



Role of Ecotourism in Local Economic Development and Sustainable Livelihoods: A Case Study of Mount Abu, Rajasthan

Dr. Kanhaiya Lal Gupta

Assistant Prof. of Geography, Govt. Girls College, Chhabra, Baran Rajasthan

Dr. Rohit Kumar

Assistant Professor of Geography, Govt. Girls College, Baran, Rajasthan

Dr. Puneet Yadav

Assistant Professor of Geography, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

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Abstract

Ecotourism has attracted considerable academic and policy attention as a mechanism for reconciling biodiversity conservation with local economic development and sustainable livelihoods in ecologically sensitive areas. This paper critically examines the role of ecotourism in fostering local economic development and sustainable livelihoods at Mount Abu, Rajasthan India's only hill station and a notified wildlife sanctuary within the ancient Aravalli Range. Drawing on an original synthesis of Scopus-indexed secondary scholarship, government tourism statistics, ecological assessments, and regional development reports, the study deploys three interlocking theoretical frameworks: the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), the Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) paradigm, and the Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) model. The analysis reveals that while ecotourism has generated measurable direct and indirect economic benefits particularly through employment in accommodation, guiding, and artisanal commerce structural asymmetries in benefit distribution, tourism revenue leakages, weak governance frameworks, and accelerating ecological stress from mass tourism inflows significantly constrain its developmental and sustainability potential. Ecotourism's contribution to natural capital regeneration and social capital formation among indigenous Bhil and Garasia communities remains inconsistent and contingent upon institutional quality. Integrating political ecology with sustainable tourism theory, the study advances a critically grounded, site-specific policy framework for strengthening ecotourism's developmental impact at Mount Abu, with transferable implications for ecotourism governance across South Asian montane destinations.

Keywords: ecotourism; sustainable livelihoods; local economic development; Mount Abu; community-based tourism; pro-poor tourism; wildlife sanctuary; Aravalli Range.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism has emerged as a prominent strategy for balancing ecological conservation with economic development, particularly in biologically rich but economically disadvantaged regions. It is widely regarded as a means of generating local income, promoting environmental conservation, and supporting sustainable livelihoods (Honey, 2008; Buckley, 2012). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015) defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, enhances the well-being of local communities, and promotes education and interpretation. Despite its growing popularity, evidence regarding its developmental effectiveness remains mixed, as outcomes often depend on local governance, community participation, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Kiss, 2004; Coria & Calfucura, 2012). India provides an important context for examining these issues due to its extensive network of protected areas and the dependence of rural communities on natural resources. While ecotourism has significant potential to contribute to conservation and rural development, its success has often been constrained by weak institutions, unequal distribution of benefits, and increasing pressures from mass tourism (Sekhar, 2003; Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004). Mount Abu, Rajasthan's only hill station, represents a unique case study. Located within the 326.10 km² Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary in the Aravalli Range, it combines rich biodiversity with cultural and religious attractions, including the Dilwara Jain Temples and Nakki Lake. The sanctuary supports diverse wildlife, endemic flora, and over 110 orchid species, attracting nearly 1.5 million visitors annually (Rajasthan Tourism, 2022). However, the economic gains from tourism remain unevenly distributed, while increasing visitor pressure threatens ecological sustainability. This study examines the role of ecotourism in promoting local economic development and sustainable livelihoods in Mount Abu. It investigates the distribution of tourism benefits, identifies key opportunities and challenges affecting local communities, and evaluates existing governance and institutional arrangements. Drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and the Pro-Poor Tourism approach, the paper provides a critical assessment of how ecotourism can better integrate conservation objectives with inclusive economic development and offers policy recommendations for strengthening sustainable ecotourism in the region.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Ecotourism is conceptually grounded in the principles of sustainable development, integrating environmental conservation, economic development, and social equity (WCED, 1987). Unlike conventional nature-based or mass tourism, ecotourism is characterised by its commitment to biodiversity conservation, community participation, environmental education, and responsible visitor behaviour (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2008). Its primary objective is to generate local livelihoods while maintaining ecological integrity. Global evidence suggests that well-managed ecotourism can create economic incentives for conservation, particularly in biodiversity-rich regions (Balmford et al., 2009). However, many tourism enterprises marketed as ecotourism fail to meet these standards, often providing limited conservation benefits and unequal economic returns to local communities (Buckley, 2012). This distinction between authentic ecotourism and “greenwashed” nature tourism is especially significant in India, where certification and regulatory mechanisms remain weak (Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004). Consequently, robust governance and accountability are essential to ensure that ecotourism genuinely contributes to sustainable development rather than functioning

merely as a marketing label.

2.2 The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) and later refined by Scoones (1998) and DFID (1999), provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the relationship between ecotourism and rural livelihoods. The SLF identifies five forms of livelihood capital—natural, human, financial, physical, and social—that collectively shape household well-being and resilience. In ecotourism contexts, tourism can enhance or undermine these assets through changes in resource access, employment opportunities, infrastructure, skills development, and community institutions. Studies indicate that ecotourism generates multidimensional livelihood outcomes rather than purely economic benefits, with impacts largely determined by governance quality, institutional effectiveness, and equitable benefit distribution (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010; Holladay & Powell, 2013). Accordingly, the SLF offers an appropriate analytical framework for evaluating ecotourism's contribution to sustainable livelihoods at Mount Abu.

2.3 Pro-Poor Tourism and Community-Based Ecotourism

The Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) approach emerged to address the limited benefits that conventional tourism delivers to economically disadvantaged communities (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Rather than focusing on tourism type, PPT emphasizes strategies that increase economic opportunities for the poor, reduce vulnerability, and strengthen institutional and policy frameworks. Its central premise is that tourism's developmental impact depends on equitable benefit-sharing, inclusive governance, and local participation rather than visitor numbers or total revenue (Chok et al., 2007; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) operationalizes these principles by promoting community ownership, management, and distribution of tourism benefits (Scheyvens, 1999; Manyara & Jones, 2007). However, the effectiveness of CBET is often constrained by limited managerial capacity, inadequate market access, and insufficient policy support (Salafsky et al., 2001). Consequently, governance structures that ensure collaboration among government, private stakeholders, and local communities are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive ecotourism outcomes (Tosun, 2000; Li, 2006).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology supported by critical interpretive synthesis and systematic analysis of secondary data (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Yin, 2014). Mount Abu was selected as the study area because of its ecological significance, established tourism economy, and limited representation in international ecotourism research. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed articles published in leading journals, government reports, Rajasthan Forest Department publications, Wildlife Institute of India reports, RTDC documents, census data, and ecological assessments. Relevant literature was identified using databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar with keywords related to ecotourism, sustainable livelihoods, Mount Abu, and Rajasthan. Data were analysed using the thematic framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, Pro-Poor Tourism, and Community-Based Ecotourism concepts. Although the study relies on secondary data, triangulation across multiple academic and institutional sources enhances the credibility and robustness of the findings.

4. Mount Abu: Geographical and Ecological Context

4.1 Physical Geography and Ecological Significance

Mount Abu, located in Sirohi District of southern Rajasthan (24°36'2"N, 72°43'2"E), lies at an elevation of 1,000–1,722 m above sea level, with Guru Shikhar forming the highest peak of the Aravalli Range (Geological Survey of India, 2010). The Aravalli, among the world's oldest mountain systems, supports a unique ecological landscape due to its geological antiquity and transitional location between the Thar Desert and the humid regions of western India (Naqvi & Rogers, 1987). This setting has fostered high biodiversity and significant levels of endemism.

The 326.10 km² Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1960, constitutes the region's principal ecological resource. It comprises tropical dry deciduous, subtropical broad-leaved, and dry evergreen forests, providing habitat for species such as the leopard, sloth bear, sambar deer, four-horned antelope, and more than 250 bird species (Wildlife Institute of India, 2013; Rajasthan Forest Department, 2018). The sanctuary also supports over 110 orchid species and numerous medicinal plants of ecological and cultural importance (Singh, 2002).

Beyond biodiversity conservation, Mount Abu performs critical ecosystem functions. Its forests regulate watershed processes, enhance groundwater recharge, moderate local climate, and sustain water resources across southern Rajasthan and northern Gujarat (Singh & Mal, 2014). These ecosystem services substantially enhance the region's ecotourism value, although they remain largely unaccounted for in existing conservation financing and tourism management frameworks.

4.2 Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile

Mount Abu, with a resident population of 22,943 (Census of India, 2011), experiences a substantial seasonal increase due to tourism. The local economy is primarily driven by tourism-related activities, including hospitality, transport, retail, and food services (District Statistical Office, Sirohi, 2019). Indigenous Bhil and Garasia communities have traditionally depended on forest resources for livelihoods, but wildlife protection and tourism expansion have simultaneously restricted resource access while creating new livelihood opportunities and socioeconomic transformations (Singh, 2002).

Table 1: Key Ecological and Tourism Parameters of Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary

Parameter	Details / Figures	Source
Sanctuary Area	326.10 km ²	Rajasthan Forest Dept. (2018)
Elevation Range	1,000–1,722 m (a.s.l.)	GSI (2010)
Mammal Species	~46 spp. incl. Leopard, Sloth Bear	WII (2013)
Bird Species	>250 species	Rajasthan Forest Dept. (2018)
Orchid Species	>110 species	Singh (2002)
Annual Tourist Arrivals	~1.5 million (2022)	Rajasthan Tourism (2022)
Registered Hotels/Guesthouses	~180 registered; ~300+ total	RTDC (2022)
Key Tribal Communities	Bhil, Garasia (Scheduled Tribes)	Census of India (2011)

5. THE ECOTOURISM RESOURCE BASE AT MOUNT ABU

Mount Abu possesses a diverse ecotourism resource base that integrates natural, cultural, and spiritual attractions, making it one of Rajasthan's most distinctive tourism destinations. The Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary forms the core ecological attraction, offering wildlife viewing, birdwatching, nature trails, Trevor's Tank crocodile habitat, Guru Shikhar, and Achalgarh for trekking and nature-based recreation (RTDC, 2022). Complementing these are the renowned Dilwara Jain Temples and the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, which attract large numbers of religious and heritage tourists, significantly contributing to the local economy but also increasing

pressure on natural resources (Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004). Indigenous Bhil and Garasia communities possess rich cultural traditions, ecological knowledge, and handicrafts that offer strong potential for community-based ecotourism. However, limited institutional support and inadequate community participation have constrained their integration into formal tourism, restricting livelihood benefits and reducing opportunities for culturally authentic visitor experiences (Zeppel, 2006).

6. Ecotourism and Local Economic Development at Mount Abu

6.1 Direct Economic Impacts and Employment Generation

Ecotourism is a major contributor to Mount Abu's local economy through employment generation and tourism-related enterprises. With nearly 1.5 million annual visitors, tourism creates sustained demand for accommodation, food services, transport, guiding, retail, and other support activities (Rajasthan Tourism, 2022). According to RTDC (2022), the sector provides direct employment to approximately 8,000–12,000 people, while many others depend on informal and indirect tourism-linked livelihoods. However, economic benefits are distributed unevenly. Hotel owners, restaurants, and transport operators capture the largest share of tourism revenue, whereas informal workers, artisans, and seasonal vendors receive comparatively lower and less stable incomes (Roe et al., 2004). Moreover, tourism expenditure is concentrated around Nakki Lake, Dilwara Temples, and the central market, while tribal communities living in peripheral and sanctuary buffer areas remain weakly connected to tourism supply chains. This limits inclusive economic development and reduces the pro-poor potential of ecotourism (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Mbaiwa, 2005).

6.2 Indirect and Induced Economic Effects

Ecotourism at Mount Abu generates significant indirect and induced economic benefits beyond direct employment. Indirect impacts arise through demand for goods and services supplied by sectors such as agriculture, horticulture, construction, and finance, while induced effects result from the local spending of tourism-related incomes (Ashley & Roe, 2002). Studies of comparable Indian hill stations indicate tourism multipliers of 0.4–0.7, suggesting that 40–70% of tourism expenditure circulates within the local economy through supply chains and household consumption (Singh, 2001; Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004). However, Mount Abu's reliance on imported food products, beverages, and construction materials from nearby urban centres limits local value retention and reduces the overall economic multiplier.

6.3 Tourism Revenue Leakages and Economic Inequality

Economic leakage remains a major constraint on the developmental effectiveness of ecotourism at Mount Abu. A substantial share of tourism revenue leaves the local economy through external hotel ownership, procurement of goods from outside the region, payments to online travel agencies and tour operators, and income remitted by migrant workers (Gossling & Hall, 2006). Studies of similar Indian tourism destinations estimate leakage rates of 40–60% of total tourism revenue (Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004; Sekhar, 2003). Moreover, limited access to land, credit, marketing, and certification restricts indigenous and small-scale entrepreneurs, resulting in unequal benefit distribution and weakening the pro-poor potential of ecotourism (Chok et al., 2007).

7. ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

7.1 Livelihood Diversification and Vulnerability Reduction

Ecotourism at Mount Abu serves as both a livelihood strategy and a mechanism influencing household financial assets from the standpoint of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. According to DFID (1999) and Scoones (1998), households

with sufficient financial and physical resources, such as lodging or transportation services, are better positioned to profit from tourism, allowing for income diversification and lowering reliance on forest-based livelihoods. This diversification strengthens resistance to agricultural and climatic hazards. On the other hand, a large number of households in Bhil and Garasia lack the resources—financial, human, and otherwise—necessary to engage in the formal tourism sector. As a result, indigenous communities continue to be marginal participants in ecotourism's promise for inclusive and sustainable livelihoods without focused interventions in capacity building, financial availability, and community institutions (Zeppel, 2006; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010).

7.2 Natural Capital and Conservation Finance

The natural capital of Mount Abu is impacted by ecotourism in both positive and negative ways. Positively, tourism promotes the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge, generates income for conservation through sanctuary entry fees, and creates jobs locally in wildlife protection and guiding (Naidoo & Adamowicz, 2005). These advantages increase the incentives for sustainable resource management and biodiversity protection. However, the delicate environment is severely strained by the yearly flood of about 1.5 million visitors. Trail erosion, solid waste, plastic pollution, vehicle emissions, habitat disruption, and uncontrolled construction inside buffer areas are some of the main environmental issues (Wildlife Institute of India, 2013; Rajasthan Forest Department, 2018). The sanctuary's vital watershed functions and ecosystem resilience are threatened by seasonal overcrowding, which exacerbates ecological stress (Singh, 2002; Strickland-Munro et al., 2010).

7.3 Social and Human Capital Formation

Ecotourism contributes to both human and social capital at Mount Abu by creating opportunities for skill development, employment, and institutional networking. Tourism enhances human capital through training in hospitality, guiding, communication, and customer service, while strengthening social capital through associations, cooperatives, and partnerships with conservation and tourism stakeholders (Scheyvens, 1999; Tolkach & King, 2015). These networks improve access to markets, information, and livelihood opportunities. However, tourism can also generate social challenges, including commercialization of local culture, widening income disparities, and weakening traditional community institutions (Tosun, 2000; Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Strong community cohesion and effective local governance remain essential for ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably and sustainably (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010).

8. GOVERNANCE, STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION, AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Ecotourism governance at Mount Abu is characterised by multiple institutions with overlapping responsibilities, including the Rajasthan Forest Department, Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC), Sirohi District Administration, Mount Abu Municipal Committee, and the Archaeological Survey of India. While the Forest Department manages the Wildlife Sanctuary, RTDC promotes tourism, often creating coordination challenges between conservation and development objectives (Rajasthan Forest Department, 2018).

Community participation remains limited despite the establishment of Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) in buffer-zone villages. Although EDCs provide a formal platform for local involvement, their decision-making authority over tourism planning, revenue sharing, and resource management remains weak, with key decisions largely controlled by government agencies (Sekhar, 2003; Sarin, 2005). Furthermore,

ecotourism regulation is constrained by the absence of scientifically determined carrying-capacity assessments and inadequate enforcement of environmental impact assessments for tourism infrastructure (Wildlife Institute of India, 2013).

Strengthening governance requires greater institutional coordination, meaningful community participation, and adoption of recognized ecotourism certification standards. Initiatives such as responsible tourism certification can improve environmental management, enhance equitable benefit-sharing, and increase destination competitiveness. However, successful implementation will require capacity building, financial support, and technical assistance for local entrepreneurs and indigenous communities, supported jointly by the RTDC and the Rajasthan Forest Department (Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004).

9. CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

9.1 The Mass Tourism Contradiction

The principal challenge facing ecotourism at Mount Abu is the conflict between conservation and mass tourism. Although promoted as an ecotourism destination, the majority of its 1.5 million annual visitors are leisure and religious tourists whose travel patterns exert significant environmental pressure rather than supporting sustainable tourism principles (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2008). Peak-season overcrowding has intensified problems such as solid waste accumulation, habitat degradation, human–wildlife conflict, and freshwater scarcity, threatening both biodiversity and the long-term sustainability of tourism (Buckley, 2012; Rajasthan Forest Department, 2018; Singh & Mal, 2014). These challenges highlight the urgent need to balance tourism development with ecological carrying capacity and effective environmental management.

9.2 Land Use Conflicts and Dispossession

The expansion of tourism infrastructure at Mount Abu has intensified land-use conflicts, particularly affecting tribal communities and economically marginalized households with insecure land tenure. Rising demand for tourism-related development has increased land values, encouraging speculative investment and reducing access to land for indigenous residents (Peluso, 1992; Sarin, 2005). As construction within the Wildlife Sanctuary is restricted, development pressure has shifted to buffer zones, where many Bhil and Garasia households possess customary but legally unrecognized land rights. This has heightened their vulnerability to displacement and exclusion from tourism benefits. Although the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 provides a legal framework for protecting community land and resource rights, its inconsistent implementation in Rajasthan has limited its effectiveness, creating a significant governance and equity challenge for sustainable ecotourism development (Sarin, 2014).

9.3 Climate Change and Long-Run Ecological Sustainability

Climate change is posing a growing danger to Mount Abu's ecotourism industry's long-term viability. The Aravalli region's forest ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and water resources, such as Nakki Lake and the Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, are predicted to change due to rising temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns (Singh & Mal, 2014). As the only hill station in Rajasthan, these environmental changes may lessen the area's climatic appeal, which would impact tourism demand and diminish ecosystem resilience. The need for climate-resilient tourism planning and conservation strategies is highlighted by the substantial risks that climate-induced habitat degradation and current pressures from mass tourism pose to biodiversity, watershed functions, and the ecological resources that support ecotourism (Gossling & Hall, 2006; Holden, 2003).

10. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the developmental effectiveness of ecotourism at Mount Abu depends less on tourism volume than on the governance systems regulating the creation and distribution of tourism benefits. Consistent with the Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) and Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) perspectives, tourism has generated significant economic activity but has not ensured equitable benefit-sharing. Financial gains remain concentrated among established tourism enterprises, while tribal communities and informal workers receive comparatively limited benefits due to inadequate participation, weak institutional support, and unequal access to resources (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Scheyvens, 1999). Strengthening community participation, improving revenue-sharing mechanisms, and supporting local enterprises are therefore essential for achieving inclusive development.

The analysis further reinforces Buckley's (2012) distinction between genuine ecotourism and conventional nature-based tourism. Although Mount Abu is promoted as an ecotourism destination, its tourism economy is largely dominated by mass leisure and religious tourism, creating environmental pressures that challenge conservation objectives. Measures such as carrying-capacity-based visitor management, differential pricing, certified ecotourism products, and stricter environmental regulation are necessary to balance tourism growth with ecological sustainability.

Application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework highlights that ecotourism influences multiple livelihood assets, including financial, human, social, and natural capital, but these benefits are unevenly distributed because of existing socioeconomic inequalities and governance constraints (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Similar patterns observed in protected areas such as Corbett, Kanha, and Kaziranga indicate that Mount Abu reflects broader challenges of governance, equity, and sustainability within India's protected-area tourism system, while its distinctive hill-station setting and tribal communities provide important regional insights.

11. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study critically examined the role of ecotourism in promoting local economic development and sustainable livelihoods at Mount Abu, Rajasthan. The findings indicate that although Mount Abu possesses exceptional ecological, cultural, and tourism resources, its developmental potential is constrained by weak governance, unequal benefit-sharing, environmental degradation, and limited participation of indigenous communities. Rapid growth in mass tourism has increased pressure on fragile ecosystems, while the economic benefits of tourism remain concentrated among formal tourism enterprises, leaving Bhil and Garasia communities with relatively limited gains.

To enhance the sustainability of ecotourism, five key policy interventions are proposed. First, a scientifically based carrying-capacity assessment should guide visitor management and tourism planning within the Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary. Second, a transparent benefit-sharing mechanism should allocate a fixed proportion of sanctuary revenue to Eco-Development Committees for community-led conservation and livelihood initiatives. Third, a regional ecotourism certification programme should promote environmentally responsible tourism practices and encourage community-based enterprises. Fourth, targeted livelihood programmes should strengthen tribal participation through skills training, financial inclusion, market access, and effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Finally, climate adaptation strategies should integrate biodiversity conservation, watershed management, and sustainable tourism planning to improve the long-term resilience of the Aravalli ecosystem.

The Mount Abu case demonstrates that ecotourism can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development only when supported by effective governance, equitable benefit distribution, ecological safeguards, and active community participation. These findings offer valuable lessons for protected areas across India and South Asia, highlighting that the success of ecotourism should be measured not by visitor numbers alone but by its contribution to biodiversity conservation, social equity, and resilient local livelihoods.

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