

Ecotourism for Sustainable Development in Gilgit-Baltistan: Prospects under CPEC

Neelum Nigar*

Abstract

Ecotourism is an instrument for protecting the natural landscape along with improving the livelihood of the rural communities. It helps minimise the negative impacts of tourism on bio-diversity of the protected areas. With the increasing prospects of better infrastructure and improved means of communication under the framework of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), there is huge potential for promoting ecotourism in the ecologically fragile areas like Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). This paper attempts to evaluate the theoretical concept of ecotourism and sustainable development and also analyses how the two issues are intertwined. Furthermore, it explores the prospects for developing ecotourism in GB with the help of a better infrastructure development as planned under the CPEC. While doing so, this study examines the potential benefits of ecotourism for sustainable development of the rural communities of GB.

Keywords: Tourism, Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Gilgit-Baltistan.

Introduction

Over the past decades, tourism experienced continued growth and diversification, which has turned it into a key driver of socio-economic progress among the nations worldwide. According to a recent report by the World Economic Forum, tourism is one of the world's largest and most rapidly expanding industries. It is a sector, which accounts for 10 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), seven per cent of the global trade and contributes one in 10 jobs in the world.¹ Global tourism is

* The author is Research Fellow at the China Pakistan Study Centre, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

¹ "The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017," World Economic Forum, 2017, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2017_web_0401.pdf

predominantly driven by the tourist flows from the developed to the less developed countries, which has shown sustained growth, reaching to US\$1.2 billion. This trend continued, despite the challenges that the global community faces today due to the global financial crisis and trans-national terrorism.² As a result, a greater flow of tourists to the developing countries is positively impacting the socio-economic status and environment of the local communities. This has created an urgent need, in most of the developing countries, to plan the appropriate destinations for tourists, with the objective of optimising equitable benefits to the local community and reducing the adverse impact on the local biodiversity.

With the shift in development thinking, it has become imperative to focus on the type of sustainable tourism, which provides livelihood to the local people and conserves the natural resources and landscapes. This requirement has led to the emergence of new tourism practices. As a result, the phenomenon of mass tourism was criticised as merely being a means, used by the developed countries, to continue their exploitation and domination of the underdeveloped countries.³ Nature tourism is meant to serve various purposes:

- i. To attract foreign investment in the “smokeless” tourist industry.
- ii. To bring national and international tourists to visit natural and cultural sites.
- iii. To provide local employment for rural population.
- iv. To preserve ecosystems and cultures.
- v. To solve the ecological, social and political woes that hinder sustainable rural development.⁴

In Pakistan, tourism has been heavily based upon the vast region of GB, formerly known as the Northern Areas (NA). This part of the country is famous for its snowy mountains, lush green valleys, mighty rivers, plentiful wildlife and beautiful lakes. The World Wide Fund for Nature Pakistan (WWF-P) has been a pioneer in introducing sustainable ecotourism

² David J Telfer and Richard Sharpley, *Tourism and Development in the Developing World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4-5.

³ Martin Mowforth and Ian Munt, *Tourism and Sustainability: Development, Globalisation and New Tourism in the Third World* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴ David S Wilkie and Julia Carpenter, “Can Nature Tourism help Finance Protected Areas in the Congo Basin?,” *Oryx* 33, no. 4 (1999): 333-339.

initiatives in GB, making ecotourism — a sustainable, responsible and an environment-friendly initiative. For the last 13 years, the WWF-P has been working closely with the local communities, private sector and regulatory bodies. It was involved in organising the first convention on sustainable ecotourism in 1999. It was also involved in the formulation of the Tourism Development Board of NA, training of ecotourism guides and porters, the development and distribution of ecotourism brochures and the introduction as well as facilitation of sport-hunting in the area.⁵

Although much has been written about the importance of ecotourism for GB, this study explores an altogether different dimension of the subject. It links ecotourism with sustainable development and tries to explore the common factors in the context of rising economic opportunities under the framework of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This study uses secondary data, which is collected and compiled from document analysis. For this purpose, a thorough literature survey has been conducted and the reliable data has been gathered from various reports, books and journals related to the specific issue of this study. The secondary data includes key socio-economic indicators of both, Pakistan and China, as well as data from GB. The indicators include population, GDP, literacy, employment and net migrations.

Based on the socio economic indicators, this paper highlights the key areas where ecotourism can lead to sustainable development, based on the socio-economic and environmental profile of the region. While giving a conceptual framework, this paper highlights the potentialities of ecotourism, which can be materialised under the CPEC and the role of sustainable development in this initiative. It concludes with some policy recommendations. The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, section two gives the conceptual framework while section three highlights the prospective potentials of ecotourism under the CPEC. The role of ecotourism for sustainable development is explained in section four. Lastly section five concludes the study along with some policy recommendations.

⁵ Abbas et al., “Ecotourism Potential in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Case Study of Khunjerab National Park,” *American Journal of Agriculture and Forestry* 3, no. 6 (2015): 253-259.

Conceptual Framework

Ecotourism is considered as an effective tool for promoting sustainable economic policies in the developing countries. The term, 'sustainable development' has been defined in many ways but the most quoted definition is from 'Our Common Future,' also known as the Brundtland Report. According to the report "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."⁶ It also defines that the concept of ecotourism is rooted in the idea of sustainable development.⁷ It further adds that ecotourism helps with community development by providing an alternate source of livelihood to the local community, which is more sustainable. It is considered as a viable means to protecting the natural environment and creating socio-economic benefits for the local communities in an area. Broadly speaking, the dimensions of ecotourism development refer to the environmental, economic and social aspects of tourism development. However, a balance needs to be attained with regards to all these dimensions for a long-term sustainability.⁸

It is pertinent to note that ecotourism is a sub-component of sustainable tourism. In fact, the developing countries are now embracing it and including it in their economic development and conservation strategies. Numerous studies have looked into the broader potentials of ecotourism and consequently the definition has varied from time to time. Generally, ecotourism, as an alternative tourism, involves visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out activities, which are environmentally friendly.⁹ It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitats, as well as cultural artefacts from the locality. While examining the approach of developed and developing countries towards ecotourism, it is observed that developed countries emphasis environmental protection and socio-cultural aspects of

⁶ Gro Harlem and Brundtland, "Report for the World Commission on Environment and Development Our Common Future," United Nations, 1987.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bhuiyan et al., "Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development in the Economic Coastal Region, Malaysia," *International Journal of Sustainable Development* 3, no.9 (2012).

⁹ Tugba Kiper, "Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development," in *Advances in Landscape Architecture*, InTech, 2013.

ecotourism, while developing countries are more focused on economic perspectives in developing ecotourism.¹⁰

A large number of studies have explored the factors of sustainable tourism and asserted that a criterion for sustainable tourism should include indicators of social and economic sustainability, adding up to the indicators of environmental sustainability.¹¹ Others have argued that for tourism to contribute to sustainable development it must be economically viable, environmentally sensitive and culturally appropriate and the forms that this might are likely to vary with location.¹²

Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Keeping in view the importance of tourism, strong commitments are made internationally to make it sustainable. In this regard, the UN declared the year 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism and Development.¹³ As stated by the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, “The declaration by the UN of 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development is a unique opportunity to advance the contribution of the tourism sector to the three pillars of sustainability — economic, social and environmental, while raising awareness of the true dimensions of a sector which is often undervalued.”¹⁴ Before this, the importance of sustainable tourism was well recognised by global leaders at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), by stating that “well-designed and well-managed tourism” can contribute to the three dimensions of sustainable development, to job creation and to trade.¹⁵

¹⁰ James Higham, *Critical Issues in Ecotourism* (Network: Routledge, 2007), 184-200.

¹¹ Laurie Kroshus Medina, “Ecotourism and Certification: Confronting the Principles and Pragmatics of Socially Responsible Tourism,” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 13, no. 3 (2005): 281-295.

¹² Geoffrey Wall, “Is Ecotourism Sustainable?,” *Environmental Management* 21, no. 4 (1997): 483-491.

¹³ “UN Declares 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism and Development,” *Press Release*, United Nation World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), December 07, 2015, <http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2015-12-07/united-nations-declares-2017-international-year-sustainable-tourism-develop>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “The Future We Want,” United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20), June 12, 2012, <http://rio20.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/N1238164.pdf>

This is an important and a much-needed step taken by the international community since it embraces the new Agenda 2030 and the SDGs approved by the UN General Assembly in September 2016. Out of the 17 goals, three goals are related to tourism as specified below:

- i. SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
- ii. SDG 12: Sustainable consumption and production.
- iii. SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

These goals emphasise the importance of tourism, which could provide sustainable job opportunities for the local people and, at the same time, act as a stewardship over the natural resources so that the environment is conserved along with ensuring sustainable development of the region.

Socio-Economic Profile of GB

With a population of around 1.8 million, GB is a mountainous area that covers 72,496 sq km area. Its population density is only 18 person/sq km and road density is the lowest in the country. The literacy rate is 38.2 per cent (male 52.6 per cent and female 216 per cent), per-capita income is below the national per-capita income. Poverty, in GB, is 29 per cent as compared to overall ratio of 21 per cent in the country. According to a survey, only 26 per cent population are declared 'food secure,' whereas, 41 per cent are moderately food insecure and 32 per cent highly food insecure.¹⁶ These indicators are also shown in the table below.

¹⁶ "Economic Transformative Initiative Gilgit Baltistan," Programme Design Report, International Fund for Agricultural Development, December, 2015, <https://webapps.ifad.org/members/eb/114/docs/EB-2015-114-R-14-Project-design-report.pdf>

Table No. 1
Socio-Economic Indicators of Gilgit-Baltistan (2015-2016)

Indicators	GB	National
Population (Millions)	1.8	197
Per capita Income (US \$)	350	1,046
Literacy Rate (Percent)	36	56
Poverty rate Headcount ratio	29	21
Multidimensional Poverty Incidence	43	39
Migration Rate(Percent)	43	25

Source: Economic Survey 2015-16, Assessment of Socioeconomic indicators in GB, 2005, Population Census 1998, (Annual Plan, Planning Commission & GB Govt.)

Compared with the urban areas, the rate of poverty is very high in the rural areas of Pakistan. According to the official report of multidimensional poverty¹⁷ released by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms, 38.8 per cent of Pakistan’s population lives in poverty. Around 54.6 per cent of the rural population lives in acute poverty while this ratio is only 9.4 per cent in urban areas. This deplorable trend calls for more robust rural-centric economic policies, which could provide livelihood incentives to the local people and expedite the development process. Ecotourism, with more community involvement, can bring more economic incentives along with minimising the negative fallout on their natural resources, thus, ensuring sustainable rural development for the indigenous people.

Pakistan’s Tourism Industry and Gilgit-Baltistan

Pakistan’s travel and tourism industry is booming after significant improvement in the security situation. *According to the 2017 World Economic Forum report*, Pakistan’s travel and tourism industry contributed seven per cent to its GDP. It includes foreign and domestic travel and tourism spending as well as its contribution in creating employment opportunities in the country. The report further states that Pakistan has been

¹⁷ Multidimensional poverty is made up of several factors that constitute poor people’s experience of deprivation — such as poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standard, lack of income (as one of several factors considered), disempowerment, poor quality of work and threat from violence for details see, “Policy — a Multidimensional Approach,” Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI), <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/>

able to improve its ranking on tourism competitive index. It is currently at 124 out of 136 countries while it was at 125 in the year 2015,¹⁸ which shows an improvement by one point in the overall performance of the industry. The report further states that the average receipts per arrival have been estimated at US\$328.3 whereas, total receipt has been amounted to US\$317 million, with travel and tourism competitiveness having share of 2.8 per cent of GDP.¹⁹

Among the sites for travel, the northern part of the country has always been the preferred tourist destination. The region is blessed with beautiful landscape, a unique cultural heritage and rich in biodiversity, which gives it a comparative advantage in attracting the tourists from all over the world. The world's three mightiest mountain ranges – the Karakoram, the Hindukush and the Himalayas – are located in this region. The variety of rare fauna and flora along with the mountains attract the mountaineers, trekkers and researchers from all over the world. Over the years, the number of tourists visiting this region has steadily increased as shown in the table below.

Table No. 2
Tourist Inflow in Gilgit-Baltistan (2007-2016)

	Domestic	Foreign
2007	23,770	10,338
2008	54,040	8,404
2009	54,602	7,704
2010	45,300	5,529
2011	61,233	5,242
2012	28,893	4,321
2013	51,914	4,524
2014	245,000	5,000
2015	500,000	7,500
2016	690,000	10,000

Source: Tourism Department, Government of GB, 2007-2016.

According to the tourism department statistics, over half a million tourists visited the region in 2016, making it the most attractive destination

¹⁸ “The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2017.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

for the visitors. However, it is observed that tourism has also resulted in creating adverse effect on the eco-system and biodiversity of the region due to the lack of consideration of the environmental issues. For instance, it has become a common practice that the tourists litter and stew garbage alongside rivers and picnic spots, which results into environmental degradation.²⁰ This development has shifted the focus of the present government, the provincial as well as the federal government, towards ecotourism development in the region.²¹ GB government is already working with different stakeholders in order to raise awareness among the masses. The local hotels and institutes have started “Responsible Tourism” initiatives in order to educate the young children and women about protecting their resources and acting as the environmental stewards.²²

Prospects for Ecotourism under CPEC

Environmental sustainability is an integral part of a nation’s overall economic development framework. Striking a balance between the two is very crucial for ensuring a sustainable path of development. In Pakistan, with the prospects of better infrastructure facilities under the CPEC framework, there is a boost in the flow of tourists to the scenic spots of the country. Moreover, it is very important that the government timely formulates the relevant policies so that with an increase in commercial activities, their negative fallouts is minimised in the fragile eco-system of regions like GB.

Background of CPEC and its Importance

In Pakistan, the CPEC has opened the doors of economic opportunities for the people of Pakistan through improved infrastructural development and enhanced regional connectivity. The CPEC is a multi-billion development project signed between the Government of Pakistan and the Government of People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2015. It aims at establishing a network

²⁰ “Social and Environmental Impacts of Tourism in Gilgit Baltistan,” *Pamir Times*, June 22, 2018, <https://pamirtimes.net/2018/06/22/social-and-environmental-impact-of-tourism/>

²¹ “Promoting Ecotourism in Gilgit-Baltistan under CPEC,” Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms, Government of Pakistan.

²² “Abruzzi Teaching Garden,” Shigar Valley, Baltistan, <http://www.abruzzischoolgarden.com/2012/03/how-it-started-and-where-were...>

of highways, railways, oil pipelines, electrical power grids, fibre optic cables and Special Economic Zones (SEZs). It links the Chinese trading hub of Kashgar in Xinjiang province with the Pakistani port city of Gwadar in the Balochistan province, which is located near the strategic Straits of Hormuz.²³

Like other provinces, GB holds a strategic position and is fundamental in the successful implementation of the CPEC. More importantly, it is the only land connection between Pakistan and China. All the roads and pipelines and most of the communication networks run through this mountainous area.²⁴

The main components of the CPEC are Gwadar port, energy and infrastructure development projects. According to the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms, GB is fully included in the CPEC through various infrastructure and energy projects. These include the expansion of Karakoram Highway (KKH), KKH Phase 11 (Thakot-Havalian Section, 118 km) and KKH (Thakot-Raikot N35, 136 km). These improved logistic facilities and revamped highways will benefit the region and will have multiplier effects for the overall economic growth in the country. The other proposed projects include expansion of the Gilgit-Skardu road project, setting up of the Board of Investment²⁵ and the most recent approval of setting up one SEZ over 250 acres' of land near Maqpoon das. A rail link is proposed which would start from Kashgar in China while crossing the Khunjerab Pass and ending up at Rawalpindi. This project is at a feasibility study stage, as of now, and is part of the second phase of the CPEC projects. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between the Governments of Pakistan and China to build five hydro projects along the Indus River as part of the second phase of the CPEC.²⁶

²³ "China's New Silk Road: What is in it for Pakistan?," *Dawn*, April 05, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1177116>

²⁴ Siegfried O Wolf, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and its Impact on Regionalisation in South Asia," in *Regional Cooperation in South Asia* (Springer: Cham, 2017), 99-112.

²⁵ The Board of Investment is an institutional body to expedite economic projects under the CPEC.

²⁶ The five projects are located in the region that starts from Skardu in Gilgit-Baltistan and runs through Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa as far as Tarbela; the five hydro projects include Diamer-Basha Dam, Patan Hydropower Project, Thakot Hydropower Project, Bunji Hydropower Project and Dasu Hydropower Project.

Potentials for Ecotourism under CPEC

Improved infrastructure facilities under the CPEC will create a broad range of economic opportunities for the region's traders. The corridor will prove to be a historic milestone and it will also promote tourism in GB, which would ultimately benefit the local people. According to the Asian Development (ADB) report, the CPEC will boost tourism over an area extending for 73,000 sq kms, which is called a paradise for mountaineers. This area is the home to five of the highest peaks above 8,000 meters (including the world's second highest peak K-2 and the 9th highest, Nanga Parbat) as well as more than 50 mountains over 7,000 meters.²⁷ The list is given in the table below.

Table No. 3
Highest Peaks of Gilgit-Baltistan

S. No.	Name of Peak	Altitude (meters)	Mountain Range	World Ranking
1	K-2 (Chogori)	8,611	Karakoram	2
2	Nanga Parbat	8,125	Himalaya	9
3	Gasherbrum-I	8,068	Karakoram	11
4	Broad Peak	8,047	Karakoram	12
5	Gasherbrum-II	8,035	Karakoram	14
6	Gasherbrum-III	7,952	Karakoram	15
7	Gasherbrum-IV	7,925	Karakoram	17
8	Distaghir Sar	7,885	Karakoram	20
9	Kunyang Chhish	7,852	Karakoram	22
10	Masherbrum NE	7,821	Karakoram	24
11	Rakaposhi	7,788	Karakoram	27

Source: Alpine Club of Pakistan.

The region is also rich in fruits production. As reported in the ADB report, GB is the producer of over 100,000 metric tons of fresh apricots

²⁷ "Using Solar Power to Dry Fruit for Farmers in Northern Pakistan," Asian Development Bank, September 04, 2014, <https://www.adb.org/features/solar-driers-bear-fruit-farmers-northern-pakistan>

annually, an estimated 4,000 tons of cherries and 20,000 tons of apples.²⁸ Keeping this in view, the officials in Pakistan have formulated some agro-based projects, which would be included in the long term plan under the CPEC. According to the plan, food processing plants would be set up near Gilgit, Skardu and other areas to enhance the export of fruits produced in the region, which would require lands to be purchased from the locals to set up the plants. Such eco-friendly economic projects would help in providing better livelihood opportunities to the local people along with the protection of their natural resources and biodiversity.

Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development

Given the high potential for developing ecotourism in GB, it can play a pivotal role in ensuring sustainable development. While looking at the socio-economic profile of the region, it shows that the socio-economic status of the indigenous people is relatively low compared to the national data set. Poverty is high both in terms of head-count ratio as well as in the multidimensional sense. This has led to higher rates of migration towards urban areas. According to official statistics, migration from the region is more prevalent in GB: 30 per cent compared to the provinces and regions in Pakistan like in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (28 per cent) and the Punjab (20 per cent).²⁹ This trend indicates that rural centric policies like ecotourism, have the potential of generating positive economic outcomes for the local people while protecting their natural resources. Eventually, it will ensure sustainable development of the region. The potentialities of sustainable development in GB through ecotourism are briefly discussed below.

Firstly, as the socio-economic profile suggest, the per capita income in GB is lower than Pakistan as a whole. Through ecotourism, better livelihood opportunities will be generated for the indigenous people, which will help in increasing the per-capita of the region. Moreover, it will be a useful tool in ensuring sustainable through responsible tourism. This will be helpful in

²⁸ Zofeen T Ebrahim, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Winds through Gilgit-Baltistan," *Third Pole*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/2016/01/28/the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-winds-through-gilgit-baltistan>

²⁹ "Labour Migration from Pakistan: 2015 Status Report," Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development Government of Pakistan Islamabad.

minimising the risk of loss of their natural resources, while at the same time, providing more economic opportunities for the local people.

Secondly, as already observed, the overall poverty and the multidimensional poverty of the region is higher than the national poverty rate of Pakistan. Promotion of nature-based activities that relate to ecotourism experience, such as trekking, hiking, seeing wildlife and birds will generate activities for the tour operators while selling the ecotourism experiences to the potential travellers. This will generate revenue for the business sector along with creating employment opportunities for the local communities. As a result, it will alleviate the poverty level in the region.

As discussed above, along with ensuring environmental sustainability, ecotourism promotes tourism with the sense of responsibility towards the local culture. This will be easily embraced by the local people, proving to be a successful model for local development.

Lastly, the eco-scenic spots will help in generating revenues through better management. By taxing the visitors, the government can compensate their adverse impacts on the local biodiversity besides making the visitors travel responsibly. In this way, sustainable development can be ensured while protecting the environment along with generating economic and social benefits for the local people.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the potential of ecotourism for sustainable development in the region amidst the emerging economic activities under the CPEC. It highlighted the socio-economic and environmental profile of GB in comparison with the national data and found that the socio-economic status of the region is weak in comparison to the national status in terms of poverty rate, literacy rate and per capita income. On the other hand, the region is rich in its natural landscape and ecology. Thus, it concludes that ecotourism is one important tool for providing livelihood opportunities to the local people while protecting their natural resources and biodiversity.

The economic collaboration between China and Pakistan provides an opportunity to put the economy of Pakistan on a sustainable growth trajectory through improved infrastructural development under the CPEC

framework. It promises to connect the peripheries to the main markets, providing more livelihood opportunities to the residents. Ecotourism is one such industry which can be used as a tool for ensuring local development to the mountainous regions like GB. The area has the unique biodiversity pockets along the CPEC route, which have their own significance. This must be given due importance while formulating the long-term plan under the CPEC. For this, the federal and provincial ministries need to establish and implement certain mechanisms to manage the environmental fallout of the projects along the route. A collaborative effort is required for better implementation of such mega projects in order to bring sustainable rural development. Moreover, in relation to coal based power projects, the government must ensure a better exchange of technology from China in order to minimise their adverse impact on the environment and biodiversity of mountainous regions like GB.