial Sensitization Programs (Phase: 1)

Sl. No.	Participants in RT	Number of participants
1.	Local self-government Members	45
2.	People Representatives	10
3.	Partnering Hotels	135
4.	Kudumbashree Office bearers	82
5.	Samruthi activity group	82
6.	Kudumbashree micro Enterprises	88
7.	Kudumbashree cultivation groups	140
	Total	582

Source: Responsible tourism state cell Kerala

In Kerala, a Destination Level Responsible Tourism Committee (DLRTC) was developed to enhance the relationship between stakeholders in the tourism industry and the local community. After considering demand for local products and services, the State Level Responsible Tourism Committee decided to implement a State Poverty Eradication Mission and it is popularly known as Kudumbashree (Mathew & Kumar, 2014; Venu & Goodwin, 2008) This helped the tourism industry to expand the employment opportunities from highly skilled to non-skilled people in the local community. ‘Village life experience package’ and ‘a day with farmers’ are innovative initiatives which provides a better understanding of real-life situations and local culture in the local community. Majority of the respondents highlighted responsible tourism initiatives contributed for poverty alleviation and employment opportunities to local community. It also encouraged local communities in the supply vegetables to the hotels and resorts.

Positive Impacts of Responsible Tourism in Environment

Mangrove Regeneration Campaign

The roots of the mangrove physically buffer shorelines from the erosive impacts of waves and storms. In addition, mangroves are used by mammals, reptiles and migratory birds as feeding and breeding grounds, and provide crucial habitats for fish and crustacean species of commercial importance. In the focus group discussion and interviews the participants mentioned that with the clustering of resorts and hotels in Kumarakom adversely affected the number of mangrove trees in destination. It made negative impacts on natural habitats, breeding of fishes and soil erosion in Kumarakom. The local people were ignorant about the

advantages of the mangrove. With the Responsible tourism initiative, a campaign on the mangrove regeneration was organised and planted around thousand mangroves in Kumarakom locality. It helps to create awareness to local people about the importance of mangroves in the destination. Many participants suggested that responsible tourism contributed some practices for sustainable development in Kumarakom:

..... took initiative to conserve the resources in Kumarakom through campaigns and awareness programs, for e.g. authorities will charge fine to guests who drops plastic waste and cans in bird sanctuary.... (Participant 10 – Local community)

Promote farming

Agriculture was the major source of income for the local people. People left agriculture cultivation because of low yield, increase in the cost of production and low demand for local products. The uncultivated land and paddy fields were identified through surveys and resource mapping in the destination. The Responsible tourism consultant Kudumbashree units-initiated paddy cultivation on 55 acres of land and around 600 homestead farmers took up vegetable farming to meet the demands of local hotels and resorts. Response from local community and government officials states that responsible tourism took initiative to reduce the gap between the local production and supply of local products in Kumarakom:

.... encourage the resorts use local available products such as papaya, coconut, banana leaves, tender coconut etc. to support local community.... (Participant 7- Government official)

....it helps to create demand for our products and encourage us to start agricultural framing. Local government authorities arranged classes on framing, cultivation etc.... (Participant 8- Local community)

In addition, the responses from the government officials states that Grama-Panchayat encouraged them to start the vegetable farming in 30 acres of land. Moreover, the destination also promotes organic farming to protect the environment and provide awareness among the local people. So, it helps the local community to improve a positive outlook towards farming and agricultural cultivation. It helps to generate income and better livelihoods for the local people.

Fish Farms and Lotus Cultivation

The responsible tourism cell identified the opportunity for fish cultivation and lotus cultivation in twenty-six pounds which were not well maintained. Fish cultivation was established in twenty ponds and lotus cultivations in six (Manoj, 2010). Participants emphasize that it created an economic impact in the local community and also conserved environmental resources.

Community awareness program

In a rural context, local community will not be aware of concepts of tourism management. The DLRTC officials highlighted the department of tourism and responsible tourism cell arranged a destination level awareness program on the adverse impacts of child labor,

exploitation, prostitution etc. In the tourism industry, the community should take a clean environment by identifying and preventing the illegal activities.

Reduce Plastic Waste

From interviews and focus group discussions its evident that, plastic was one of major issue in the destination that destroys natural habitat of birds. The visitors used to carry plastic bags, bottles and cans to the bird sanctuary and destroying habitats with plastic waste. With the introduction of responsible tourism initiatives has taken adequate steps to reduce the plastic waste in Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary and declared as plastic free zone.

Issue of certificate

Certification was introduced to encourage the resort and hotel groups to follow sustainable and environmentally friendly practices e.g. usage of paper bags and cloth bags, water recycling. It also considers various measures to reduce the energy usage in the tourism industry. Total score of 1000 has been divided into under four responsibility categories as;

Sustainable Management 200
Socio Cultural responsibility 250
Economic responsibility 250
Environmental responsibility 300

The properties that have scores between 750 – 1000, 600-749 and 500-599 will be classified into Platinum, Gold and Silver respectively (Department of Tourism 2012).

Discussions and Conclusion

The tourism industry contributes positive and negative impacts to destination and local community. Some of the major finding and sustainability challenges provided by the management, employees, and local community are water pollution, scarcity of fishes and waste management. Backwater tourism is a major attraction of the destination, but indirectly it contributes to water pollution, it is reported that three layers of waste such as plastic waste, cooking oil waste and petroleum can be identified in lake and water bodies. The government should take adequate steps to monitor house boats to control water pollution. The fishing is one of the major occupations of local community. With the expansion of tourism industry, fish population has drastically reduced due to improper waste management in destination. Also, the government must seek local community proposals along with tourism industry expansion. The identification of these findings and sustainability challenges provides a better opportunity for further research agenda for green growth. It clear that water pollution is one of the major concerns in the destination. So, there is a wider scope in expanding the green growth concept along with responsible tourism initiatives to maintain the environment sustainability. Many participants suggested that responsible tourism has further scope to address environmental sustainability challenges in Kumarakom:

.... local people identified the major sustainability issues such as water pollution, reduction in fish population, soil erosion etc., as most of local community live their livelihoods on fishing and

agriculture. So, it was easy for them to identify sustainability issues (Participant 9 - Government official).

The case study will help to explore the significant contributions and the positive impacts of the responsible tourism in the environment in the Kumarakom tourist destination in Kerala, India. This study helps to review the existing knowledge of responsible tourism and how to interlink initiatives with environmental sustainability. The dream for a Green growth approach would be an asset for the well-being of the whole ecosystem. Tourism is one of the most promising industries to enrich the sustainable growth of the world economy and key to driving the defining trends of the transition to a green economy (Blanke & Chiesa 2013). With tourism's close connections to numerous sectors at the destination and international levels, even small improvements toward greater sustainability will have important impacts (Ekins 2002). In a developing country context, the focus on green growth strategies is ensuring a practical and flexible approach for economic potential on a sustainable basis (Law et al. 2011). Greening has been defined as the investment in sustainable practices and facilities it considers both environmental facilities and extends socio-cultural sustainability too (Bowen & Fankhauser 2011; Butler 1999). The green growth initiatives play a vital role in sustainable development and responsible tourism policies have not explored the advantages of green growth strategies. So, by integrating the two concepts we can develop some practical solutions and comprehensive business innovation on addressing the root causes of issues and ensuring creation of necessary channels for resource distribution.

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