

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SELECTED ECO-DESTINATIONS OF MADHYA PRADESH

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Abstract

Ecotourism has emerged as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, offering a unique opportunity to conserve natural resources while promoting socio-economic development of local inhabitants. Madhya Pradesh, often referred to as the "Tiger State of India," boasts a rich ecological and cultural heritage, making it a prominent ecotourism destination. This study presents a comparative analysis of ecotourism development in three key eco-destinations—Kanha National Park, Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve and Panna National Park.

The research adopts a mixed-method approach, utilizing both primary data (interviews with local stakeholders, field observations) and secondary sources (government reports, published literature). The comparison focuses on various indicators such as infrastructure, community participation, conservation outcomes, and economic benefits. Findings reveal significant variation in ecotourism maturity across the destinations. Kanha has developed a robust ecotourism model supported by strong infrastructure and forest department initiatives, though it faces challenges related to equitable local participation. Pachmarhi showcases effective community-based ecotourism with minimal environmental impact but lacks modern infrastructure and visibility. Panna, on the other hand, is in a transitional phase, witnessing the re-establishment of its ecological identity through tiger reintroduction programs and slow-growing tourism initiatives.

The study highlights that while ecotourism holds immense promises in Madhya Pradesh, its success largely depends on localized planning, stakeholder engagement, and policy support. Recommendations include enhancing capacity-building among local communities, promoting public-private partnerships, and implementing stricter environmental monitoring. The research contributes to the discourse on sustainable tourism by emphasizing the need for differentiated and inclusive ecotourism strategies tailored to the unique ecological and socio-cultural characteristics of each destination.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Madhya Pradesh, Sustainable Tourism, Kanha National Park, Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, Panna National Park, Conservation

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world, plays a crucial role in regional development, job creation, and cultural exchange. However, conventional mass tourism models have often led to unsustainable practices, resulting in environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and unequal economic benefits. In response to these challenges, **ecotourism** has emerged as a responsible alternative that

promotes environmental conservation, respects local cultures, and ensures that the benefits of tourism are equitably shared with host communities.

Ecotourism is defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.” It is a sustainable form of tourism that focuses on small-scale, low-impact travel to fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas. Unlike traditional tourism, which often prioritizes consumer convenience and profit, ecotourism strives to achieve a balance between environmental protection and socio-economic development.

In the Indian context, the scope for ecotourism is vast and varied. India is endowed with immense biodiversity, protected landscapes, and indigenous cultures—all key elements that support ecotourism. Among Indian states, **Madhya Pradesh** stands out for its rich biodiversity, dense forests, and diverse flora and fauna. Known as the “Tiger State of India,” Madhya Pradesh is home to several national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and biosphere reserves, many of which have been designated as eco-destinations by the state government and tourism board. This makes the region an ideal setting to study the growth, potential, and complexities of ecotourism.

Despite its promising ecotourism prospects, Madhya Pradesh faces several **challenges** such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of community participation, environmental concerns, and uneven policy implementation. Different eco-destinations within the state demonstrate varied levels of development, tourist footfall, conservation success, and local involvement. Therefore, a comparative study becomes essential to understand what is working well, where improvements are needed, and how tailored strategies can be developed to ensure sustainable ecotourism practices across different regions.

This research focuses on three significant eco-destinations in Madhya Pradesh:

1. **Kanha National Park**, renowned for its successful conservation of the hard-ground barasingha and vibrant ecotourism initiatives.
2. **Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve**, a unique mix of natural beauty and tribal culture with relatively low tourist density.
3. **Panna National Park**, which has recently regained attention due to its tiger reintroduction program and slow resurgence of eco-tourism infrastructure.

These destinations offer contrasting models of ecotourism development—ranging from highly organized systems to community-led conservation efforts and newly emerging sites. By comparing these cases, the study aims to draw meaningful insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) associated with ecotourism in Madhya Pradesh.

Furthermore, the research addresses key questions:

- How do different eco-destinations in Madhya Pradesh compare in terms of their tourism infrastructure, community involvement, and conservation outcomes?

- What are the major bottlenecks and success factors influencing ecotourism in these areas?
- What policy recommendations can be made to enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of ecotourism in the state?

By answering these questions, this paper seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on sustainable tourism, while also offering practical recommendations for policymakers, tourism authorities, conservationists, and local communities. It is hoped that this study will serve as a valuable resource in guiding the future development of ecotourism in Madhya Pradesh and similar regions in India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the current status of ecotourism development in selected eco-destinations.
2. To compare the ecological, economic, and social impacts of ecotourism in these areas.
3. To assess the role of stakeholders including forest departments, local communities, and tourists.
4. To suggest recommendations for enhancing sustainable ecotourism in Madhya Pradesh.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies emphasize the potential of ecotourism in conserving biodiversity and supporting rural economies (Honey, 2008; Das & Chatterjee, 2015). However, inconsistent implementation, lack of infrastructure, and limited community participation remain critical barriers. The literature also suggests that comparative regional studies are essential for formulating localized policy interventions.

Singh and Upadhyay (2019) examine interactions between ecotourism and wildlife conservation in Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve. Through ecological field surveys and socio-economic assessments, they find that ecotourism brings both benefits (increased awareness, supplemental funding for protection) and risks (disturbance to habitat, wildlife stress). The authors highlight a need for regulated tourist flow and structured zoning to safeguard sensitive species. Their study aligns closely with your research by illustrating how Pachmarhi must balance conservation with tourism, providing invaluable empirical data and practical guidelines.

Tiwari, Marahatta, & Devkota (2024) This systematic review of 53 studies explores community involvement as a core component of successful ecotourism. Tiwari et al. (2024) categorize participation into active (decision making, ownership) and passive (menial roles) engagement. They identify four major barriers: inequitable benefit-sharing, weak stakeholder cooperation, tokenistic involvement, and poor capacity-building. The authors recommend fostering genuine local power-sharing and empirical, cross-regional studies—echoing your comparative approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design:** Descriptive and comparative.
- **Study Areas:** Kanha National Park, Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, Panna National Park.
- **Data Collection:**
 - Primary Data: Interviews with forest officials, local entrepreneurs, and tourists.
 - Secondary Data: Tourism department reports, published studies, NGO documentation.
- **Tools for Analysis:** SWOT analysis, thematic coding, and comparative matrices.

ECOTOURISM OVERVIEW OF STUDY AREAS

Kanha National Park, located in the Mandla and Balaghat districts of Madhya Pradesh, is one of India's most celebrated tiger reserves and ecotourism destinations. Established in 1955, Kanha is not only rich in biodiversity but also renowned for its success in conserving the endangered hard-ground barasingha (swamp deer), which has become a symbol of its conservation efforts. The park spans an area of over 940 square kilometers and comprises dense sal forests, open grasslands, and meandering streams, making it an ideal habitat for tigers, leopards, wild dogs, and hundreds of bird species.

Ecotourism in Kanha is well-developed and professionally managed by the Forest Department in collaboration with eco-resorts, private operators, and local communities. The park follows a zone-based safari system, and strict regulations are in place to control the number of vehicles, timing, and behavior of tourists. Eco-lodges around the buffer zones offer nature-centric experiences with low environmental impact, employing local villagers and promoting indigenous handicrafts. Despite its success, challenges remain, such as managing seasonal tourist influx, ensuring equitable benefit distribution among locals, and preventing ecological degradation from over-tourism in certain core areas. Nevertheless, Kanha serves as a model for integrating wildlife conservation with ecotourism in India.

- Renowned for successful conservation of barasingha.
- Offers guided safaris, eco-resorts, and community-led tourism.
- Strong forest department involvement and private investment.

The Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, situated in the Satpura ranges of Madhya Pradesh, represents a unique confluence of biodiversity, cultural heritage, and tribal traditions. It encompasses the Satpura National Park, Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, and Pachmarhi Wildlife Sanctuary, covering an area of 4,926 square kilometers. Unlike traditional wildlife parks, Pachmarhi offers a more diverse ecotourism experience that includes trekking, cave exploration, scenic waterfalls, and rich tribal heritage. It is home to several tribal communities such as the Gonds and Korkus, who maintain a symbiotic relationship with the forest ecosystem.

Ecotourism development in Pachmarhi is less commercialized compared to other destinations like Kanha or Bandhavgarh. The focus here has been more on community-based tourism, with eco-development committees playing a pivotal role in managing local tourism activities, including nature guides, village stays, and local art promotion. The relative remoteness of the region has helped preserve its ecological and cultural integrity, although it also limits the economic scale of tourism. Infrastructure remains modest, and promotional activities are minimal, leading to lower tourist footfall. However, this also ensures minimal ecological impact and better preservation of the area's natural and cultural assets. As such, Pachmarhi exemplifies low-impact, culturally integrated ecotourism that could be scaled with cautious planning and investment.

- Focus on cultural and natural heritage.
- Less commercialized; managed by eco-development committees.
- Limited tourist influx but better preservation of local tribal culture.

Panna National Park, located in the northern region of Madhya Pradesh near Khajuraho, is a compelling case of ecological revival and emerging ecotourism potential. Declared a tiger reserve in 1994, Panna faced a major setback in 2009 when it lost its entire tiger population due to poaching and mismanagement. However, with the successful reintroduction of tigers and enhanced protection efforts, Panna has since made a dramatic comeback and now stands as a symbol of wildlife conservation success. The park spans 542 square kilometers and is known for its diverse terrain—ranging from plateaus and gorges to riverine habitats and teak forests—supporting a wide range of species, including leopards, crocodiles, antelopes, and over 200 bird species.

Ecotourism in Panna is in a developmental phase, with growing attention from conservationists and eco-travelers alike. Efforts are underway to promote eco-friendly infrastructure, interpretative programs, and community engagement through local employment in tourism services. However, compared to more established destinations, Panna still lacks the institutional support and private investment necessary to scale its ecotourism initiatives. The park offers guided safaris, birdwatching tours, and cultural experiences near rural villages, but the outreach remains limited. The scope for sustainable tourism is immense, especially if coupled with community benefit-sharing mechanisms and improved connectivity. Panna thus represents a promising but underutilized ecotourism destination in need of strategic support and sustainable planning.

- Recently revived due to tiger reintroduction.
- Significant eco-lodges and conservation education centers.
- Community benefit programs in early stages.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Parameter	Kanha	Pachmarhi	Panna
Tourist Footfall	High	Moderate	Increasing
Infrastructure	Well-developed	Basic	Emerging
Community Participation	Moderate	High	Low

Conservation Impact	High	Moderate	High (recent)
Economic Benefits	Significant	Limited	Limited
Policy Implementation	Strong	Moderate	Developing

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- **Kanha** has capitalized on its wildlife to develop a mature ecotourism model, though challenges remain in ensuring equitable community benefits.
- **Pachmarhi** excels in low-impact tourism with strong community ties but needs better infrastructure.
- **Panna**, while ecologically important, is still in the early stages of tourism development and lacks strong community involvement.
- Across all destinations, inconsistencies in policy enforcement and lack of local capacity building were noted as common issues.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

1. Inadequate training for local stakeholders.
2. Seasonal tourism leading to inconsistent income.
3. Environmental degradation due to over-tourism in Kanha.
4. Limited marketing and awareness about lesser-known destinations like Panna and Pachmarhi.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Ecotourism can be linked to rural livelihoods through homestays, handicrafts, and guided tours.
- Digital promotion and eco-certification programs.
- Government-NGO partnerships to build ecotourism capacity at the grassroots level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop destination-specific ecotourism master plans.
2. Introduce capacity-building programs for local communities.
3. Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism.
4. Promote responsible tourism behavior through tourist education.
5. Encourage public-private partnerships to invest in sustainable infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Madhya Pradesh holds significant ecotourism potential, but its realization requires a balanced approach involving conservation, community development, and responsible tourism practices. A comparative analysis reveals the need for tailored strategies that consider the unique ecological, cultural, and economic aspects of each destination.

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