

Eco Tourism in Maharashtra: Opportunities and Challenges for Sustainable Development

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Abstract:

Eco tourism in Maharashtra has become a potent tool of sustainable development through unity of conservation of the environment, economic development and social welfare. The variety of ecosystems and the high cultural heritage of the state provide a lot of potential to develop ecotourism. The results indicate that eco tourism facilitates the creation of employment opportunities, rural development and conservation finance besides increasing environmental awareness of local people. Nevertheless, overtourism, inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, and poor stakeholder coordination among others are some complications in ways of having sustainable improvements. Policies by the government and involvement by the community play a pivotal role in tackling such issues and enhancing the management practices. It concludes that ecotourism, when done with the right mindset, may be an important instrument in preserving the natural resources and the realization of the sustainable development agendas in Maharashtra.

Keywords: *Eco tourism, Sustainable development, Biodiversity conservation, Community empowerment*

Introduction:

Eco tourism, which is an important type of sustainable tourism, focuses on the preservation of natural resources, conservation of the environment, and the appreciation of local culture and society. It has come out as a vital alternative to mass tourism which in most cases causes environment degradation, biodiversity loss and strain on natural environment. Eco tourism facilitates sustainable development by creating revenue but also conserving the ecosystem and wildlife and uplifting the locals. Sustainable development is a position that the current needs are fulfilled without undermining the needs of future generations without ruining the economy, environment, and social pillars. This solution is connected to the

ecotourism principles as well as it connects the human wellbeing and conserving the environment. Maharashtra has huge eco tourism potential and has different landscapes, coastline, hill stations, dense forests, wildlife parks and a rich cultural heritage. Biodiversity that is characteristic of the national parks and the forested areas like Tadoba, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and other forested areas also attract nature-based tourism. The ecotourism is unique in Maharashtra because of the 400 km long coastline, historic forts, tribal culture, and rural scenic formations.

Research Objectives:

- ◆ To study the role and potential of ecotourism in advancing sustainable development in Maharashtra.

- ◆ Analyse key provisions and the impact of the Maharashtra Tourism Policy 2024 and DCEL investments on ecotourism growth.
- ◆ Identify significant challenges in ecotourism development, including environmental degradation, pollution, and lack of infrastructure.
- ◆ Evaluate the economic, environmental, and social impact of ecotourism on local communities, employment generation, and conservation.
- ◆ To suggest effective policy strategies and community-based solutions to strengthen ecotourism and ensure environmental integrity.

Research Methodology:

The research design used in this study is descriptive-analytical research design in exploring the opportunities and the obstacles of eco tourism in Maharashtra in the context of sustainable development. The study relies mainly on the secondary sources of data such as books, journals, research publications, government reports, the Maharashtra Tourism Policy 2024, DCEL investment reports, valid websites, and news articles. The research has recognized some of the limitations such as time, reliance on the quality and validity of secondary data and the inability to access remote ecotourism sites. The anticipated research findings are the formulation of viable research policies and viable strategies that can empower eco tourism programs and promote sustainable tourism in Maharashtra.

Literature Review:

Eco tourism has been commonly identified as a policy that enables the tourism development to balance with the environment conservation and community wellbeing. Research studies

globally emphasize the role of ecotourism in ensuring sustainable development whereby economic benefits are attained without impacting the degradation of the natural resources. Honey (2008) and Fennell (2008) highlight that eco tourism reduces the effects of ecological impact but provides support to the local communities and ensures balanced ecology when it is under good management. The global studies have shown that ecotourism promotes environmental awareness and responsibility, and this is a necessary strategy in areas with biodiversity.

Eco tourism has expanded rapidly in India during the past twenty years especially in some states like Kerala, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra (Sharma and Chhetri, 2016). According to Ghosh (2014), it has been growing faster due to the growing environmental awareness and conservation-based policies.

The literature also differentiates eco tourism and sustainable tourism where ecotourism is considered as responsible tourism conducted to the natural environment without degrading the environment and without adversely affecting local communities (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Sustainable tourism on the contrary is a wider framework concerned with long-term environmental, cultural and economic sustainability (UNWTO, 2004).

The trends in eco tourism in India are directly related to the conservation policies of the country including National Eco tourism Policy (2002). Tadoba Tiger reserve, Sanjay Gandhi national park, Mahabaleshwar and Matheran are some destinations in Maharashtra that can be considered as a good eco tourist destination. Nonetheless, Chavan and Pandit (2018)

claim that to realise this potential, it is essential to consider the environmental threats, limitations of infrastructure, and problematic issues with the participation of communities.

Maharashtra Tourism Policy 2024:

The Maharashtra Tourism Policy is aimed at enhancing cultural and sustainable tourism to position the state in the world tourist destination. The policy is focused on increasing tourist numbers by 2 times and creating 18 lakh jobs and developing new tourist destinations with an investment target of INR 1 lakh crore. Some of the key initiatives are Marine and River Tourism, promotion of Rural Tourism and developing 50 major tourism destinations via Special Tourism Area Program. Such software as Tourism Mitra increases the safety and experience of any visitor and a range of tourism policies has already accepted more than 2,000 applications in various industries. Overall, the policy aims at enhancing the tourism infrastructure, promoting investment in the sector by individuals and promoting the growth of tourism based on community and sustainability.

Table 1: Number of applications approved under various tourism policies (2024):

Policy	Applications Approved
Single Window Clearance for the Hospitality Sector	206
Agro-Tourism Policy	833
Adventure Tourism Policy	584
Caravan Tourism Policy	8
Women-Oriented Tourism Policy	432

(Source: Economic Survey of Maharashtra, 2024-2025, Page No.146)

According to the table above, the most approved applications were the Agro-Tourism Policy (833) which shows that rural and farm-based tourism is in

high demands. Adventure Tourism is not an exception as it is extremely popular with 584 approvals which says about the demand on outdoor and recreational activities. It was observed that 432 approvals were received on the Women-Oriented Tourism Policy which indicated a positive involvement and encouragement of women in tourism entrepreneurship. The Hospitality Sector Single Window Clearance has 206 approvals and assists in streamlining investment in hotels and services associated with it. Caravan Tourism has only eight applications, indicating a low usage, which means that more promotion and infrastructure are required. In general, the statistics demonstrate a positive outlook at the diversified and sustainable tourism development in Maharashtra.

According to the table No. 2 shows annual investments that DCEL plans to make in various tourism development heads between 2002-03 and 2021-22. It is evident that the total investment is on a rising trend over the years, which means that more focus is on the tourism infrastructure in Maharashtra. The investment areas of high order are Accommodation, tourism projects, basic and tourism infrastructure, promotion, Human Resource Management (HRM), Training, Marketing and Administration (TM and A) and other development sectors. Tourism Projects have always managed to receive the highest investment, which proves the interest that the government has towards the development of tourism facilities and attractions. There is also an increased investment in Accommodation, and this is more after 2005 indicating an improvement in the tourist accommodation facilities. Basic Infrastructure spending varies, with project-specific amounts of expenditure.

Promotion, HRM and TM & A funding is relatively constant every year, which represents supporting operational functions. This is because the total investments went up significantly after 2005-06 to the highest level of 5269.5 crore in 2018-19, which showed strong planning of tourism development. A small decrease in 2019-21 can be associated with the reduction in the

economic growth and the effect of COVID-19. The influx increases in 2021-22 once again speaks of recovery operations and the fresh attention to tourism. Overall, the statistics represent the governmental approach to the growth of tourism because of long-term planning of investments aimed at increasing the growth and stability of the economy.

Table:2
Year-wise investments envisaged by DCEL under various heads

Year	Accommodation	Tourism Projects	Tourism Infrastructure	Basic Infrastructure	Promotion	HRM	T M & A	Others	Total
2002-2003	103.0	148.9	6.5	17.2	830.0	115.0	80.0	195.0	1495.7
03-04	149.8	1518.9	86.6	7.5	830.0	115.0	80.0	195.0	2982.7
04-05	209.1	1335.9	48.5	85.0	830.0	115.0	80.0	195.0	2898.4
05-06	588.8	2585.7	208.4	167.8	830.0	115.0	80.0	195.0	4770.8
06-07	445.1	2251.6	199.0	16.8	830.0	115.0	80.0	195.0	4132.5
07-08	669.4	1084.9	499.4	0.0	871.5	120.8	84.0	204.8	3534.7
08-09	565.3	1854.4	495.4	314.4	871.5	120.8	84.0	204.8	4510.6
09-10	642.9	1246.6	470.3	0.0	871.5	120.8	84.0	204.8	3640.8
10-11	617.8	1246.6	65.5	349.3	871.5	120.8	84.0	204.8	3560.2
11-12	1085.0	1000.0	24.9	349.3	871.5	120.8	84.0	204.8	3740.2
12-13	700.0	1238.4	170.5	349.3	915.1	126.8	88.2	215.0	3803.4
13-14	936.5	1454.8	470.0	0.0	915.1	126.8	88.2	215.0	4206.3
14-15	736.2	1454.8	470.0	0.0	915.1	126.8	88.2	215.0	4006.1
15-16	299.2	2120.1	28.5	0.0	915.1	126.8	88.2	215.0	3792.9
16-17	2160.1	1253.7	10.0	0.0	915.1	126.8	88.2	215.0	4768.9
17-18	2347.7	1224.5	170.0	0.0	960.8	133.1	92.6	225.7	5154.5
18-19	2462.7	1224.5	170.0	0.0	960.8	133.1	92.6	225.7	5269.5
19-20	1668.9	1224.5	170.0	0.0	960.8	133.1	133.1	225.7	4516.2
20-21	1434.8	1224.5	10.0	0.0	960.8	133.1	92.6	225.7	4081.7
21-22	3303.9	238.4	10.0	0.0	960.8	133.1	92.6	225.7	4964.7

(Source: Study Report on Development of Sustainable Tourism in Maharashtra, Joint Director, Dept. of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism & Culture, Delhi. Page. No. E3)

Ecotourism in Maharashtra:

Maharashtra is also blessed with a variety of landscapes, beaches, mountains, forests, plateaus and desert-like areas; thus, it is very suitable to ecotourism. The state has special ecosystems, along the Western Ghats and in the coastal region of Konkan, having rare plants and animals. Its topography is a variety of waterfalls, rivers, caves, the wildlife reserves, and the secured national parks. Some of the

well-known ecotourism sites are TadobaAndhari Tiger Reserve, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Karnala Bird Sanctuary and Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary. Sahyadri (Western Ghats) are known as a biodiversity hot spot in the world, and it is a glittering attraction to nature lovers and researchers all over the world. Mahabaleshwar, Matheran, Lonavala and Panchgani are some of the examples of environment-friendly tourism. Ganpatipule, Tarkarli and

Alibaug are the beautifully positioned beaches in Maharashtra that sustain marine and adventure-based eco tourism. It has nature-based tourism because of its rural lifestyle, ancient temples, historic forts, and traditional culture and heritage. The state has eco-tour packages that assist in the incorporation of sustainable tourism, conservation of wildlife, and community development.

As such, Maharashtra has great prospects of emerging as one of the leading eco tourism destinations through sustainable growth of tourism and preservation of the environment.

Ecotourism and Its Potential for Sustainable Development:

Maharashtra has a high potential of encouraging employment and rural economic development through eco tourism. Its development generates the need to offer services such as guided tours, eco-friendly Accommodation, transportation and the local handicrafts, which will bring revenues to the local communities. It encourages entrepreneurship by homestays, nature resorts and small tourism enterprises with special reference to rural regions where agricultural earnings are meagre. Therefore, ecotourism helps in reduction of poverty and promotes sustainable utilization of resources and conservation of the environment in the long run.

Another important activity of ecotourism is to preserve forests, wild animals and vulnerable ecosystems that are endangered by deforestation and building activities. The tourism activities like in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve are reinvested in habitat protection and wildlife management by relying on revenue generated by the tourism activities. It enhances sustainable activities including water

conservation, organic farming and proper utilisation of natural resources besides creating environmental awareness in tourists and communities.

Also, eco tourism enhances the power of the residents by training them in hospitality, nature guiding, better livelihoods and community involvement in conservation. It also assists in the conservation of the Maharashtra cultural heritage in terms of the popularization of the traditional arts and crafts and festivals to ensure that the cultural identity is not lost in the generations to come.

Eco Tourism Development Challenges:

Even though the main purpose of eco tourism is to promote conservation, its rate of expansion in Maharashtra has led to environmental degradation. Infrastructure development includes roads, hotels, and resorts, and causes deforestation and loss of habitat and disturbance of the wildlife in delicate regions like the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger reserve. Tourists raise waste, pollution and automobile emission that destroy soil, water bodies and biodiversity. In places like Sanjay Gandhi National Park and Mahabaleshwar over-tourism leads to the erosion of the land, water shortage, loss of vegetation, and the disturbance of the wildlife behaviour. Eco tourism will be detrimental instead of sustainable when it goes beyond ecological limits. The pressure should be minimized by effective control of the number of visitors, strict waste management, and marketing less popular sites.

Maharashtra has a good potential; however, the development of its eco tourism may be limited due to poor infrastructure and insufficient sustainable planning. Most of the destinations do not have waste

management systems, eco-friendly Accommodation as well as transport infrastructure contributing to unsustainable practices like poor disposal of waste and wasting resources. The projects are usually brief and disjointed without cohesive strategies to balance between environmental and economic objectives thus endangering ecosystems.

Effective eco tourism involves effective working of stakeholders, yet poor involvement of local community and sharing of benefits with the locals leads to conflicts between the government, the private sector, and the local population. Absence of training and capacity building means that communities can never exploit the opportunities that ecotourism presents to their fullest extent. Hence, to achieve sustainability in the long term, community participation in decision making and management is indispensable.

A Policy and Planning Framework for Eco tourism in Maharashtra:

Maharashtra has come up with great policies that facilitate eco tourism on the state and national level. MTDC has an ecotourism policy, Maharashtra Eco tourism Policy, designed to help to develop ecotourism sustainably in the conservation of biodiversity, community participation, and sustainable tourism practices. It aids in proper management of natural resources and at the same time makes sure that the local people are benefiting. On the national level, the National Ecotourism Policy 2017 advocates the ecotourism circuits, environmental education, and minimization of adverse effects. The two policy frameworks focus on benefits distribution that is fair, safeguarding natural assets and long-term sustainability thus ensuring that eco

tourism does not impact negatively on the ecological integrity.

Policy Recommendations and Sustainable Tourism Development Strategies:

The existing ecotourism policies allow the enhancement of strategic management in Maharashtra. Each of the main destinations should have a complete eco tourism management strategy, which is aimed at protecting the environment and socio-economic development. Green infrastructure (solar-powered facilities, environmentally friendly transport, and efficient waste management) needs to be invested in. To make sure that tourism operators are highly sustainable, eco-certification programs should also be introduced. Tourism incentives can be used to promote off-peak tourism and help ease the congestion during tourist seasons. There is also a need to have stronger cooperation between tourism, conservation agencies, and local governance to make sure that there are equal benefits and holistic implementation of the policies.

Government and Private Sector Contributions for Ecotourism:

The development of eco tourism in Maharashtra needs a good partnership between the government and private sector. Development of conservation-oriented tourism policies should be spearheaded by the agencies such as the MTDC and the Forest Department which should also develop incentives which will encourage the incorporation of sustainable practices by the private enterprises. The eco-friendly operations that should be facilitated by the private sector include energy efficiency, recycling of waste, and preservation of natural habitats.

Relationships with eco-resorts, tour operators and hotels may be used to build training and certification of the local people. The NGOs that are involved in environmental and cultural conservation may also cooperate with the personal stakeholders, guaranteeing the balance and sustainability of the eco tourism development in the long term.

Local Community and Ecotourism:

Local communities should be involved in eco tourism in Maharashtra to make it successful and sustainable. The policies must be such that the locals are heavily involved in the planning and decision making. The process of training community members into guides, hospitality workers and conservation workers can ensure that they acquire skills and can benefit in economic ways. The government should collaborate with the community and the business world to steer the development of eco tourism through the community-based committees. Culture can be conserved by supporting local businesses in the community such as homestays, craft shops and local food stalls which will generate revenue. Among other things, the government can also afford incentives to communities which practice sustainability so that ecotourism can have the effect of improving the environment and socio-economic development.

Findings:

- ◆ Ecotourism plays a major role in the creation of jobs, especially amongst the tribal society and the marginalised communities.
- ◆ Tourism earnings are used to assist in conservation by funding forest conservation and preservation of wildlife.
- ◆ There is still unequal participation in the community and most of the local

groups are devoid of decision making and training power.

- ◆ Excessive tourism leads to environmental destruction, especially in tourist hotspots that have a high population of tourists.
- ◆ The development of infrastructure is not even, and eco-tourism sites in the rural areas do not have eco-friendly facilities.
- ◆ Government policies are also prospective though this should be improved by means of better monitoring, enhanced transparency and more significant stakeholder alignment.
- ◆ Conservation awareness and education have enhanced knowledge of conservation between tourists and people.
- ◆ The trends of DCEL financial investments affirm a long-term investment in sustainable tourism development.
- ◆ Innovation and field level implementation has been enhanced by the participation of the private sector and the NGO.
- ◆ The ecotourism promotes the development objectives of rural regions and maintains cultural heritage and traditional wisdom.

Recommendations and suggestions:

- ◆ The assessment of the carrying capacity is required as part of discouraging over-tourism in the ecologically vulnerable areas.
- ◆ Environmentally friendly infrastructure should be given importance, and this would comprise of solar power, collection of rainwater and scientific garbage disposal systems.
- ◆ Introduction of community-based tourism governance models to assure equity in revenue distribution.

- ◆ MTDC and NGOs should be used to improve training and skill development programs to youth and women in the country.
- ◆ There should be the adoption of digital surveillance of forests and control of tourists.
- ◆ Publicity on lesser-known ecotourism sites to ease congestion in many sites.
- ◆ Strict compliance of environmental regulations of tourism construction proposals.
- ◆ Scientific management should have academic research partnership with universities.
- ◆ Tourist eco-education to decrease irresponsible behaviour.
- ◆ Developing community-based model of partnership between the public and the private sectors (PPCP) to achieve effective implementation of policy.

Conclusion:

Eco tourism in Maharashtra has a huge potential of sustainable development through balancing environment conservation, economic development, and social empowerment. Although it has generated employment, empowered rural residents and conservation, issues like overtourism, environmental destruction, and poor infrastructure are still present. Long-term sustainability strongly relies on good governance, community participation, and a stringent environmental law. The Maharashtra Tourism Policy 2024 and the National Ecotourism Policy 2017 are powerful in the form of policies but need to be implemented efficiently. Enhancement of eco tourism will make Maharashtra a role model of sustainable development and conservation of the environment.

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