



Ecotourism Development Strategy by Swot Analysis: A Case Study on Gilgit Baltistan, Pakistan

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Abstract: Gilgit Baltistan serves as a typical model showcasing the intrinsic connection between eco-tourism and local economic development in Pakistan. However, in contrast with its immense potential, a noticeable research gap exists regarding eco-tourism within this region. This paper aims to establish a robust theoretical foundation and strategic roadmap for the synchronized advancement of tourism, ecological preservation, economic prosperity, societal welfare, and environmental sustainability in Gilgit Baltistan. This study conducts a systematic analysis of the evolutionary phase and progressive enhancements within the local eco-tourism landscape and analyzes the multifaceted challenges and their underlying causes. To implement this a range of management and decision-making instruments were employed. These methods encompassed interviews, questionnaire surveys, and the application of SWOT analysis. A sequence of interviews was carried out with the aim of discerning the measures undertaken by accountable governmental entities. This study grapples with the intricate question of how to foster the cultural ecology of Gilgit Baltistan in a manner that is both protective and sustainable. The findings indicated that the current tourism activities within the region fell short of meeting sustainability criteria. Consequently, a SWOT analysis was employed to pinpoint the necessary management strategies for enhancing ecotourism within the region.

Key words: Gilgit Baltistan; Cultural ecology; Ecotourism; SWOT analysis

1. Introduction:

Tourism is regarded as one of the driving forces of economic development [1], it increases foreign exchange, creates employment opportunities, and brings benefits [2]. Tourism also has a positive impact on employment [3]. Using annual time series data for Pakistan from 1971-2008, Adnan Hye and Ali Khan [4] conclude that tourism revenue and economic development of Pakistan. It has also been noted that tourism also has a negative impact on the environment if not managed sustainably. Lenzen et al. [5] point out that tourism also increases greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 8%. Ecotourism is a new avenue for the healthy and sustainable development of the tourism industry and stimulating economic growth. Under effective regulation, ecotourism can play a positive role in the economic and tourism development of a region [6].

Numerous empirical and practical studies paved a road of how to develop ecotourism. Ecotourism involves traveling to appreciate the incredible diversity of the world's natural life and human cultures while ensuring no harm is done to either. A fundamental requirement is that tourists must demonstrate respect for both the environment and the local inhabitants [7]. Ecotourism encompasses trips to natural areas with the goals of acquiring knowledge, conducting research, or engaging in activities that have no detrimental impact on the environment. Simultaneously, it aims to safeguard and uplift the local community socially and economically [8]. Tourism in the region has predominantly revolved around the breathtaking landscape and striking mountain vistas of the northern areas. There have been fewer travel plans highlighting the region's wildlife or the distinctive cultural and archaeological heritage of Gilgit Baltistan [9]. The tourism industry is a significant contributor to the economy of the northern areas. While official statistics are lacking, it is estimated that over 50% of international tourists coming to Pakistan choose to visit Gilgit Baltistan [10]. Currently, many studies analyze the development of the tourism industry, especially ecotourism, through SWOT analysis [11-15]. Based on the theories of the eco-tourism system, this study discusses the development status quo of the eco-tourism

[Received] 09 June 2023; Accepted 11 Aug 2023; Published (online) 18 Aug 2023]

Finesse Publishing stays neutral regard to jurisdictional claims published maps



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DOI: 10.61363/jsse.v3i1.86

industry, puts forward the development strategy, and uses SWOT analysis to extract and summarize the internal advantages and disadvantages of eco-tourism in Gilgit Baltistan.

2. Study Area

The northern Gilgit Baltistan region has six peaks above 8,000 meters. K2, Nanga, the "pearl" of the Himalayas, It shares its border with China's Xinjiang province to the north. To the west, it neighbors Chitral, while to the south, it is surrounded by Kalam, Kohistan, and Kaghan valleys. Just a short distance to the north, it shares a border with the newly independent Republic of Tajikistan. To the east, it is adjacent to the occupied territories of Ladakh and Kashmir, which is a unique geographical point where the three major regions of Asia, namely Southern Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, converge. It attracts many tourists every year. According to the Pakistan Tourism Development Corp, the number of annual tourist arrivals to Pakistan has tripled to 1.75 million from 2015 to 2020. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the total tourism industry in Pakistan is currently worth \$19.4 billion, accounting for 6.9% of the GDP. By 2027, 2.17 million tourists are expected to visit Pakistan and bring \$36.1 billion in economic benefits. However, the unplanned prosperity of tourism also incurs some negative problems, which aggravate the ecological burden to a certain extent. At the end of 2020, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed concern at the launch ceremony of the national ecotourism project that Pakistan's tourism industry has been on the verge of saturation, especially the lack of planning for hotel construction in the Gilgit Baltistan region. The development and implementation of environmentally friendly tourism policies have been urgent. The local government is actively exploring a new way to coordinate the development of the tourism economy and ecological protection, and it has determined that 22 new scenic spots will be developed under the principles of harmonious coexistence and sustainable development by the end of 2020. The government also advocates the new concept of "scattered residence" and "scattered tour", giving priority to encouraging residential development with concessional loans to the State Bank of Pakistan to encourage residential construction rather than support large-scale constructions. In this context, the exploration of ecotourism development has become particularly important. How to accumulate and stimulate the potential of the ecotourism industry in the increasingly fierce international competition to win the future market has become an urgent problem for ecotourism in Gilgit Baltistan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Literature research method

It mainly includes the current academic research on the theory, research results and practical application of ecotourism, followed by a lot of reading and development practice articles in areas rich in ecological resources similar to the situation of Gilgit Baltistan. Through reference and absorption, the development strategy and practical safeguard measures for eco-tourism in the Gilgit Baltistan region are put forward. This research primarily conducted a literature review on eco-tourism in Gilgit Baltistan using the Google Scholar database. In recent years, there has been increasing scholarly attention towards eco-tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. A total of 396 articles related to eco-tourism in Gilgit Baltistan were found on Google Scholar.

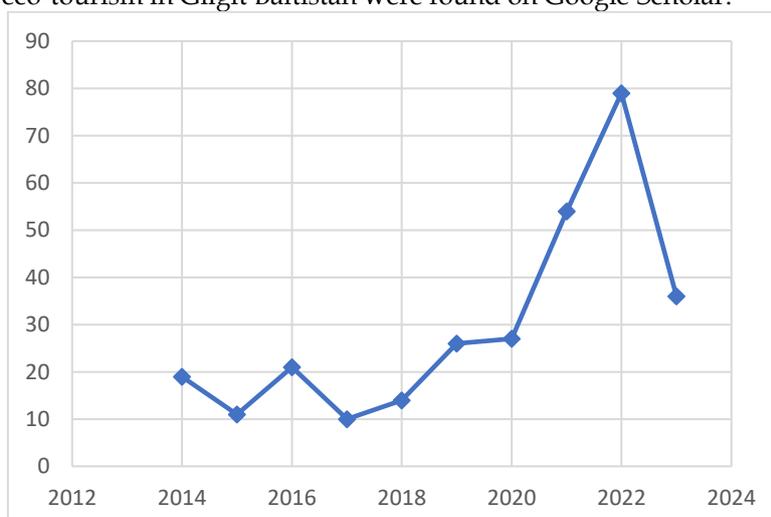


Table 1: The number of articles published on eco-tourism in the Gilgit Baltistan region over the past 10 years. Among these, 36 articles were published in 2023, 79 articles in 2022, and 117 articles from 2021 to 2019. There were also 163 articles published before 2019. Through a literature review of 313 out of 396 articles, research on



forests in the Gilgit Baltistan region was examined [16]. Additionally, 355 out of 396 articles were reviewed concerning mountain research[17], 250 out of 396 articles on river studies [18-19], 353 out of 396 articles on cultural aspects [20], 358 out of 396 articles on policies [21], and 344 out of 396 articles on China-Pakistan relationship[22-23], 295 out of 396 articles on biodiversity [24-25].

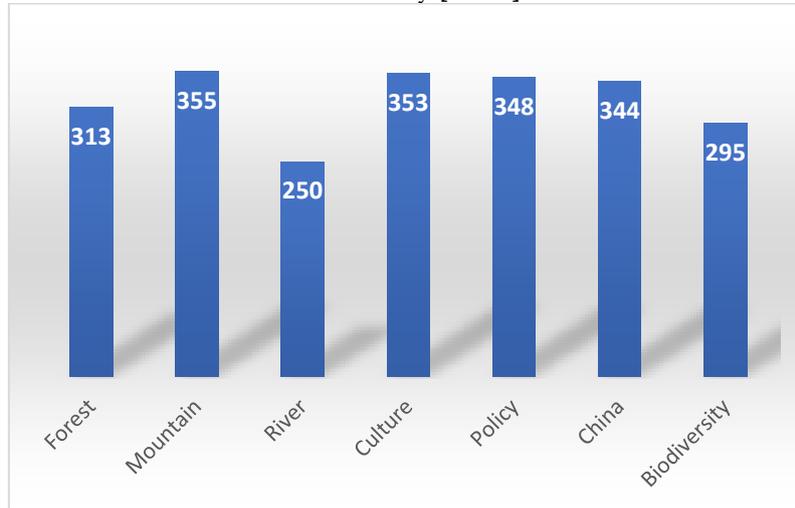


Figure 2: Recent Journal Articles Associate with Ecotourism at Gilgit Baltistan Region

Through the literature review, we observed that the majority of articles have conducted systematic analyses of natural and cultural resources in the GB region. Most of these documents have proposed specific policy measures for the development of eco-tourism in GB. Importantly, scholars have recognized the close connection between the development of eco-tourism in GB and the relationship between China and Pakistan.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents

Category	No. out of 768
Male	558
25-45 years old	612
Provide subjective evaluations of brief SWOT analysis	721
Provide subjective evaluations of more than 25 words each	631
Provided two or more suggestions	631
Monthly income of less than	697

3.2 SWOT analysis tool was used to carry out the analysis

3.2.1 Strength

Breathtaking Natural Landscapes: Gilgit Baltistan is renowned for its awe-inspiring natural landscapes. The region is nestled in the heart of the Himalayas, Karakoram, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, offering visitors some of the most dramatic and majestic scenery on the planet. Towering peaks, including K2, the world's second-highest mountain, attract mountaineers and climbers from all corners of the globe. The challenging terrain and the sense of accomplishment associated with conquering these peaks make it a hub for adventure tourism. The region is dotted with pristine lakes such as Attabad Lake, Sheosar Lake, and Shangrila Resort's Lower Kachura Lake. These serene bodies of water, often surrounded by snow-capped mountains, provide ideal settings for relaxation, boating, and photography.

Rich Biodiversity: Gilgit-Baltistan's unique geographical location and varied climate zones contribute to its rich biodiversity. The region is home to numerous species of mammals, birds, and flora.

Bird enthusiasts will find this region particularly appealing as it hosts a wide variety of bird species, including the Himalayan snowcock, lammergeier, and Himalayan monal. Birdwatching is a popular activity, and the region's pristine habitats make it a haven for ornithologists. The presence of the elusive snow leopard, which is highly endangered and rarely seen in the wild, draws wildlife enthusiasts and conservationists. Conservation efforts are underway to protect this majestic big cat and its habitat.

Cultural Diversity: Gilgit Baltistan is a melting pot of diverse cultures and ethnicities. It is inhabited by various ethnic groups, including Baltis, Shins, Hunzakuts, and Wakhi, each with its own distinct language, traditions, and customs. Travelers have the unique opportunity to engage with these welcoming communities, learn about their way of life, and participate in local festivals and celebrations. The region's cultural diversity enriches the overall tourism experience. Visitors can explore ancient monasteries and archaeological sites, such as the Altit and Baltit Forts in Hunza, which provide insights into the region's historical significance and architectural heritage. The presence of Buddhist rock carvings further adds to the cultural intrigue of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Foods and cuisines: The local food of Gilgit-Baltistan is exclusive and delicious, and it serves as a significant tourism advantage, attracting travelers from all over the world. Staple foods like wheat and barley underpin the local diet, while meat dishes, including mutton, goat, and even yak in some areas, are prepared in various flavorful ways. Dumplings and bread, like momos and chapshuro, offer delightful snacks, and vegetarian dishes like saag and markhor cater to diverse tastes. Dairy products, such as yogurt, butter, and cheese, are integral to many dishes, and the region's abundant fruits, nuts, and spices enhance the culinary experience. Traditional beverages like butter tea drinks add to the cultural immersion. Gilgit-Baltistan's exceptional cuisine not only provides tourists with a delectable experience but also an opportunity to connect with the region's rich heritage and traditions, making it a compelling destination for food enthusiasts and cultural explorers alike.

3.2.2 Weakness

Imperfect Regulatory Frameworks: Presently, ecological protection laws and regulations in place exhibit varying emphases and lack a systematic approach. Many resource-related laws primarily address individual elements within the natural environment, often failing to consider the holistic integrity of ecosystems and the interdependence among ecological components. Moreover, inadequate investment in ecological protection exacerbates the existing challenges, with funding levels inadequate to address the significant ecological issues confronting the nation. Investment channels remain limited, and the efficacy of ecological management projects requires enhancement.

Inadequate Environmental Policies and Practices: Many tour operators in Pakistan lack comprehensive policies and procedures concerning environmental protection [26]. The absence of recycling policies and a focus on sustainable practices is evident in their operations. Addressing environmental concerns, such as the use of diesel-powered vehicles and the carbon emissions associated with transport, demands attention. Moreover, a lack of environmental-friendly policies in the selection of accommodations and limited efforts to audit the environmental practices of hotels further contribute to ecological issues. While some high-end tour operators engage in environmental assessments of accommodations, smaller operators struggle to afford such measures.

Insufficient Infrastructure: The tourism infrastructure in Gilgit-Baltistan region faces significant inadequacies. Deficient transport infrastructure, characterized by limited domestic airports and outdated technology, hampers tourism development. Land transportation, including railways and roads, languishes in disrepair. In addition, accommodation and entertainment facilities remain insufficient, with a dearth of hotels and recreational establishments [27]. Popular tourist destinations often grapple with inadequate lodging options during peak seasons. Scenic interpretation falls below international standards, and limited internet connectivity compounds the issue. Additionally, the absence of English signage at regional rest stops, motels, medical facilities, and pharmacies poses challenges for foreign tourists.

Lack of Government Planning: A lack of comprehensive planning in hotel construction has led to the transformation of many natural mountain attractions into concrete urban landscapes, imperiling the sustainable development of tourism. Urgent action is required to formulate and implement environment-friendly tourism policies. At present, Gilgit Baltistan lacks an overarching ecological development plan and relies predominantly on short-term planning, necessitating improvements in strategic capacity. Furthermore, insufficient coordination among various government departments hinders the advancement of ecological tourism. Insufficient collaboration between the tourism and logistics sectors constrains ecological tourism development efforts.

Limited Management and Service Quality: The tourism industry in Gilgit-Baltistan region faces challenges arising from inadequate tourism management and non-standardized services. Various facets, including domestic tourism government agencies, airlines, tourist sites, travel agencies, and hotels, confront numerous issues. These encompass limited tourism service centers, inefficient handling of tourist inquiries, inadequate channels for addressing tourist complaints, substandard hotels in terms of cleanliness and service, insufficient translation services, and protracted entry and exit procedures. Currency regulations remain inflexible, contributing to black market transactions, while tourism service charges lack uniformity between domestic and



foreign tourists. Although many terms of service claim to prioritize environmental protection, the absence of clear regulations and policies limits their ability to influence individual tourists. Effective governance by local governments and regional administrations is also imperative to address the detrimental effects of mass tourism on Pakistan's environment.

3.2.3 Opportunities

Government Policy: The Pakistan Sustainable Tourism Foundation, an NGO committed to promoting ecotourism, embarked on an ecotourism initiative in 2022 aimed at safeguarding the Indus River dolphin. To facilitate boat rides for tourists for dolphin-watching, the organization even provided specialized training to local fishermen. Additionally, two ongoing projects by the foundation aim to preserve the centuries-old culture of Kanasa Valley in Chitral district and protect the endangered snow leopard in the HOPER Valley in Gilgit-Baltistan, with plans to designate these areas as ecotourism destinations.

The Belt and Road Initiative: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has intricately linked the Gilgit-Baltistan region with countries along its route, offering profound prospects for the Gilgit-Baltistan region's tourism industry growth. Moreover, it opens avenues for tourism collaboration between the Gilgit-Baltistan region and its neighboring nations, fostering a tourism community with shared interests and promoting regional tourism integration. By optimizing the "Silk Road Corridor network" in partnership with China and Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan can collaboratively forge an exquisite cultural tourism route spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa, aligning with the BRI countries. Leveraging the winds of the BRI, the Gilgit-Baltistan government aims to entice more Chinese tourists to explore its landscapes along the ancient and modern Silk Road. China's outbound tourism market continues its robust expansion, making it the world's largest tourism market.

3.2.4 Threats

Security Risks: Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of terrorist organizations and a surge in violent and tragic incidents across Pakistan. Regions like Baluchistan, Khyber Pashtun, and Sindh were hotspots for terrorist activities before 2014, resulting in approximately 50,000 casualties, including civilians, government personnel, and militants. While the Pakistani government's military operations significantly reduced the number of attacks in 2015 compared to 2014, the enduring presence of terrorist groups in neighboring Afghanistan maintains the persistent threat of terrorists infiltrating Pakistan through the Afghan border. Consequently, this terrorism threat poses both potential and realistic challenges to the development of projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including potential targeting of these economic cooperation initiatives by militant groups.

Cultural Conflicts: Cultural conflicts, as known as cross-cultural risks, stem from the disparities in language, values, customs, and other cultural aspects between investors and host countries. China, as one of the largest tourism import country to Pakistan, its cultural differences present challenges for several reasons. Firstly, significant differences in cultural customs and norms between the two nations can lead to discomfort during interactions, particularly regarding gender roles, thought processes, perceptions of time, and language expression habits. For example, Chinese culture employs subtler ways to convey gender equality compared to Pakistan, where a more rigid gender hierarchy prevails, often embellished. Secondly, cultural stereotypes fueled by these differences can exacerbate misunderstandings. For instance, Chinese perceptions that Pakistanis have a lax attitude toward punctuality contrasts with studies indicating that Pakistanis prioritize time management more than their Chinese counterparts.

Environmental Impact of Fossil Fuel-based Transport: Pakistan's reliance on diesel- and gasoline-powered transport exacerbates air pollution, with the influx of tourists leading to increased use of such vehicles. Developing sustainable transportation systems represents a critical challenge requiring government intervention and policies conducive to innovation and sustainable development. Policymakers must contemplate the adoption of electric vehicles, particularly for larger tour operators, to address these pressing environmental concerns.

4. Cause analysis of existing problems

The primary weakness is due to the historical prevalence of terrorism and violent incidents in Pakistan, particularly in regions like Baluchistan, Khyber Pashtun, and Sindh. These incidents have created a perception of insecurity among tourists [28-29]. In addition, the ongoing threat from militants crossing the Afghan-Pakistani border contributes to security concerns. As long as this issue persists, there will be a potential risk to

tourism and infrastructure projects like the "CPEC." Second, differences in cultural customs, gender concepts, thinking styles, time management, and language expression habits between Chinese and Pakistani people create challenges in communication and understanding. These differences can lead to misinterpretations and discomfort for both tourists and hosts. The absence of comprehensive laws and regulations that address the interdependence of ecological elements is also an outstanding problem. Specific resource laws may not adequately protect the natural environment as a whole, and the lack of long-term planning and coordination at the governmental level can result in haphazard development and negatively impact natural landscapes. Moreover, inadequate funding and investment in ecological protection, transportation, and media exposure further hinder ecotourism too.

5. Recommendations

Given the causality mentioned above, some practical suggestions are posted:

The Pakistani government should continue to prioritize security efforts to combat terrorism and maintain peace and stability. Investments in intelligence, law enforcement, and border control are essential, and establish a specialized tourist police force trained to assist and protect tourists, providing them with a sense of security.

Local authorities should provide cross-cultural training for local service providers and tour operators to better understand and accommodate the needs and expectations of international tourists, and they also need to encourage cultural exchange programs to foster mutual understanding between Chinese and Pakistani people. Development of comprehensive ecological protection laws that consider the interdependence of natural elements is essential, governments should strengthen environmental protection regulations to ensure responsible tourism practices. They also need to allocate more funds for ecological protection and conservation projects. Explore opportunities for public-private partnerships to boost investment.

Governments must develop a comprehensive long-term tourism master plan that includes infrastructure development, destination management, and sustainability initiatives, and enhance coordination between various government departments involved in tourism and environmental management.

Since majority of practitioners of tourism in Gilgit Baltistan region, stakeholders should offer training programs for tourism professionals to improve service quality and hospitality standards and establish more tourism information centers to assist tourists and address their queries and concerns. Local tourism associations should encourage and incentivize hotels and guesthouses to meet international standards of hygiene and service.

Governments, such as education bureau and tourism bureau should actively promote responsible and sustainable travel practices, such as reducing waste, conserving energy, and respecting local cultures and environments to tourists, they should also encourage the adoption of sustainable transportation options, such as electric vehicles, for tour operators by providing subsidies.

Governments should work with international media outlets and travel influencers to showcase the positive aspects of Pakistan's tourism, highlighting safety and unique attractions, and invest in international marketing campaigns to promote Pakistan's tourism potential and attract a diverse range of tourists domestically and internationally.

Investors and stakeholders should dedicate to develop eco-friendly infrastructure in popular tourist destinations to minimize environmental impact. Governments should develop and enforce clear policies and regulations that promote sustainable tourism, environmental protection, and responsible visitor behavior, and implement effective waste management systems in tourist areas to maintain cleanliness and sustainability.

According to literature review, the tourism development at Gilgit Baltistan region inevitably needs the cooperation with China, so, local authorities should actively strengthen their exchange and cooperation with China to tap into its outbound tourism market and develop tailored marketing campaigns and ecotourism routes to attract Chinese tourists to Pakistan.

Finally, local government should closely and continuously monitor the tourism industry's performance, gather data and feedback from tourists, and adapt strategies to address evolving challenges and opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This research analyzed of tourism development in the Gilgit Baltistan region, thoroughly assessing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats through a comprehensive SWOT analysis with literature review and interview. The study identifies key factors influencing the ecotourism industry's growth within the region. Through quantitative SWOT analysis, the current and future outlook of ecotourism in Gilgit Baltistan is critically examined. The findings underscore the immense potential of the Gilgit Baltistan region as a magnet for tourists and ecotourism enthusiasts. Notable strengths include its awe-inspiring landscapes, rich



biodiversity, extensive range of ecosystems across its vast expanse, valuable natural reserves ripe for enhanced enjoyment, and the presence of mountainous and forestry areas offering tourism that can be harmoniously integrated with ecotourism experiences. However, the region's infrastructure and promotional efforts fall short, largely due to the local government's insufficient attention to the burgeoning ecotourism sector. This deficit in support renders Gilgit Baltistan susceptible to unsustainable mass tourism activities. Other problems such as military and cultural conflicts are examined. These research outcomes provide local stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the tourism sector, especially the ecotourism sector, offering valuable insights to inform potential enhancements. Ultimately, this paper serves as a pivotal stepping stone for future research initiatives aimed at implementing sustainable tourism practices within the Gilgit Baltistan region.

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