

An Exploratory Study of the Factors that Promote, or Impede Sustainable Eco-Tourism Development in Saiful Muluk National Park Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

During the last two decades tourism is considered as the building block of country overall growth. Pakistan tourism ranking among the world is at the lowest level. Despite the fact that Pakistan is considered as one of the top countries among the rest of the world for ecotourism and also other forms of tourism the overall purpose of this research study was to identify factors that impede and promote sustainable eco-tourism development in Saiful Muluk National Park of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The main objectives of this study were to explore factors impeding sustainable tourism development in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to identify factors promoting sustainable tourism development in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Being qualitative in nature, data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (Wildlife Staff, Local business community and Tourists) of Saiful National Park. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze data through NVivo software. The key findings in respect of impeding factors were identified as inadequate infrastructure, unbalanced power structure and communication gap among the key stakeholders while promoting factors includes uniqueness of the site, scenic beauty, precious wildlife species and hospitable local community culture.

Keywords: Sustainable, promoting, impeding, tourism, power structure, uniqueness

Introduction

Background of the Study

Tourism is one of the main growth factors for developing economies (UNWTO, 2017). In the mid of the 19th Century very less people would have known about the current growth of tourism development, and the importance it brings in terms of economic growth, foreign exchange, employment and income for the local communities and overall population of a country. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2017) annual report, foreign tourists' arrival was 25 million in 1950 and in 2011 it jumped to 980 million and will be 1.8 billion by 2030. By the year 1950 world tourists receipts were US \$2.1 billion, in 2010 it reached up to US \$919 billion and this growth also varies from country to country as there are numerous trends emerging around the world (UNWTO, 2017).

World Travel and tourism GDP is about 10%, which contributes and support about one in eleven of all jobs on the earth, such a high growth can bring about enormous social and economic development (UNWTO, 2017). During the last two decades,

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tremendous tourism growth has been observed globally and has been currently rated as the fastest economic sector in the world. In today's world tourism growth have been exceeded other businesses such as food, oil exports and automobile sector. Its growth is also witnessed due to tourism diversification between countries. One of the main outcomes of this growth has brought prosperity in the economies of the countries, by providing jobs in various sectors, like telecom and agriculture (Tolkach, 2016).

In recent times Eco-tourism is considered as the most important form of tourism. Thus, it described how tourists can make understanding toward natural beauty and environment. Wildlife, forests, mountains, glaciers, lakes and all other outdoor pursuits are terms refers to Eco-tourism , while in keeping the ethics of this form of tourism as not to damage the environment (Tolkach, 2016).

Sustainability of Eco-tourism is to protect the natural scenery, landscape which in turn can attract and return the tourists' to see the sights again and again (Lorde *et al.*, 2011). This can also be achieved by the strategy that can retain tourists' and their revenues within the country (Lorde *et al.*, 2011).

Sustainable Eco-tourism Development

The last two decades, have proved significant growth in tourism development and is playing an important role in building economies of the countries. According to Kavoura and Stavrianeas (2015) that, eco-tourism is an alternate solution for the creation of various jobs, increasing foreign reserves, development of infrastructure and enterprises. Numerous authors have identified various strategies in relation to sustainable eco-tourism development around the world (Postma *et al.*, 2017; Sotiriadis *et al.*, 2015). However, less attention has been given to sustainable eco-tourism development in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa National Parks. Nature based tourism towards National Parks have been increased around the globe tremendously (Puhakka *et al.*, 2014). Culture and norms are an important parameters for enhancing and attracting foreign tourists (Palmer *et al.*, 2013). Saiful Muluk National is quite diverse in its rich culture, norms and the natural beauty of the Park.

According to Ahebwa (2013), that the management of National Parks can enhance the lifestyle of surrounding people by benefitting the people belonging to those areas. Tourists visit National Parks can bring revenue sufficient to self-finance its expenses and is widely accepted source of income for management of National Parks (Lee, 2013; Palmer *et al.*, 2013). Involvement of local residents in the National Parks development can be beneficial for them (Sebele, 2010). However, Jones (2013), identified certain factors such as terrorism, economic and political instability and poor infrastructure as an impeding factors in sustainable eco-tourism. Thus, these impeding factors might affect the overall sustainability of ecotourism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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This discussion highlights certain aspects of the development of National Parks which can bring economic benefits to the local residents and can improve the quality of life of those people residing in the surrounding of the National Parks. However, there are other factors which cannot be ignored, which can halt the development of these parks and can impede the sustainable tourism.

What is sustainable tourism? In order to define this term the researcher studied latest research articles and extract what exactly sustainable tourism is about. The researcher is confident that this information will further increase the knowledge of the researcher and policy makers to understand this phenomenon from the beginning till date and align its strategies accordingly.

Tourism was defined by Mowforth and Munt (2015), in two broader perspectives one is its technical definition and the other one is its conceptual understanding. Technically, they defined tourism as "Temporary short-term movement of people to destination outside the places where they normally live and work, and their activities during their stay at these places; it includes movement for all purposes, as well as day visits or excursions."

The concept of sustainable development was introduced for the first time by World Conversation Strategy (WCS). The WCS in its report highlight balance between natural resources and economic development. The significance of the relationship between economic development and natural resources, however, was emphasized further to provide a strategic path for the government and non-government organizations to align issues exist in their organization with sustainable development strategy (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

Context of the Study

Pakistan remains a land of high adventure and full of natural scenic beauty. Trekking, mountaineering, clean water rafting, scenic lakes boating, wild boar hunting, mountain and desert jeep safaris, camel and yak safaris, trout fishing and bird watching are fewer activities, which attract the adventure and nature lovers to Pakistan. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is considered the hot spot for tourism in Pakistan. The province has a varied landscape ranging from rugged mountains, valleys, hills and dense agricultural farms. It can be an adventure for majority of tourists' having jeep safari in these mountainous areas. It can also be as sights where tourists' can enjoy the natural scenery, beautiful waterfalls and try to understand the local cultures. One of the most significant debates in research community underway in these days is regarding the idea that how we can have these sites for life time. In other words, how can we sustain these natural sites? According to Dillimono and Dickinson (2015) sustainability of tourism is not merely a trend that government will follow to adopt, rather it is an evolving process with the demands and needs of the tourists'. Sustainable Tourism can defined by UNWT (2017, p. 5) as tourism, "that takes full

account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities".

Problem Statement

According to Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index out 136 countries Pakistan ranked 124 (WTTC, 2017). Such a low ranking of Pakistan in tourism sector is a great concern for country overall sustainable tourism, which is enriched in all aspects and especially very attractive for eco-tourism. In term of Tourist Services and infrastructure Pakistan ranked 125 out of 136 countries of the world (Arshad *et al.*, 2018). The problem is how Pakistan can improve its overall ranking shall be solved by identifying the key factors that either promote or impede sustainable eco-tourism.

National Parks on every continent and within every environment are responsible for the preservation of land, animals, and habitats. However, the establishment and management of national parks are not without controversy, and there are policies and actions governments can take to better ensure that our global national parks systems live up to their potential for sustainability and responsibility. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, there are 6 national parks i.e. Ayubia National Park District Abbottabad, Broghil National Park District Chitral, Chitral Gol National Park District Chitral, Lulusar-Dudipat National Park District Mansehra, Saiful Muluk National Park District Mansehra, Sheikh Baddin National Park District D.I Khan (Khan, 2012). The current government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has launched a campaign for the development and management of these national parks. The focus of this study is to Saiful Muluk National Park.

Approximately, there are 6,555 National Parks exist worldwide and only 21 National Parks are in Pakistan (Khan, 2012). According to Khan (2012), that Pakistan National Parks represents ecological regions covering an area of 29,589 km² of the overall area of the country. Saiful Muluk National park was established in 2003 and is located in Kaghan Valley of District Mansehra. The beauty of this park is due to its rich and dense forests, shrubs and herbal plants. Apart from its scenic beauty this national park is also famous for its unique fauna which consist of Asiatic black bear, Snow Leopard, Marmot, Eurasian Lynx, Snow cock, snow partridge, Indian leopard and weasels (Khan, 2012). Recently, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has put a number of initiatives to develop and attract tourists to visit this National Park. However, the park is not yet fully developed to Benchmark the International National Parks standards and also failed to attract a desirable number of tourists. Therefore, this study is very important to highlight the issues which refrain this park from becoming an International Standard Park. Thus, this study has focused on factors which promote or impede sustainable eco-tourism in Saiful Muluk National Park.

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Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following main objectives.

- To explore factors which promote sustainable eco-tourism development in Saiful Muluk National Park Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.
- To explore factors which impede sustainable eco-tourism development in Saiful Muluk National Park Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Significance of the Study

As this study has identified the main factors that promote or impede sustainable eco-tourism in Saiful Muluk National Park in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, therefore, the findings of this study will help the policy makers and management to consider possible ways to sustain eco-tourism development in Saiful Muluk National Park.

From the managerial perspective, this study elaborates various issues which were needed to be solved. Sustainable tourism is the need of the day and it was of utmost importance for the Wildlife Department to find out issues that are promoting or impeding sustainable tourism in Saiful Muluk National Park and this study will be a helping hand for the Wildlife Department to align its strategies accordingly.

Methodology of the Study

Without the proper collection of empirical data it will not be possible for the researcher to identify the main factors that are responsible for promoting or impeding sustainable eco-tourism in Saiful Muluk National Park. Qualitative research was conducted as the researcher want to explore various factors that either could have promoted or impede sustainable eco-tourism. As this study is exploratory in nature therefore researchers have conducted in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders of this Park.

The main Stakeholders of this study include, staff of the Wildlife Department, Local business community and the tourists. This study has mainly focused on the following three research questions in order to reach the depth of aforementioned factors.

Q1. What in your opinion are the most important and urgent issues currently facing Saiful Muluk National Park?

Q2. What in your opinion are the most important factors that can promote sustainable tourism?

Q1. How to improve Saiful Muluk National Park and what is in your opinion the core issues related to this national park which can impede its sustainability?

Data Collection Process

The tools use for data collection was in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders of Saiful Mulk National Park i.e. Wildlife Department, Local Business Community and Tourists. Step wise interviews were conducted. In the first phase, the researcher conducted interviews with three persons from Wildlife Department to know about their view in relation to these factors. In, the following step, seven persons belongs to local and business community were interviewed. Similarly, in the last step to know about the tourists perspectives regarding the promoting and impeding factors ten tourists were interviewed (refer table 1).

Table 1

Details of the interview

S. No.	Number of Interviewees	Description
1	Three persons from Wildlife Department	One -Sub divisional Wildlife officer, two Range Officers of the concern National Park
2.	Seven Persons from Local and Business Community	President, General Sectary of the local business association, Two members of local bodies, two persons from the local community and one local religious scholar.
3.	Ten tourists	Eight national (three female and five male) and two international tourists

Findings and Discussion

The collected data was properly analysed in the order to know about the impeding and promoting factors affecting sustainable eco-tourism at Saif ul Muluk National Park. The researcher applied thematic analysis to identify the factors from collected data. After thorough analysis, first the researcher identified the following impeding factors (refer figure 1).

Power Structure and Lack of Communication

Currently, researchers have highlighted the importance of communication among stakeholders in order to sustain eco-tourism (Osman *et al.*, 2018). Interviewing various stakeholders (Local community, Wildlife staff) at Saiful Muluk National Park, the majority of the interviewees were with a view that, there is a lack of proper communication, and nobody knows who is in power of controlling the National Park. The local community claims that they are the actual residence of the area and bonafide

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owners of this land. One of the member of the local community replied in these worlds regarding the ownership of the land.

“Since 100 years, 90% of the land belongs to the local community, and before acquiring this land from the local community, an environment of mutual understanding should be established in order to avoid any conflict.”

In this regard, the local Wildlife officer replied;

“That there is a lack of communication not only between the local community and the Wildlife Department but also there is a lack of coordination among different concern government departments.”

He further stressed that;

“Trust policy should be formulated with consultation of all the key stakeholders in order to build a trustworthy environment and to avoid any conflicts”.

In the same vein another Wildlife officer contented that;

“That majority of the National Park land has been acquired by the Wildlife Department and the remaining land acquisition is in process”.

He further explains that;

“Before forcefully acquisition of the land, first the government should create awareness among the local community especially with the owners about the importance of National Park”.

Lack of Trust among Stakeholders

According to Nunkoo and Gursoy (2017), that the relationship of organisation trust and tourism is directly proportional to each other. Hence, such relationship needs stability among all stakeholders. Numerous authors (Czernek and Czakon, 2016; Nunkoo and Smith, 2013), backing a strong relationship between all stakeholders, such as Wildlife Department, Local Business Community and the Tourists. Such relationship will develop trustworthy environment which will ultimately develop a sustainable eco-tourism environment (Zuo *et al.*, 2017). Despite an increase in the number of local tourists, still there is deficiency of trust among international tourists to visit these sites (Arshad *et al.*, 2018).

During the last decade Pakistan witnessed waves of terrorism. Thus it has drastically brought political, social and economic instability. Therefore, tourist trust on visiting natural parks and the countryside was in decline. However, the government of Pakistan took strong action against the terrorists and security related problems were solved and have attracted a number of local tourists.

In order to probe this issue local and international tourists were interviewed. One of the local tourists narrates that;

“I belong to Karachi, and I was a bit worried when I plan to visit KP, but, when I came here, I feel quite relaxed and I couldn’t find any security issue”.

Another tourist replied that;

“Media should play a positive role, and the Wildlife Department also needs to promote this National Park to the general public”.

One of the tourist was clueless about the national park he respond that,

“I don’t have any idea about whether, this area is declared as a National Park by the government”.

Two foreign tourists from Malaysia, were also interviewed. According to them;

“Before, coming to Pakistan we were worried too much about the security situation in KP, but now we feel quite relaxed”.

As, compared to the perception of tourist trust, the local business community were in different view. According to one of the local business man that;

“We have a conflict with the Wildlife department and said that they have an agreement with us that we will pay a certain amount of money for the rent of shops and restaurants. However, they came and demolished our shops and restaurants and in this way the conflict emerged”.

Another member replied that;

“That we are very much willing to talk to the Wildlife department in order to solve this issue, as because of this conflict the local community is in deep stress.”

However, when asked the same question from the Wildlife staff;

“They informed that the conflict was due to misunderstanding and the department is working on it to solve it with the local community.”

Poor Infrastructure

Infrastructure boost eco-tourism by offering recreational services to tourists in the form of resting places, car parking, roads, walking tracks and other benefits related to it (Pan *et al.*, 2018). According to Pan *et al.* (2018), that tourists visiting protected areas, a good infrastructure can be beneficial for conservation of Wildlife and provision of recreational facilities to tourists.

The local business community were interviewed in this regard and according to one of the community member;

“Saiful Muluk Lake was actually consists of 900 Kennals and now it is reduced to only 500 Kennals and is further going to reduce in the near future”.

Promoting Factors

As this study is also focussing on those factors which promote susutainbale eco-tourism in Saiful Mulk National Park, therefore, the following promoting factors were interrogated from all the three stakeholders (refer figure 2).

Unique and Scenic View

Scenic view includes aesthetic services which can prompt the ability of the place to provide an exceptional experience to the tourists in the form of visual gratitude (de Almeida Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018). A study conducted by Souza (2016) in Brazil regarding the impact of scenic view of ecotourism and Brazilian economy, according to this study that Brazilian protected area received 8 million visitors in 2015 and contribute around \$1.2 billion to the overall economy of the country. The study also provides an evidence of investment by the Brazilian government on protected area which is around one U.S dollar they invested the returned was about \$7 which create about 43,602 jobs (de Almeida Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018; Souza, 2016).

In this regard, visitors were also interviewed; one of the visitors responded that;

“I am impressed from the scenic beauty of this area and I will encourage my friends and family members to visit this beautiful area. However the surrounding of the lake is not clean as per my expectations”.

An International tourist uttered his experience as;

“I haven’t seen such beautiful glaciers and mountains before. This, scenic beauty is outstanding”.

History of Saiful Muluk National Park

During the last decade a shift in paradigm emerged among the researchers to discuss about historical tourism and its importance in overall country tourism sustainability (Varfolomeyev *et al.*, 2015). Story tales, historical buildings and cultural heritage are among the essential components to attract local and international visitors (Varfolomeyev *et al.*, 2014).

There are numerous myths and stories related to Saif UL Muluk National Park. Asking this question from the local community members, one of them replied that;

“This national park is popular for its history and story tales. The name of the park is due to the name of a Persian prince Saif UL Muluk. The story of the Persian prince and local princes is very popular and the tourists enjoyed such kind of stories”.

When asked from one of the tourists about these fairy tales he replied that;

“The history and related fairy tales are quite attractive for tourist to be pleased and joyful”.

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Hospitality of the local people

Recently in sustainable tourism practices, hospitality is a great challenge for policy makers of Wildlife department, department of tourism and academia (Dolnicar *et al.*, 2008; Lim, 2016). However, according to Ricaurte *et al.* (2012) that tourist operators and hotels are offering hospitable services in order to obtain benefits and thus, develop sustainable ecotourism practices. Hospitality is also embedded in the local culture of the people and can play a key role in the development of sustainable tourism.

Inquiring about the hospitality of the local people from the tourist, one of them replied that;

“The local people are very hospitable and are rich in their culture and history, and I am pleased that there is no such conflicts in relation to religion and other social related matters”.

Regarding local culture and hospitality one the local business community member replied that,

“The people are a bit liberal. However, still they will prefer that foreign tourists should wear Islamic dress”.

One of the government officers suggests that,

“Tourists need to be encouraged to stay in the villages and a proper mechanism need to be developed in order to build "Home Stay" or guest houses in the nearby villages which will be cost effective for the tourists and also a source of income for the local community”.

Security issue

Security and terrorism are considered disastrous for the development of tourism related activities (Kılıçlar *et al.*, 2018). In recent past Pakistan has faced a wave of terrorism. However, the security forces of the country have coped well with terrorists and the country is almost free from such kind of activities.

One elder from the local business community replied that;

“In this national park there is no issue related to security and this place very safe from terrorism.”

One the tourist expresses his feeling as;

“I didn't see any security issue and found this place very secure as compared to other parts of the country”.

Member of the Wildlife department view that;

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River Kunhar or from the local stream coming from the National Park. This will further boost tourism and attraction to the site. A walking track will also be a good idea as it can be an adventurous experience for bag pickers. In order to sustain the beauty of the lake a strong RCC bridge need to be built at the exit of the lake.

As, for maintaining a clean environment, the tourist need to be warned and imposed certain fines on those who make the Lake and surrounding area dirty and filthy. The Wildlife Department needs to consult the local people about the land requisitions and also involved the local community in decision making in the form of a committee which include people from the Wildlife Department and prominent people from the concerned village.

The committee must have met at least the start of the season and have to discuss what measure they can take to protect the natural environment in order to sustain the eco-tourism. Mutual cooperation, proper communication and trust building will be the key challenges for the Wildlife Department to implement.

The research in the field of eco-tourism support the promoting factors mentioned in this report as the building block of sustainability. The interviewees also support the importance of these promoting factors. The scenic beauty of the site, the story tales and history of the site, hospitality of the local's commodity, security and protection of precious animals.

The scenic view can be utilized in a proper manner. However, it also needs to be protected from dark tourism. When, number of tourists visits the site they should not disturb the ecosystem by leaving their garbage and other stuff over there. It has been witnessed from the current research literature that a number of countries are taking advantage of the scenic view in terms of foreign reserves and job opportunities.

The literature also supports the importance of historical places and story tales. Saiful Muluk national park is popular for story tales and can be advantage for the tourism department to attract tourists.

In recent time hospitality and tourism are directly proportional to each other (Chang, 2018). The hospitality of this park can be a competitive edge for the tourism department. In order to take advantage of the hospitable nature of the locals "Home stays" or guest house kind of projects should be initiated by the government. These projects will generate income for the government as well as the local community.

As evidence from the current literature the value of Wildlife trade worth in billion US dollars. Number of precious Wildlife living in this national park can be a valuable asset for the government of Pakistan if legally exported to interested people around the world. TV and social media advertisement are also an essential component to inform the tourists regarding how to sustain the eco-tourism in the form of its cleanliness, Wildlife protection, etc. The Wildlife Department also needs to encourage the tourists to give feedback regarding their experience and as per there feedback the Wildlife Department must think and align their strategies accordingly.

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