

Navigating the Challenges of Sustainable Tourism in Malakand Division

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to find what challenges and issues are affecting sustainable tourism practices in the Malakand division and what steps need to be taken to overcome these challenges. Qualitative method was used for data collection. 10 faculty members, teaching Tourism and Hospitality in two universities were taken as a sample. In-depth interviews were conducted. To analyze data, a thematic analysis method was employed, and results were drawn. Study revealed that the most common issues and challenges to sustainable tourism in Malakand Division are infrastructure, law and order situation, lack of effective tourism management and regulation, degradation of tourism products and less involvement of local communities. The study recommends that government may invest in infrastructure development and take support from stakeholders, a comprehensive strategy for law-and-order situations may be chalked out, tourism regulations may be strengthened by ensuring cultural preservation, community involvement, education and awareness and true implementation is needed, degradation of tourism products may be minimized, and the active participation of local communities may be ensured for sustainability goals. Limitations and future calls are part of the study.

Keywords: Tourism; Sustainability and Malakand Division

Introduction

Tourism industry is rapidly growing after the slump of COVID-19 in most of the countries in the world (M. Alam, Khan, & Hussain, 2021). It is gaining pace and has started contributing again in its full swing to the economies of the countries in the world. In 2023, it contributed 9.9 trillion US\$ to the global GDP, according to Statista Research Department published in 2024 and expected to contribute 11.1 trillion US\$ in the year 2024. Tourism offers variety of benefits in the shape of employment, strengthening local economy, preserve and conserve cultural and natural resources, develop superstructure and infrastructure, reducing inequality and poverty and creating a soft image of the country (Hanif, Alam, & Manzoor, 2021).

Sustainable tourism and sustainable development are increasingly recognized as priorities in tourism policy and practice (Eger, Munar, & Hsu, 2022; Sharpley, 2020). Tourism

competitiveness increases when tourism practices are sustainable in terms of environment, economic and socio-cultural aspects. Destination competitiveness also poses challenges and issues to its sustainability. Tourism sector has to take the responsibility to minimize its negative effect on environment, economic welfare and socio-cultural aspects thus resulting responsible behavior from tourism activities (Azinuddin, Zain, & Shariffuddin, 2022). This is hard to find the right balance between environmental limits and the development of the tourism sector. Tourism dynamism, host community complexities, lifecycle of destination, irresponsible tourists' behavior, uncertain and instable global economy, and other such factors are the threats to sustainability.

Malakand Division is very rich in tourism resources. A substantial number of tourists visit this area throughout the year. Most of the people's livelihood is dependent on tourism income (Hanif et al., 2021). There are various threats confronting the sustainability of tourism in Malakand Division. Identification, minimization or elimination of those threats are vital for prosperous tourism in the area. The objective of this study is to find what challenges and issues are affecting sustainable tourism practices in Malakand division and what steps need to be taken to overcome these threats. The proposed study will have significance for policy makers, industry and community by identifying threats to sustainability so that steps can be taken for non-occurrence of these threats and tourism can flourish and sustain.

Literature Review

Before 1990, sustainability was a less concerned area in strategic management literature. But now a days sustainability is the core of every strategy in the corporate world (Fowler & Hope, 2007). It has become an integral part of companies' policies and practices in every sector. Tourism is not an exception. Tourism should encourage and support positive influence rather than negative in terms of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects (Streimikiene, Svagzdiene, Jasinskas, & Simanavicius, 2021). Tourism is successful when it offers competitiveness in products and services. To make a destination competitive, sometimes the steps taken are not destination friendly. It leaves a negative effect on the environment, financial well-being, and culture and society of the community (Go & Kang, 2023).

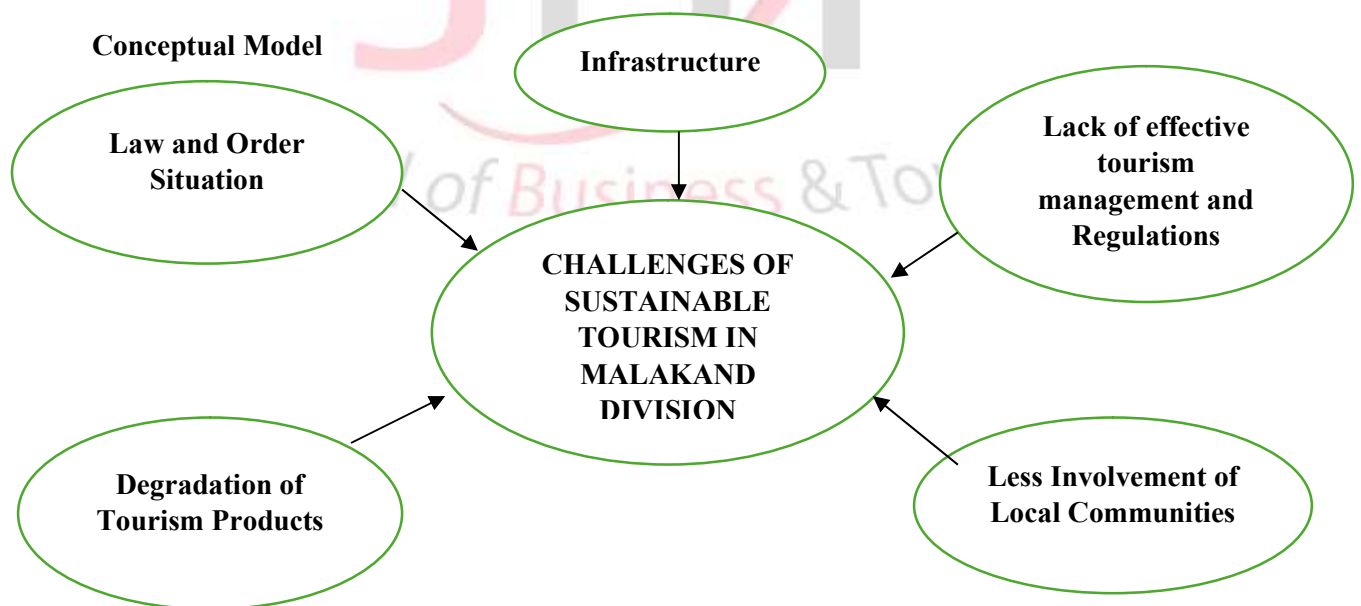
Sustainable tourism development practices and guidelines need to be practiced in every type and niche of tourism for meeting the visitors' expectations in present and not to compromise the quality of tourism products and services in future. The three pillars of sustainability are environment, economic and socio-cultural (Irawan & Hartoyo, 2022). Environmental sustainability ensures the minimum effect of tourism on the environment in the shape of not to degrade water, forests, soil erosion, natural habitat loss, increased pollution, natural resources, create pressure on endangered species and disruption of local ecosystem (Kyara, Rahman, & Khanam, 2022). Climate change and global warming are the result, which is evident from recent floods and temperature rise in Malakand Division. The negative effect can be minimized through eco-tourism, responsible tourism, the use of renewable energy and green house infrastructure, carbon offsetting and eco-friendly transportation, conservation and community-based tourism practices.

The second pillar of tourism sustainability is economic sustainability. Economic sustainability ensures that local communities are getting mostly all the economic benefits from tourism and at

the same time it preserves the same for future generations. Economic benefits are in the shape of employment generation, contributing to the local/regional and national revenue, multiplier effect, long term economic growth, contribution to the infrastructure, poverty and inequality reduction, financial stability at micro and macro level and strengthening goods and services. It also strengthens other tourism components which are crucial for tourism development (A, Fernando, José, Francisco, & A, 2023; Grilli, Tyllianakis, Luisetti, Ferrini, & Turner, 2021; Hall, 2021). Economic sustainability in terms of providing jobs to the locals is encouraging in Malakand Division. It also contributes a substantial amount to the local economy (N. Alam & Anwar).

The third pillar of tourism sustainability is socio-cultural sustainability. To what extent the local community is affected by the tourism inflow? The aspects of culture and society must be respected and protected. Cultural tourism is the most dominant phenomenon in the tourism world. Heritage management is the vital component of cultural tourism (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Tourism is an excellent way to provide access to tourists into culture and heritage, but it also brings challenges and issues in respect of overtourism, authenticity and cultural appropriateness (Richards, 2018). Due to its negative side, some local community and heritage experts oppose the development of tourism. Sustainable cultural tourism practices bring the local community and heritage experts to the center of decision making (Ivanovic, 2008). The socio-cultural aspects of sustainable tourism associated with the host community vulnerable and sensitive issues, values, history, unique identity and living styles, perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, rejection and acceptance level and their response towards tourism activities (Sonuç, 2020).

Conceptual Model



Methodology

In depth structured interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members, teaching Tourism and Hospitality subjects in two public sector universities in Pakistan. Faculty members were chosen as a sample for this study on the grounds that they teach these sustainability approaches and philosophies and most of them are from Malakand Division, so they are more familiar with the sustainability issues of the area. The objectives of the study are to find challenges and issues affecting sustainable tourism practices in Malakand division and what steps need to be taken to overcome these threats. For data collection, in-depth structured interviews were arranged using purposive sampling method. After making an analysis of the interview's codes emerged were environmental, socio-cultural and economical aspects. The most dominant was environmental aspects. Categories were established, the main themes which were extracted are infrastructure, inadequate tourism planning and management, policy issues, security concerns, deforestation, unregulated tourism growth and less community involvement. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis and presented.

Results and Discussion

After conducting structured interviews, various issues and challenges pertaining to sustainability of tourism in Malakand Division had emerged. The common issues and challenges surfaced are grouped into Environmental factors which includes natural resources degradation, less compliance of environmental laws, unregulated construction, degradation of tourism products, pollution and waste management, overtourism, destruction of natural resources, transportation practices in shape of carbon emission, and threats to biodiversity. Economic factors include limited economic benefits for local and limited job opportunities. Socio-cultural factors include cultural erosion and disrespect for local customs and traditions. Other factors also emerged in which some can be kept under the heading of Policy and Governance on the part of government, they are meagre information centers, lack of social awareness about sustainability, limited collaboration among stakeholders, infrastructure, policy issues, security issues, behavior of law enforcing agencies, public private partnership, limited government support, limited accommodation and allied facilities, insufficient public transportation, lack of interdepartmental coordination, low priority of tourism sector, limited investment in tourism infrastructure, seasonal tourism, less marketing and promotion and insufficient training for tourism human resources.

The themes which emerged in respect of the most common issue and challenges are infrastructure, law and order situation, lack of effective tourism management and regulation, degradation of tourism products and less involvement of local communities.

Infrastructure remains a very important factor for tourism development. All the facilities including Roads, electricity, sewage disposal, gas lines, communication, public transportation, water supply, safety services and allied facilities which support tourism (Hanif et al., 2021). Data revealed that infrastructure is the biggest challenge to sustainability in the area. Government needs to invest in the infrastructure supported by other stakeholders to create pleasant experiences for visitors. It is the basic requirement for any tourist destination. Militancy and floods contributed towards infrastructure destruction which is an obstacle towards tourism sustainability in the area. Private companies may be encouraged to invest in infrastructure and in return they can be benefited. Due to financial constraints, government may involve donors' agencies for infrastructure development. Recently Pakistan and Azerbaijan signed MoU where infrastructure

and connectivity are two elements among others. It will add value to the destinations and the multiplier effect will increase.

Law and order situation is necessary for tourism particularly and other activities generally (Levantis & Gani, 2000). Without peace every activity ceases to exist. Data revealed that law and order situation in Malakand Division poses threats to tourism sustainability. Due to which tourists are reluctant to visit unsafe places though breathtaking (Baker, 2015). The recent two incidents in Swat; one in Madayan, wherein mob killed a visitor from Punjab due to blasphemy and in the second incident ambassadors from various countries while visiting Malam Jabba were targeted through bomb blast, though did not record any casualty but due to blast they returned to Islamabad, left very bad impression on tourism of the area. Safety and security are the responsibility of the state. State may involve all the law enforcing agencies to ensure law and order situation in the area. Local peace committees may be constituted supported by security personnel and the same may be sensitized in public.

Lack of effective tourism management and regulation is regarded as another impediment to sustainable tourism in the area. Tourism bears fruit when it is managed and regulated properly. Management includes planning, development, maintenance and promotion of tourism products so that maximum benefits can be solicited (Ryan, 2018). Tourism regulations consist of zone laws, licensing laws, construction laws, visitors' management laws/strategies, quality standards, health and safety laws, and consumer protection laws. These laws give protection to visitors, local communities and the environment. It mitigates risks and enhances the quality of services. When tourism is regulated, it does good to the economy, culture and environment. Environmental benefits provided by laws are waste management, conservation efforts and resource efficiency. Socio-cultural impact of tourism regulations is cultural preservation, community involvement and education and awareness (Zhuang, Yao, & Li, 2019). Government may look into the laws for consumer protection, health and safety, environmental protection, cultural preservation and employment. The same may be implemented in true spirit so that it can strengthen sustainability and prevent irresponsible behavior which daunts tourism.

Degradation of tourism products also influences sustainability in a negative way. Tourism products consist of attractions, accessibility, accommodation and amenities. It is the sum of physical and psychological satisfaction provided to tourists while they are visiting touristic places. The combination of accommodation services, hospitality services, transportation, travel agencies, cultural services, shopping, attractions and health care services associated by psychological factors constitute tourism products (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). When tourism products remain in their original shape and tourism organizations try to add value to these products to keep tourism sustainable. Irresponsible tourism practices degrade tourism resources and products with littering, irresponsible use, depletion of natural resources, pollution, waste problems, over consumption, damage ecosystem, disrupt or harm local wildlife, carbon footprints, climate change and increased energy consumption. Practices need to be encouraged to avoid and minimize these negative effects of tourism on degradation of tourism products. Responsible and sustainable use of resources keeps the wheel rolling. Degradation of tourism products can be minimized by choosing ecofriendly practices, offsetting carbon emissions, using public

transportation, reducing waste, respecting local wildlife, remaining energy conscious, avoiding overtourism and educating himself and others for sustainable practices.

Less involvement of the local community in tourism planning and management is another obstacle to the sustainability of tourism in the area. The participation of local community is vital for the achievement of sustainability goals, conservation of the environment, and benefiting the local community (Okazaki, 2008). They may be engaged in decision making, their representation in different bodies may be encouraged and may work together for sustainable development growth of the region. There are various groups who play important role in tourism development, but the role of local community is very special and essential. Tourism brings economic benefits to the destination and community, but it is a matter of concern that the financial benefits do not reach to everyone equally. The involvement of local community helps the fair distribution of economic benefits to community (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). The involvement is helpful in the shape of employment including seasonal, minimize cash flow out of the community, encourage local products, services, restaurants, transportations, local products and handicrafts. Agriculture tourism and homestay will also increase local benefits. Small scale projects and community led projects will improve the standard of living and quality of life of locals. To keep balance between financial benefits and preservation of local character will be the challenge. Community-based tourism has great potential in the area but will remain successful if there is strong community leadership, involvement and support of local groups and authorities.

The current study has theoretical and practical significance. On theoretical side, literature is enriched in terms of sustainability measures for tourism. Sustainability concepts are discussed from every angle and various dimensions are explored. Practically, it will help the industry, community and stakeholders to identify the challenges and obstacles and take measures to minimize and eliminate it so that tourism can contribute to the local community and strengthen national economy.

Conclusions

The objective of this study is to find what challenges and issues are affecting sustainable tourism practices in Malakand division and what steps need to be taken to overcome these threats. After conducting in-depth interviews and analysis of the data it is concluded that the most common issues to sustainable tourism in Malakand Divisions are infrastructure, law and order situation, lack of effective tourism management and regulation, degradation of tourism products and less involvement of local communities.

It is concluded from the study that government may invest in infrastructure development along with keeping other stakeholders on board. Private companies may be encouraged for infrastructure development. Government may work in partnership with them for the same. State may involve all law enforcing agencies and chalk out a comprehensive strategy for peace in coordination with local peace committees. Tourism regulations may be strengthened ensuring cultural preservation, community involvement and education and awareness and need true implementation for results. Degradation of tourism products can be minimized by choosing ecofriendly practices, offsetting carbon emissions, using public transportation, reducing waste, respecting local wildlife, remaining energy conscious, avoiding overtourism and educating

himself and others for sustainable practices. The participation of the local community is vital for the achievement of sustainability goals, conservation of the environment, and benefiting the local community. They may be engaged in decision making, their representation in different bodies may be encouraged so they may work together for sustainable developmental growth of the region. Community based organizations may be established for tourism development wherein they work on public orientation, education, conservation and making green efforts for sustainable tourism. Community-based tourism remains successful if there is strong community leadership, involvement and support of local groups and authorities.

The study has some limitations as data was collected from 10 faculty members from two universities. The sample size can be increased, and number of universities can also be increased to have in-depth understanding of phenomenon in hand. In a sample, tourism experts, industry personnel and government officials for data collection may be added for more diverse opinion. Quantitative data will add some more dimensions to it. Geographical scope can be extended in future studies. Future studies can work on other themes related to sustainability.

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