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Life And Culture Of The Community Of East Sikkim Himalaya: A Study On The Sustainability Of Life

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Abstract

The community life of the people living in the East Sikkim Himalaya remained very restricted till 2007 for 45 years or so. They had to maintain a life without any proper economic development for being cut off from the rest of the state as well as from the country as a whole. During this period, due to the border conflict with China, this part of the country was put under restriction and no outsider was allowed any access. As the restrictions were lifted from 2008 the people gained some freedom of life and they were allowed to choose professions as they would like. They learned how to live a sustainable life with their livelihood through tourist-based industries like providing accommodation to the visitors for earning money. The residents started building home-stays (small hotels) and produce attractive handicrafts like carpets, fancy goods etc. for gaining market in the field of tourism. Their life received a form of sustainability and development started with a new dimension.

Keywords: Community life, economic development, restriction, sustainable life, home-stays.

Introduction

Sustainability is the mode or state of development by maintaining the heritage and avoiding the depletion of natural resources. In other words, sustainability focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Thus, the concept of sustainability stands on three pillars: economic, environmental, and social. In a sustainable societal life exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all maintained in synchronised form and enhance both current and future potential to meet human requirements and aspirations. It is a program for changing the process of economic development so that it ensures a basic quality of life for all people and at the same time protects the ecosystems and community systems that make life possible and worthwhile (Merwe, V., 1999). From 2008 the human beings living in the East Sikkim Himalaya came out from the restrictions imposed earlier for about 45 years following India's border conflict with China. In the new restriction-free societal and political atmosphere

they are gradually learning how to live a better economic life through sustainability under the inspiration and enterprise offered by the Government of Sikkim. This has become possible by the development of ecotourism in which the greater proportion of inhabitants is actively taking part. The term 'Ecotourism' has become very popular in recent years. In the real sense, Ecotourism is ecological tourism, where ecology has both environmental and social connotations. The term was initially coined in 1987 by Ceballos-Lascurain (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996) who defined ecotourism as an experience of 'travelling to relatively undisturbed areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wildlife'. Hence ecotourism involves visiting fragile, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, and is a small-scale form of what is often referred to as standard commercial tourism. It educates the traveller, makes him/her aware of the ecological resources, the funds help in the economic development and also promotes respect for culture. In general ecotourism deals with living parts of the natural environments. Very little work has been done to capture the status of tourism and ecotourism in the Himalayan region in India. However, some information in this regard may be obtained from the published works (e.g., Singh, 2003; Raj, 2003; Chattopadhyay, 2009)

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- to identify the socio-economic livelihood condition of the people,
- to study the role of economic development through eco-tourism examining the growth and strategies,
- to investigate the present status of sustainable development of this region,
- to assess of the future growth of sustainable economic activities and pattern of socio-economic development with it.

Methodology

Database

As these areas were restricted for a long time, very little secondary data is available. The entire study is based on primary data involving questionnaires for Home-stay owners, residents and tourists. In each case, different sample sizes have been chosen depending upon the accessibility to the concerned people.

Selection of the Study Area

Sikkim, the land of cordial people with rich cultural heritage occupies a very important place in the north eastern part of the Indian union. In a developing country like India where population, pollution and urbanisation are on a constant upsurge, Sikkim with its rugged mountains, deep valleys, dense forests, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, monasteries and pagoda-type houses remains very natural. It is located in the Eastern Himalaya being bordered by Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet (China-controlled). It is appropriately called a pollution-free organic state. The East District of this state around the settlements of Zuluk, Nathang and Kupup is selected for study in detail.

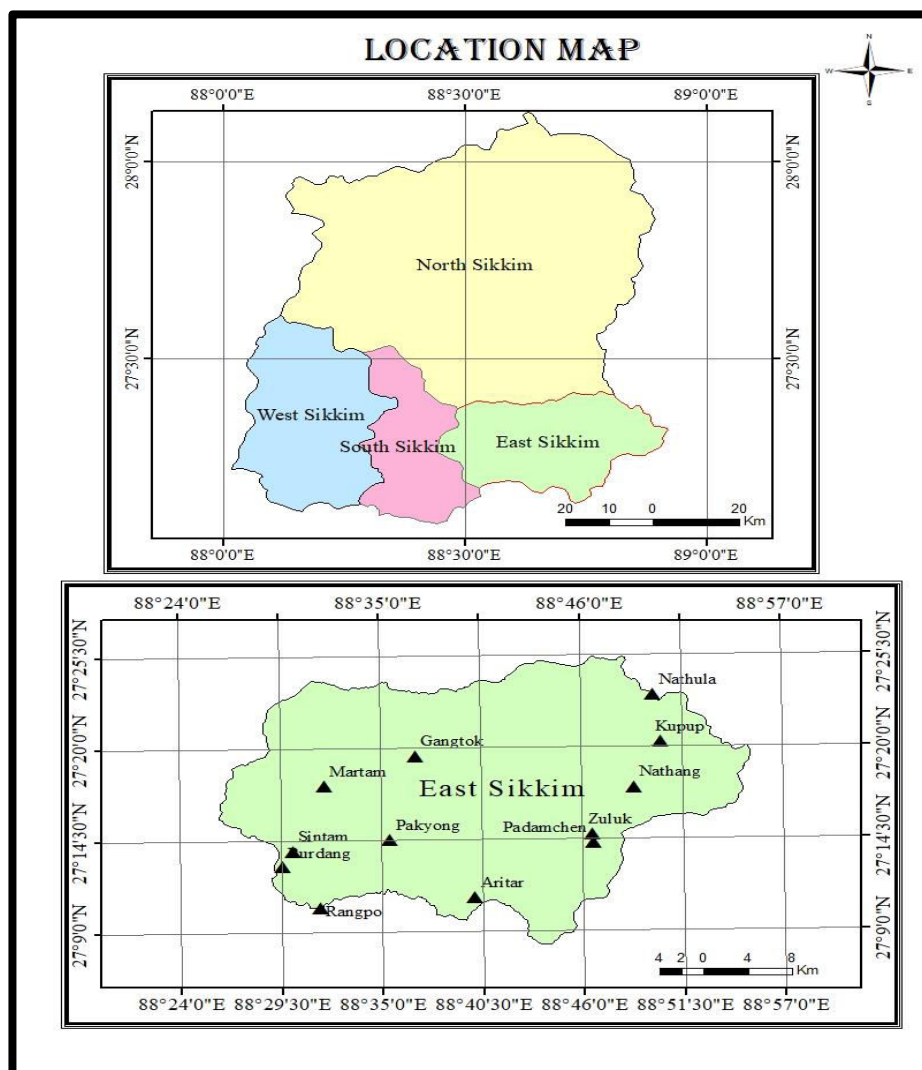


Figure 1: Location of the study area Source: NATMO



Plate 1: Old Silk Route

Location: The area under study covers the landscape of the surrounding area of historical Silk Route that extends through the East Sikkim district from southwest to northeast. The area has the international border with China on the eastern margin, North and West districts of this state on the northern and western margins and Kalimpong district of West Bengal on the south. This part of Sikkim is reasonably easily accessible from the other parts of the state as well as from West Bengal and the rest of the country. Three places namely Zuluk, Nathang and Kupup have been chosen for detailed study.

Zuluk (27°15'07"N-88°46'38"E), located at an altitude of 2,866m (9,400ft), is a small hamlet settled in East Sikkim district on the rugged terrain of the Himalaya. It is a small village with about 60 families and around 700 people.

Nathang (27°17'56"N-88°49'02"E), at an altitude of 4,116m (13,500ft), is another small village located at a distance of about 25km to the east of Zuluk on the higher-level enclosed valley of the mountain exposed to the north commanding the majestic view of the snow-clad summits of Kanchenjunga.

Kupup (27°20'35"N – 88°50'28"E) is located at an altitude of 3,971m (13,025ft) on the way to Jelep La from Nathang on the border area with China at a distance of 20km from Nathang village. This is one of the highest villages in this region with no accommodation facility for a strategic reason but has a police check post.



Plate 2: Zuluk

Plate 3: Nathang Valley

Plate 4: Elephant Lake in Kupup

The pattern of Tourism and its Development and the Perceptions of the residents towards the tourists have been analysed in details for Zuluk and Nathang.

The Pattern of Tourism and its Development: The Sustainability of these people is portrayed in their development by promoting Ecotourism. This part of the study has been conducted by generating data on a) Extension of tourist accommodation facilities, b) Catchment range of the tourists and c) Seasonal pattern of variation in tourist flow.

a) Extension of tourist accommodation facilities: The Table shows increasing accommodation of the Home-stays for 7 years.

Table 1: Description of the Home-stays in Zuluk and Nathang village

Sl no.	Location	Names of Home-stays	Year of establishment	Home-stays	Cumulative number of Home-stays	Rooms	Cumulative number of rooms	Number of persons to accommodate	Cumulative number of persons to accommodate
1	Zuluk	Green cottage	2008	2	2	3	3	6	6
2		Dilmaya Homestay				8	11	25	31
3		Palzor Homestay	2010	1	3	7	18	19	50
4		Hidden Paradise	2011	1	4	6	24	15	65
5		Snowlion Homestay	2012	1	5	8	32	22	87
6		Dewdrop Homestay	2013	4	9	4	36	12	99
7		Denzong Homestay				4	40	12	111
8		Jenyfore Homestay				2	42	8	119
9		Tibetan Villa				3	45	10	129
10		Simran Homestay	2014	2	11	3	48	9	138
11		Mama Homestay				3	51	6	144
1	Nathang	Pinasha Homestay	2010	1	1	7	7	27	27
2		Nathang Residency	2011	1	2	8	15	32	59
3		Pempha Homestay	2012	2	4	3	18	8	67
4		Sunset Homestay				4	25	18	85
5		Tashi Lumpo	2014	2	6	3	28	9	94
6		Golden Trout Lodge				5	33	15	109
7		Phintsok Homestay	2015	1	7	4	37	12	121

Table 1 and Figure 2 shows a steady rise in the number of Homestays and the associated accommodation facilities. The locals are very interested and feel pride as their native places gain importance as tourist destinations and over the years a larger portion of them join into this business by just emptying or building a couple of rooms adjacent to their home and renting it out to travellers. Almost all of the Home-stay owners have their own car and provide tourist transportation from New Jalpaiguri or Gangtok.

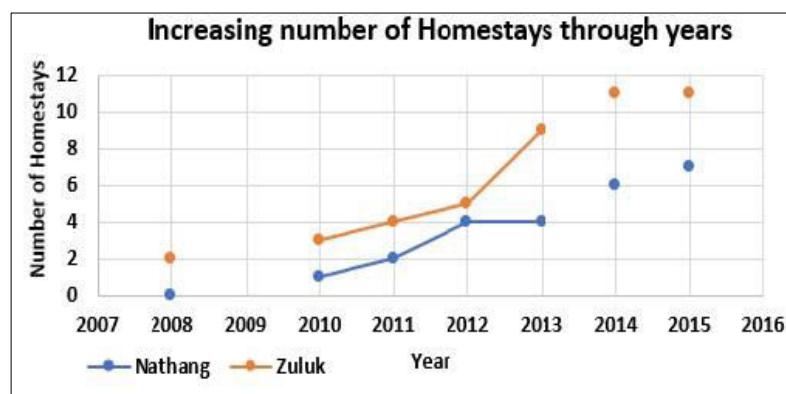


Figure 2: Increasing Number of Homme-stays through years

b) Catchment range of the tourists: The questionnaire surveying 20 tourists also helped to analyse the originating area of the tourist, i.e. tourist from which places are visiting these Eco-hubs. From Table 2 and Figure 3 it is clear that the largest proportion (70 – 85%) of the tourist influx in these villages occur from the neighbouring state of West Bengal, followed by tourist from other states (up to 20%), and a few tourists (5–10%) come from Sikkim.

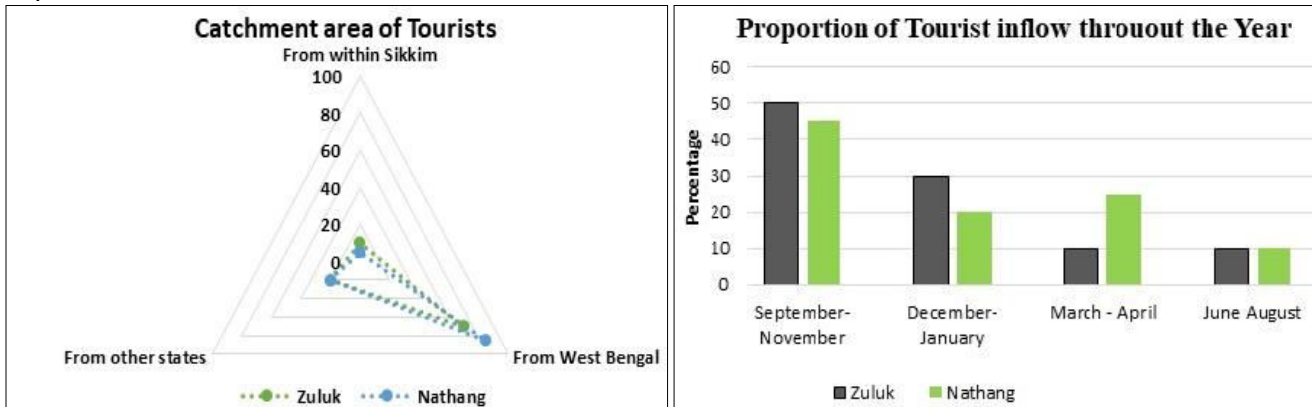


Figure 3: Catchment area of Tourists (left), Figure 4: Proportion of Tourist inflow throughout the year (right)

Bengali people are very prone to tourism and with easily accessible detail regarding these home-stays and their easy bank transfer of payment booking procedure more people escape the urban hustle-bustle, board a train or even a bus and reach this serene peaceful stretch of paradise within a day.

Table 2: Catchment area and Tourist inflow season

Sl no.	Catchment area and Tourist Season		Zuluk	%	Nathang	%
1	Tourists coming from different places	From within Sikkim	2	10	1	5
2		From West Bengal	14	70	17	85
3		From other states	4	20	2	20
Total no. of tourists interviewed			20	100	20	100
1	Time	September–November	10	50	9	45
2		December–January	6	30	4	20
3		March – April	2	10	5	25
4		June August	2	10	2	10
Total no. of Home–stays owners interviewed			20	100	20	100
Sl no.	Catchment area and Tourist Season		Zuluk	%	Nathang	%
1	Tourists coming from	From within	2	10	1	5

	different places	Sikkim				
2		From West Bengal	14	70	17	85
3		From other states	4	20	2	20
Total no. of tourists interviewed			20	100	20	100
1	Time	September–November	10	50	9	45
2		December–January	6	30	4	20
3		March – April	2	10	5	25
4		June August	2	10	2	10
Total no. of Home–stays owners interviewed			20	100	20	100

c) Seasonal pattern of variations in tourist flow: The temporal pattern of tourist visiting these places depend on what these places offer seasonally, in winter snow-lovers visit, while the peak season is from September to November as the valleys bloom up post-monsoon and the weather is great to view the extending Panorama of Mountain ranges without being surrounded by fog or grounded by landslides. From the Table 2 and Figure 4, it is clear that the maximum proportion (45–50%) of the annual tourist influx in this part occurs in the early to late autumn (September – November) season which is followed by the winter season (20–30%). Monsoon is an off-season the weather is very moist, it gets swampy for trekkers and landslides occur randomly in these parts of the Himalayas blocking the roads almost daily.

Perceptions of the residents towards the tourists: The honest mountain people are famous for their hospitality which shows in their perception towards the tourists and adaptation to newer trends.

Table 3: Perception of residents

Sl no.	Perception of the residents		Zuluk	%	Nathang	%
1	Level of choice for the village	Very happy	12	60	4	20
2		Quite happy	6	30	8	40
3		Not so happy	0	0	5	25
4		Do not know	2	10	3	15
Total no. of persons interviewed			20	100	20	100
1	Concept about Ecotourism	Have clear concept	4	20	4	20
2		Have some concept	12	60	9	45
3		Have no concept	4	20	7	35
Total no. of persons interviewed			20	100	20	100
1	Level of likings of the local people for the tourists and visitors	Likes very much	13	65	10	50
2		Likes to some extent	4	20	5	25
3		Do not like	0	0	2	10
4		No idea	3	15	3	15
Total no. of persons interviewed			20	100	20	100
1	Notions about tourist influx	Influx will disturb life	4	20	4	20
2		Influx will not disturb life	13	65	9	45
3		No idea	3	15	7	35
Total no. of persons interviewed			20	100	20	100

a) Level of choice of the inhabitants about the areas they are living in: The residents are facing numerous hardships daily starting from bad weather, harsh climate, lack of amenities, difficulties in transportation, landslide, freezing of pipelines and many others. But from Table 3 and figure 5, it clearly shows most of them are happy in Zuluk while in case of Nathang lack of civic amenities hamper daily livelihood to some extent.

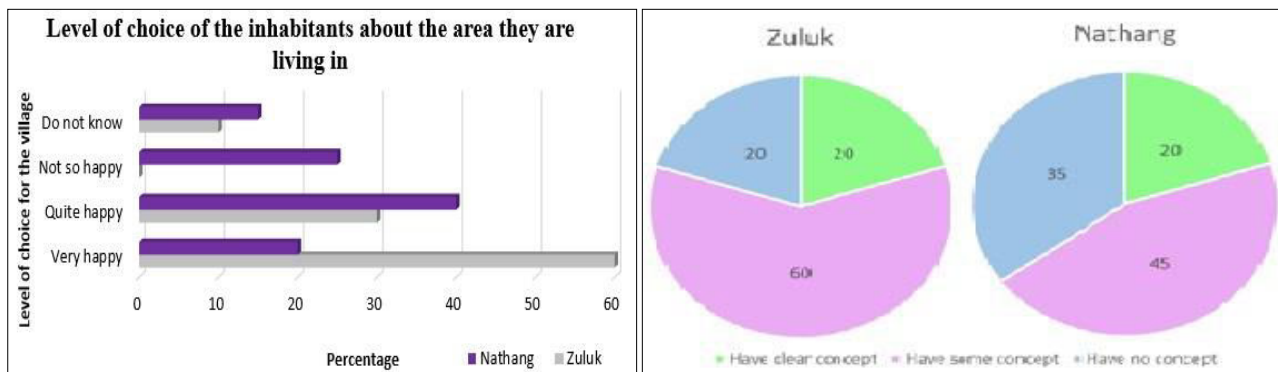
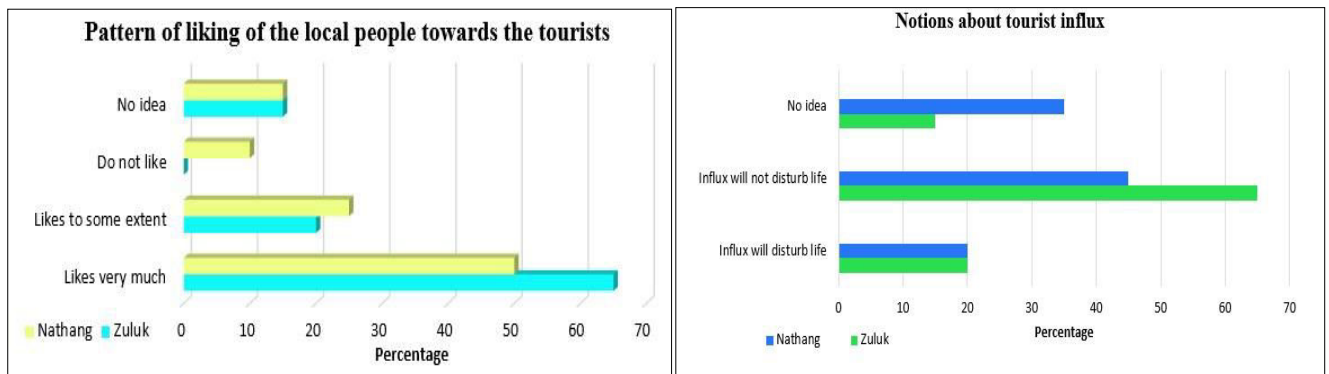


Figure 5: Level of choice(left),Figure 6: Concept about Ecotourism(right)

b) Concept of residents about Ecotourism: The meaning of Ecotourism or sustainability are recent compared to the age-old traditional-minded residents who have lived amidst nature despite its variable forms. The residents walk in the path of sustainability and are developing with the help of many promotional schemes of the government and NGOs. They are also trying their level best to promote ecotourism coping up with the rest of the world. From Table 3 and Figure 6, it is clear that, over 80% of the residents are unaware and have a very rudimentary idea about the terms ecotourism and sustainable development. Although their struggle of sustenance and development shows in their actions of promoting tourism, maintaining commutable networks, trying to communicate with the outside world and adopting new practices like Trout fish cultivation, operating bank accounts to help tourists pre-book their home-stays etc.

c) Liking towards the Tourists: The mentality or receptivity of the local people towards tourists visiting and staying in their environment is also an important factor, which must be considered while promoting Ecotourism or other processes where cultural assimilation is taking place between two very different modes of people used to two completely different lifestyles. From Table 3 and Figure 7, it is clear that a large proportion (50–65%) of the villagers of Zuluk and Nathang have a very loving attitude towards the tourists. A very small proportion (20–25%) like the tourists to some extent, while the remaining others either do not like tourists probably because regular tourists create disturbance in their otherwise peaceful lives, or may have caused economic losses or have ill-behaved with them.

Figure 7: Liking towards tourists (left), Figure 8: Notion about tourist influx (right)



d) Notion about the tourist influx whether it disturbs their life: The notion about the tourist influx, whether this will disturb their normal life or not was asked while surveying as it is very important to analyse the mentality of the locals toward tourism and tourists for understanding how willing they are accepting the mode of pursuing sustainable development. From Table 3 and Figure 8, it is evident that quite a large proportion (45–60%) of the residents do not believe that the influx of tourist would disturb their life. They maintain a very healthy mentality towards the tourists and they know that whatever the economic affluence they are having in recent years is because of tourism. However, a small portion of the villagers, particularly the older generation are not happy and they believe that the growing number of tourists in their area will cause problem and disturbance in Figure 8: Notion about tourist influx their life and ruin their culture.

e) Level of expectation for sustainable development through tourism development: In the recent year after the opening of the Old Silk Route which was closed for outsiders for a long time the government has been encouraging tourism by giving incentives to the villagers and introducing various scheme to help them run their tourism business efficiently. They have also been trained by the authority that with tourism industry the people would get affluence and self-sufficiency in the economy; their standard of living would also be raised by this endeavour. From Table 4 and Figure 8, it is clear that half of the residents of both the villages expect to have an economic boost through the tourism. The people of Zuluk village are looking forward to a sustainable development in their economy and livelihood. For Nathang village which is more remote people lack in clear idea about the outcomes from the tourism industry and hence is not sure if it would bring any

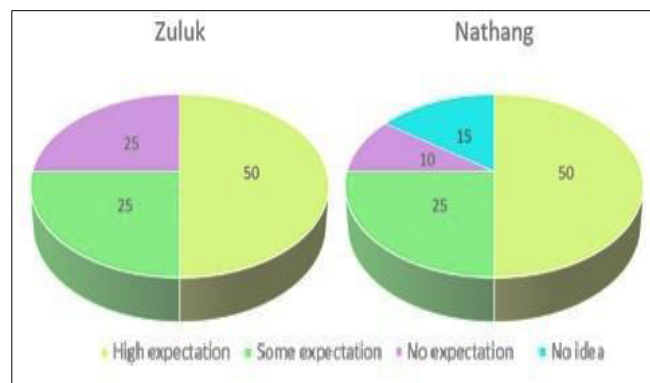
Sl no.	Level of expectation from economic development	Zuluk	%	Nathang	%
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financial development for them.

1	High expectation	10	50	10	50
2	Some expectation	5	25	5	25
3	No expectation	5	25	2	10
4	No idea	0	0	3	15
Total no. of persons interviewed		20	100	20	100

Table 4: Level of expectation from economic development

Figure 9: Level of expectation from economic development



Overall Analysis

All the above results from the questionnaire survey show that the residents of this region mostly welcome tourism and hopes that ecotourism will lead to their economic development. They are willing to adopt new methods to boost up their business and also their level of sustenance. But with the development of the economy of this entire region comes in a few other factors that need to be analysed and dealt with efficiently as this area is fragile Himalayan environment and very prone to various sorts of Natural and pseudo-natural disasters. The following concepts must be kept in mind and acted accordingly.

Carrying Capacity and Sustainability in Tourism

In recent times, economic development of a region sustainably refers to development without affecting the environment of that region. Environmentalists and regional planners are thrust with the duty of checking and analysing the effect of any areal development on its environment. In ecological terms, the size of the population which can be supported by the resources of an environment is the carrying capacity. One can estimate the demand of human to an ecosystem's carrying capacity by "Ecological footprint" (Rees, 1992) accounting. This provides pragmatic assessments from the past.

Tourism Carrying Capacity as defined by Middleton and Hawkins (1997) as the level of human activity in an area without deteriorating by affecting the residents or the quality of traveller's experience.

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO, 1997) has put forward the definition of the carrying capacity as the maximum number tourists visiting a tourist spot at a particular time without

affecting its physical, socio-cultural, economic environment while keeping the visitor's quality of expectation unruffled.

Overtourism

Concerning carrying capacity one must be aware of another term Overtourism. The resident who do not like the tourist influx are mostly scared of the future prospects which might lead to Overtourism which is "the overcrowding of visitors in particular place where the resident's lifestyle is affected by the seasonal tourism peaks and have enforced changes in the incoming of amenities and well-being" (Milano et al., 2018)

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism involves social responsibility, a strong commitment to nature, well-informed participation of the stakeholders, strong political leadership and the joining of local people in any tourism activity or development. Sustainable tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the Earth Council and the Tourism Council (WTTC) as it is a form of tourism which address the needs of tourists, hosting regions while protecting and excelling opportunities for future development. The management of resources so that the economic, social and aesthetic needs can be satisfied while maintaining the cultural uniqueness, ecological processes, biodiversity and life-support systems. Sustainable tourism products are work hand in hand with the local environment, culture and community so that they become beneficial and not harmful to the development of tourism.

Conclusion

The three villages Zuluk, Nathang and Kupup are steadily gaining popularity in the tourism sector with Zuluk and Nathang as Night stay destination while Kupup is famous for its nearby attractions. These places procure their food and other amenities either from Rongli or Gangtok for the permanent residents and also for the tourists. Therefore, it becomes the duty of the Government (which has the power of issuing all the permits for these regions) to control the tourist influx in peak season and promote tourism in off-season as per requirement of the people and also keeping in mind the environmental degradation rates caused by lack of waste disposal, plying of tourist vehicle in the mountainous terrain and many more cases which require environmental monitoring. The number of tourists securing entry permit should not exceed the existing carrying capacity of the villages. Both Zuluk and Nathang can accommodate 150 and 125 person per day respectively, keeping in mind the ecological Footprint further establishment of home-stays should be banned if required. Observing tranquillity and peace in nature, beautifying the village, pursuing waste management programmes are few initiatives that must be taken for promoting sustainable tourism in these parts.

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