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by Aaa Adaa

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**“UNDERSTANDING THE TOURISM ENVIRONMENT AND ITS
STAKEHOLDERS in Bhutan”**

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Introduction

This study centres around sustainable tourism in Bhutan, in this regard the importance of a sustainable environment and the role of tourism stakeholders will be analysed. Bhutan is regarded as one of the leading countries to promote sustainable tourism. The principles of tourism are fundamentally grounded on the principles of sustainability. Therefore, to analyse the success of Bhutan in its mission to promote sustainable tourism, the functions and role of the stakeholders will be evaluated in this study. The major macro environment factors, both beneficial and detrimental, will be analysed and discussed in this study to develop a more critical understanding of Bhutan's sustainable tourism.

Discussion

PARAGRAPH 1

According to UNWTO, sustainable tourism refers to a kind of tourism that remains accountable for its impacts on the future and current environment and society (UNWTO, 2023). Strengthening this definition, UNWTO further stated that ¹ sustainable tourism addresses the needs of the tourism industry, the visitors, the host communities and the environment. Over the years, several travel destinations have been damaged and the importance of sustainable tourism has been realised. The rationale for sustainable tourism is listed below -

The key rationale of sustainable tourism is that it ensures the optimum use of environmental resources while simultaneously maintaining substantial ecological processes. Thus sustainable tourism is a medium to promote biodiversity and preserve natural heritage.

Sustainable tourism enables the host communities to conserve and nurture their sociocultural authenticity. It further allows the host communities to protect their traditional values and cultural heritage. Moreover, sustainable tourism promotes and leads to the development of intercultural tolerance and understanding.

Sustainable tourism assures viability in economic operations, which ensures that all the concerned stakeholders are provided with the socioeconomic benefits of tourism. Stable employment, social services, poverty alleviation and the creation of earning opportunities are the major perks of sustainable tourism.

Bhutan is a mountainous country and it is more susceptible to phenomena like climate change and natural calamities (Penjor *et al.* 2021). Moreover, due to its hilly areas, the country cannot promote heavy industry; tourism is one such industry that adds substantial value to the economy of Bhutan.

However, the major decision makers the government of Bhutan of tourism policies decided to follow a sustainable approach to promote tourism in the country. This approach was adopted because of the following reasons -

A sustainable approach is required to protect the biodiversity and natural resources of the country. Without a sustainable approach, Bhutan's biodiversity will be at stake.

A sustainable approach is further required to protect the cultural heritage of the country and preserve the traditional values of the country.

Moreover, sustainable tourism is essential for Bhutan in order to increase employability and strengthen the socio-economic development of the country.

Damage to cultural assets can be prevented with the help of a sustainable tourism approach. Additionally, uncontrolled tourism can result in water shortages, indirect or direct impact on the event of weather etc. Considering all these factors, it is essential to have a sustainable approach to tourism.

Thimphu, Punakha, and Paro are three major locations that attract the attention of tourists. These places are rich in the historical and cultural heritage of Bhutan. The implementation of sustainable principles has enabled these places to protect their authenticity, and cultural richness and furthermore the socio-economic development of these areas has been facilitated.

PARAGRAPH 2

In the public sector, Bhutan ² Government adopted the policy of “*high value, low volume*” in tourism to ensure sustainability in the tourism industry. Historically, the concept of “High value and low volume” in the tourism industry of Bhutan emerged around the *1970s*. The Fourth Dragon King understands the unavoidable and inevitable severe consequence of high-volume and low-value tourism in the *1980s*. Therefore, he reinforced the implementation of a “high-value and low-volume” strategy. Since then this strategy has been helping Bhutan to maintain its principles of sustainability in tourism. The Bhutan government has grounded the very base of the tourism sector on the very principles of sustainability. Bhutan Government has implemented a policy that forbids all visitors to pay \$200 as a “*Sustainable development Fee*”. This collected revenue will be utilized by Bhutan to build sustainable travel infrastructures within the country so that Bhutan can provide the best sustainable tourism experience to travellers coming from all over the world.

In the Private sector, a total number of 869 tourism operators are listed as reliable companies for tourism in Bhutan. Some of the tourism companies of Bhutan are - Bhutan Tourism Corporation

Limited, Kamakhya Tours & Travels, Teem Travel Bhutan and so on. “The Tourism Council of Bhutan” guides all tour operators and helps to create a connected and cooperative channel of tourism (Intracen.org). The private sector serves the interests of the government and ensures that the visitors get proper accommodation and lodging within proper pricing. However, tour operators arrange and organise every facility by following sustainable measures and resources. E-Tourism has been given priority by the private sector to promote tourism in the country. Moreover, the private sector focuses on ecotourism because the market demand for ecotourism is continuously expanding. Moreover, the biggest challenges such as accessibility and seasonality have been addressed by the private sector. Therefore, flight facilities in terms of connectivity and frequency and lodging facilities are being improved in the country.

Tourists are the major stakeholder of the tourism industry because without tourists there is no industry as such. Bhutan primarily targets responsible tourists because it fulfils Bhutan’s goals of being an exclusive and niche tourist location. The main motivation of tourists that drives them to visit Bhutan is the natural and cultural landscape of the country. Moreover, Bhutan offers an optimum sustainable travel experience to the visitors and these two suit the preferences and motivations of value travellers.

PARAGRAPH 3

Bhutan is a developing country and certainly, it is far behind in terms of technological innovation and digitalisation. Yet the country has focused on improving its technological aspects in terms of facilities that can ease the movements of tourists in the country. The Bhutan government has taken initiatives like eco-tourism and e-tourism to capture the attention of tourists. E-tourism has enabled people to book hotels and transportation online. Moreover, to ensure disrupted tourist movement in the country, the airline facility has been improved in the country. It has been ensured that there is a continuous flow of tourists throughout all seasons.

Bhutan is a sensitive country when it comes to environmental aspects like climate change and natural calamities. Although Bhutan’s economy is heavily dependent on tourism, Bhutan is not ready to compromise with sustainability. High-value, low-volume tourism is a policy that targets to attract the attention of responsible travellers and consequently leads to high revenue (Norubhutan, 2023). Bhutan has faced the adverse effects of high crowds in the tourism sector, and therefore Bhutan has implemented this strategy to target only travellers who are responsible and who can value the sustainable policies of Bhutan. Thus, Bhutan becomes an exclusive and

overly niche place for visitors. Travellers who come to Bhutan feel mesmerised by the measures that have been taken by Bhutan to protect the environment. Bhutan is one such country in the world that is carbon negative because over 70% of this country is covered with forests. Thus, it can be noted here that Bhutan sets an example to maintain tourism without harming the environment.

In terms of social and cultural aspects, it can be stated here that Bhutan is protective of its culture and cultural heritage. Bhutan has been successful to preserve and conserve its cultural landscape and tourists often come to visit Bhutan to enjoy its cultural heritage besides the natural aspect of Bhutan (Chih-Hung, 2022). Bhutan's authenticity in terms of cultural richness is a centre of attraction for tourists. Tourists from all over the world come to enjoy and interact with the diverse and authentic culture of Bhutan.

PARAGRAPH 4

The primary internal macro factor that motivates tourists to come to Bhutan is Bhutan's natural landscape. According to the comments of Chamling, and Bera (2020), Bhutan offers a variety of natural landscapes, along with incredible groups of fauna and flora. Moreover, Bhutan comes under one of the largest and most breathtaking mountain chains and provides trekking opportunities to travellers. Bhutan's biodiversity is another major motivation for the tourist. Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes safety and psychological needs. Bhutan government focuses on meeting these two needs of the travellers. Bhutan's cultural and rich historical heritage sites are a major source of intrinsic motivation for travellers. The psychological needs of travellers are fulfilled by the natural landscapes and cultural sites of Bhutan. While the safety needs of the travellers are met with the help of sustainable infrastructure and protective measures like a seamless airline, hotel facilities and inland transportation. Furthermore, Bhutan's unique approach to sustainability is motivating the travellers to visit this country.

Bhutan opens its gate to travellers in 1974 with the aim to promote sustainable tourism in the country. This very foundation core of Bhutan's approach to tourism works as an intrinsic factor for the travellers. Bhutan ensures that all travellers get proper accommodation in the country and gives high priority to the safety of the travellers. Travellers who have come to Bhutan leave the country with an exhilarating experience and the mass perception of Bhutan as a tourist destination is essentially satisfactory. Destinations like Thimphu, Punakha and Paro provide breathtaking experiences to travellers with their rich culture and marvellous natural surroundings. Besides this, initiatives like e-tourism, and eco-tourism have affirmatively impacted tourist's perception of

Bhutan. Moreover, tourists that value sustainability, are bound to perceive Bhutan as their next travel destination because Bhutan has an approach to sustainability is unique in itself.

In terms of external factors of motivation, Bhutan's location and its rich biodiversity and natural landscape is the major motivational factor. Bhutan locates in the eastern ridges of the Himalayas and Over 70% of this country is covered by forest, moreover, Bhutan is home to a wide variety of fauna and flora. Additionally, Bhutan is a niche destination for tourism and it maintains high value over high volume. Therefore, travelling to Bhutan is an add-on to show one's class and economic affluence. Thus, high-income class tourists feel motivated to visit Bhutan and exhibit their socioeconomic affluence.

Conclusion

To conclude this study, it can be noted here that Bhutan prioritises sustainability in tourism and its policy like “ high value and low volume” ³ has been facilitating sustainable approaches in the country. Furthermore, stakeholders like the private sector also contribute to sustainability by following the guidelines issued by the Bhutan Government. Bhutan is a highly natural and diversified place in terms of culture and biodiversity and landscapes, therefore, tourists have multifaceted forms of motivation to visit Bhutan. Besides this, Bhutan's extraordinary approach to sustainability has captured the attention of travellers who prioritize sustainability and eco-tourism over uncontrolled tourism. Moreover, Bhutan is adopting modern approaches like E-tourism and Ecotourism to become a more prolific travel destination for travellers.

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