
Literature Review: Prospects and Challenges of Ecotourism in the Gambia

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Abstract

The prospects and constraints of ecotourism largely depend on the principles and regulations applied. This study found that ecotourism can reconcile environmental protection, sociocultural preservation, and economic upliftment for communities and practitioners without compromising environmental quality and local culture. It increases local people's ecological consciousness, creates jobs, and improves income generation potential and living standards. However, the study concludes on the hypothesis that ecotourism can lead to environmental damage if practitioners neglect its principles. Underparticipation of local communities can lead to serious environmental damage, pollution, social disintegration, violent conflict, and eventually a short-lived ecotourism practice where local people bear the burden of environmental degradation while practitioners suffer economic loss. The desire for profit triggers the unsustainable practice of ecotourism. In the Gambia, private ecotourism practice has a short lifespan whereas government-managed parks have no standards or designed programs. There is no legislation regulating the practice of ecotourism. Therefore, practitioners operate on their terms and conditions.

Keywords: challenges, ecotourism, environmental, prospects, socio-economic, sustainability

1. Introduction

Ecotourism is the most rapidly growing sector in the global tourism industry (Sambou, 2019). it is one of the most promising sectors in transforming the Gambia's tourism sector into a more viable and sustainable one. The smiling coast is famous for its hospitable people, rich culture, beautiful nature, colourful birdlife, and biological diversity. Ecotourism can potentially reconcile environmental protection, sociocultural preservation, and economic upliftment for communities and practitioners without compromising environmental quality and local culture (Olimjon Saidmamatov et al, 2020). It increases environmental consciousness amongst local people and improves their income generation potential and living standards. However, it is one of the most misused and misconstrued terms in the tourism sector. It has the potential to attract nature travellers and environment-conscious holidaymakers therefore some destination owners use the term as a hoax to attract tourists (Hussain, 2022; Sambou, 2019).

Ecotourism has its prospects and challenges depending on the principles applied. In some cases, it can lead to serious ecological disruption, disturbance in wildlife ecologies, biophysical environmental degradation, the introduction of alien cultures and lifestyles, and conflict between community members and destination owners (A. Sarhan, 2016).

The paper examines the prospects and challenges of ecotourism in The Gambia, which is the smallest country in mainland Africa with a total land mass of 11,300 km². The Gambia is a country whose economy is largely dependent on agriculture and tourism since it gained independence from Britain in 1965. It has a relatively high population density with a fragile environment that is challenged by rapid land-use change and other anthropogenic ecological disruptions, as well as natural phenomena that are exacerbated by climate change, therefore in critical need of sustainable development (GBoS, 2013; Jallow, B. P., 1996). This paper studies the demand and supply of ecotourism by examining its pros and cons from the perspective of the host communities economically, environmentally, and socio-culturally.

Hypothesis: Can ecotourism lead to ecological damage?

1.1 Tourism in The Gambia

1.1.1 Conventional Tourism

Conventional tourism is one of the world's fastest-growing industries and employs millions worldwide (Hakim, 2008). It also brings pleasure to millions more who travel to countries to see sights that they would have only been able to read about in books fifty years ago.

Yet conventional tourism also has a downside as it puts more stress on fragile ecosystems and has immense and complex effects on tourist destinations' cultures, economies, and environment. Its effects are exacerbated because conventional tourism often involves visits to sites that are of natural, historical, and cultural importance. Conventional tourism also suffers from being short-sighted, looking only for short-term returns, while the greater picture of long-term environmental and social health is often ignored (Sambou, 2019).

1.1.2 The Gambia

The Gambia is the smallest country on mainland Africa, surrounded by Senegal on three sides and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. It is highly underdeveloped, and with few resources, the country's economy and people depend largely on agriculture and tourism (GTDM, 2006). It has a population of 2.4 million with a land size of 11,000 Km² (GBoS, 2013; Sambou, 2023).

2. Methodology

The study is based on information from other literature from published books, different published research articles, policy documents, destination guides, newspapers, magazines, reports of various government and non-government authorities, official statistics, and reports from the Gambia Tourism Board (GTB).

3. Ecotourism Principles

Most of these principles may encompass various other forms of tourism, depending on the set rules and institutional visions, ecotourism is merely a hoax without the principles and practices that consider the dimensions of sustainable development- Environment, Economy, and Society(Honey, 2008).

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) 1991 defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people.” The principles of ecotourism are to:

- a. Minimize negative environmental impact,
- b. Build environmental as well as cultural awareness and respect,
- c. Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts,
- d. Provide direct financial benefits for conservation,
- e. Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people and
- f. Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate(Das, 2015).

4. Prospects of Ecotourism

Ecotourism provides economic, environmental, and social benefits that can result from the strict application of its principles (Sambou, 2019). Amanda L. Stronza (2019)suggests ecotourism holds more peril than a promise, and there are fallacies and mismatches in its research and practice. Olimjon Saidmamatov et al(2020) highlighted that "the main functions of ecotourism—to protect natural areas, provide competitive tourism experience, and enhance local economies through nature protection, environmental education, and rural empowerment—may stimulate the rapid development of tourism, as well as other sectors of the economy, withhold environmental degradation, and improve the socio-economic well-being of the local population” (p: 4)

4.1 Conservation

“Conservation is a field that transcends the traditional boundaries of pure sciences; it must produce solutions that address ecological concerns alongside human dimensions, including socio-political, economic, legal, cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual considerations”(Cheung, 2015; p: 31). As anthropogenic impacts on the world's natural ecosystems compound, the need for conservation becomes more important for sustainable development(Hubert Cheung, 2015). Like other conservation strategies, ecotourism in many countries and destinations is no longer a panacea.

Ecotourism is both a business and a conservation strategy that helps to conserve a wide spectrum of our natural ecosystems, provide economic incentives, and derive tourist satisfaction and pleasure. It helps in the conservation of natural heritages, preservation of spiritual sites, and biodiversity conservation in wildlife parks, as well as reduces our vulnerability to climate stressors, decreases environmental pollution and defaunation, improves tree canopy cover, and increases resilience to natural disasters. Its economic viability encourages local people to protect a wider spectrum of their flora and fauna as ecotourism improves their livelihoods, preserves culture, and conserves the environment. This is a spiritual doctrine in the Balinese culture called

“Tri Hita Karana” which means man must believe in God, be kind to his neighbour, and be in harmony with nature (Nushrat Nahida Afroz, 2017; Sambou, 2019)

4.2 Economic viability

Tourism especially ecotourism contributes tremendously to rural economies (Nushrat Nahida Afroz, 2017). Ecotourism creates jobs for the local people in various types such as housekeeping, tour guides, receptionists, tourist taxi drivers, conservationists, barkeepers, entertainers, cooks, etc. As a major contributor to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it accelerates infrastructural development, reduces poverty, enhances the standard of living, etc. Community members can also venture into other forms of income-generating businesses such as craftsmanship, tailoring, restaurants, fruit vendors, homestay operators, and the sale of agricultural and other local products (Mnini, 2020).

4.3 Socio-cultural preservation

The Gambia is a nation of tradition, norms, and values. The multi-ethnic country is known for its cultural richness and diversity. Ecotourism empowers and enables traditionalists and local culture. Women are major beneficiaries of ecotourism as women entrepreneurs are empowered through their local businesses (sale of traditional outfits, cultural crafts, traditional foods, entertainment with traditional dance, hairdressing, etc. These activities enable the retention of local culture, norms, and values while improving the standard of living of the local people.

5. Challenges of Ecotourism

5.1 Cultural Impacts

Generally, it is believed and argued by scholars that ecotourism helps to conserve local cultures. Abhin and CS (2021) argued that there is evidence that the establishment of ecotourism parks has led to the loss of homes, places of worship, food (sustainable bushmeat hunting), and sacred forest ecologies without compensation. Touristification leads to gentrification and displacement of local people from their original homes. It has the potential to change rural places into urban and entrepreneurial communities. Urbanization has the ability to introduce alien cultures, increase crime, and disintegrate social fabrics through the introduction of Short-term rentals (STRs) (Sambou, 2024).

5.2 Environmental Impacts

When ecotourism principles are not strictly applied or selectively applied with a focus on economic gains, it leads to serious and irreversible environmental damage. Uncontrolled tourist numbers in natural areas or wildlife ecologies can cause distress to wildlife, and trampling on grown animals such as ants can cause death (Charnley, 2005). Community land tenure on ownership and use of land is a critical aspect of ecotourism. If the community is not involved in decision-making, it can lead to environmental conflicts over the use and ownership of land (Omar Sambou, 2023, Omar Sambou, 2023). In some ecotourism camps, an increase in the number of buildings leads to increased land use change causing vegetation reduction and biodiversity loss. In residential ecotourism sites, waste management, noise, environmental pollution, deforestation, and heavy traffic are sometimes experienced (Byczek, 2011).

5.3 Control

Ecotourism practice should be based on principles guided by an essential framework. This must be either through national, regional, or community-based legislation, policies, and/or frameworks. In the Gambia, ecotourism practice is entirely left to the destination owners and practitioners. In the case where economic gains supersede sociocultural and ecological stability, leads to negative impacts on society and the environment (Awa Jarjou, 2021). The level of community inclusivity in the decision-making processes and leadership matters a great deal in the sustainability of ecotourism practice. Whereas the community members are not involved or in control, there are higher tendencies of unsustainable practices leading to ecological disruption, conflicts, and social disintegration(Hakim, 2017).

6. Conclusion

The Gambia has no set rules, legislations, policies, and regulations on ecotourism practice. The practice is dependent on practitioners who are not under any legal guidance on the practice. If ecotourism practice follows its principles strictly, it can lead to sustainable development i.e. economic progress, environmental protection, and socio-cultural preservation inclusive of the local people. This can improve the living standards of local people while conserving nature for the next generation. However, without rules, principles, and regulations, the practice can cause ecological disruption, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution and degradation, the introduction of alien cultures, social tensions over the ownership and use of land, and even violent conflicts. In the Gambia, private ecotourism practice has a short lifespan whereas government-managed parks have no standards or designed programs.

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