

Is Ecotourism a Strategy for Regional Economic Development in India? The Case of Mussoorie and Asan Barrage

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Abstract

The state of Uttarakhand (in the Himalayas) in which the two case studies were conducted is trying to expand its already existing strength in the tourism sector as well. Tourism is estimated to make up for about 20% of GDP in Uttarakhand in comparison to 5,83% for India and the ITOPC (Indian Tour Operators Promotion Council) gives a figure of 16,7 million domestic visitors for 2006 in a state with approx. 8,5 million inhabitants (ITOPC calculations are based on numbers provided by the state government).

In general, the Himalayas (which make up a big portion of the state of Uttarakhand) have been considered one of the emerging markets in Asia with the highest potential for growth, alongside Sri Lanka, Laos and Vietnam (Shackley, 2006: 66). In Uttarakhand the mountains themselves are the biggest attraction, providing the backdrop for Adventure Tourism (mainly trekking and rafting) and of course pilgrimage (e.g. Haridwar and Chard Dham or the four holy shrines) and Yoga (including Rishikesh the “Yoga capital of the world”).

However, Singh (2007) has named several main problems for the tourism industry in Uttarakhand: (1) the state has not been developed as a destination brand and there are no coordinated marketing efforts (especially in the international market), (2) the infrastructure is only of low quality and (3) there are high taxes on tourism products. In order to tackle these and other problems large consulting projects in the Himalayas region have been initiated. Most important for the case studies presented in this paper is certainly the “Uttarakhand Tourism Development Master Plan” conducted by the UNWTO (2008b), which sets the framework for the development processes at the local and regional level.

Case Study Design

Following Yin (2003) a case study investigates a real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. It relies on multiple sources of evidence (e.g. statistical data, interviews etc.) while it should be based on theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

When the Chair of Tourism of the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt organized an excursion with 22 students to Northern India in September 2009, it also included a four-day project that was conducted in cooperation with GTZ India as part of their technical cooperation project RED. Two explorative studies on the potential of Ecotourism for regional development were conducted at two sites (Mussoorie and Asan Barrage) close to Dehradun, the state capitol of Uttarakhand. During this process nine structured interviews with stakeholders and additional discussions with local representatives were arranged which provided the basic data for the SWOT-Analysis and the results later presented at a stakeholder meeting. Additional background data has been provided by GTZ India and the respective local administrations.

The cases had two aims: First of all to investigate the region's development potential through Ecotourism in form of teaching cases and secondly to review the sustainability of such a development process. The latter is the focus of this paper and the research question was already stated above – to explore the potential of Ecotourism and how it can influence tourism development in regions like Uttarakhand. Therefore we aim to draw findings from those two cases (Mussoorie/Asan Barrage), which are taken from quite different circumstances (concerning landscape, tourism infrastructure and the like), but with the similar involvement of GTZ India. The data gathered through desk research (tourism websites, UNWTO study) only provide the backdrop for the studies while the interviews and the on-side participant observation are the main sources to describe GTZ role in the ongoing process. The usage of cases from different stages of tourism development was considered to be a great advantage in order to investigate the potential of Ecotourism under different circumstances and therefore to gain more “representative” results. After the completion of the teaching cases, the data (including the transcribed interviews) were again analyzed under the propositions of the research question and discussed with the students that had taken part in the excursion, therefore ensuring that multiple investigators have taken part in drawing conclusions from the cases (following Ozcan and Eisenhardt, 2009).

The interview partners had different backgrounds and were coming from the public as well as the private side in order to gather opinions from different points of view thereby minimizing possible biases. The public side included representatives from the Forest Department of India, the Wildlife Institute of India and holders of public offices (e.g. mayor), while the private side were hotel owners/managers and a representative of the (state-owned) tourism provider UTDB (Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board). The content of a typical interview consisted of three parts: Part one was about personal background and function as well as strategy in responsive field of activity, part two focused on Ecotourism development in the regions while the third part focused on development issues and networking questions. While the interviews were held in optimal

surroundings, good atmosphere and enough time, there have been difficulties with the transcription of the interviews (which were made anonymous), because the students from Europe were not used to the Indian dialect. A thorough case study protocol (following Yin, 2003) including the names of the sites visited, methods used, expectations of the investigators etc. was developed, but a pilot case was not possible due to the tight time schedule during the field study. After describing the cases and the findings drawn from the data gathered, a short cross-case analysis will be conducted (which can only be of qualitative nature due to the small number of cases), following Yin (2003).

Results and Limitations

The study shows that Ecotourism is a useful path for destination development in India. The role of tourism in India has changed enormously over the last decades and nowadays the focus lies on how sustainable value-chains can be created, especially in regions that can be considered remote, but with high potential for tourism development. Additionally, in India stakeholder management is of great importance, because of India's democratic history and empowerment of social groups. Organizations like GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) seem apt to play the role of the intermediary in order to ensure progress and foster sustainable destination development.

This paper draws its findings solely on two cases, therefore further research has to be undertaken to broaden the understanding of potential developments in Ecotourism in developing countries such as India.

Added value is created by calling attention of both academics and those working in the field to developments in the rising Indian market and how local and international consultants can help finding sustainable solutions in emerging destinations in the tourism industry of rural areas in India.

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