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Towards Sustainable Tourism Futures: Rethinking Ecotourism Management

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Abstract

In an era of intensifying Globalisation, achieving sustainability has become a critical global imperative. Ecotourism, with its emphasis on ecological conservation, community participation, and cultural preservation, offers a viable pathway towards fostering environmental responsibility while supporting local livelihoods. This study examines the management concerns and governance challenges related to developing ecotourism within the Similipal Tiger Reserve, a protected forest area renowned for its rich biodiversity and inhabited by diverse indigenous communities. Drawing upon primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations with local residents living around the reserve, the research investigates their perceptions, levels of awareness, and willingness to engage in ecotourism initiatives. The findings reveal a strong positive disposition among local communities towards contributing to ecotourism, motivated by expectations of employment, cultural promotion, and improved infrastructure. However, the study also uncovers a persistent gap between community readiness and governmental action. Despite the area's considerable tourism potential, state authorities have exhibited limited commitment and vision in formulating participatory policies, investing in sustainable infrastructure, and building local capacities. This disjuncture has impeded the integration of indigenous stakeholders into decision-making processes, thereby undermining the prospects of sustainable development. The study argues for an inclusive, multi-stakeholder governance framework that prioritises local engagement, equitable benefit-sharing, and ecological safeguards. Such an approach could enable the Similipal Tiger Reserve to emerge as a model of community-based ecotourism, simultaneously advancing environmental conservation and socio-economic upliftment.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Indigenous Communities, Participatory Management, Similipal Tiger Reserve

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of accelerating and intensifying global change, the notion of sustainable development has emerged as a central paradigm shaping global policy and academic discourse. Increasing ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and socio-economic inequalities have prompted a re-evaluation of conventional development trajectories, particularly in sectors that exert significant pressure on natural ecosystems, such as tourism. Mainstream mass tourism has often been critiqued for its extractive and disruptive impacts on both local environments and cultural fabrics. In contrast, ecotourism has gained prominence as a form of alternative tourism that endeavours to integrate environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local socio-economic development. It is premised on the principles of minimising ecological footprints, fostering community participation, and ensuring that economic benefits

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are equitably distributed among host populations (Hasana et al., 2022; Tiwari et al., 2024). These objectives align ecotourism with the broader goals of sustainable development, rendering it a potentially transformative instrument for reconciling conservation and development imperatives.

Within India, the significance of ecotourism is amplified by the country's extraordinary biodiversity, its extensive network of protected areas, and the presence of numerous indigenous communities inhabiting ecologically sensitive regions. This convergence of biological richness and cultural diversity creates both opportunities and challenges. Protected areas are governed under stringent conservation regimes that often restrict resource access and livelihood practices of resident communities, while tourism policies tend to prioritise revenue generation and infrastructure expansion. This dichotomy has frequently resulted in tensions between conservation authorities and local populations, where the promise of participatory development through ecotourism remains largely rhetorical rather than realised (Cabral & Dhar, 2019). Addressing this contradiction necessitates a governance framework that harmonises ecological objectives with the rights, aspirations, and knowledge systems of indigenous peoples. It is within this context that the Similipal Tiger Reserve emerges as a critical site for interrogating the complexities of ecotourism governance.

The Similipal Tiger Reserve represents one of India's most ecologically significant protected areas, known for its rich flora, diverse fauna, and the cultural distinctiveness of the indigenous communities residing in and around its peripheries. Despite its ecological and cultural wealth, the region has witnessed limited progress in operationalising ecotourism in a manner that substantively includes local stakeholders. While state policies acknowledge the potential of ecotourism as a driver of sustainable development, they have often been characterised by inadequate investment, weak institutional support, and fragmented planning mechanisms. This has created a disjuncture wherein local communities demonstrate readiness and enthusiasm to participate in ecotourism, driven by expectations of livelihood opportunities, cultural promotion, and infrastructural improvements, yet remain marginalised from actual decision-making and benefit-sharing structures (Mohanty et al., 2024). Such exclusion not only undermines socio-economic outcomes but also compromises conservation goals, as the long-term protection of biodiversity-rich landscapes depends upon the active stewardship and cooperation of local populations.

A growing body of scholarship on ecotourism governance highlights that sustainable outcomes are contingent upon participatory institutional arrangements that empower communities as co-managers rather than passive beneficiaries (Gumede & Nzama, 2021; Tiwari et al., 2024). Studies from various parts of India, including other protected areas in Odisha, illustrate that when local groups are involved in planning and monitoring processes, there are tangible improvements in conservation effectiveness, equitable benefit distribution, and community satisfaction (Pujar & Mishra, 2024). However, these successes are sporadic and often undermined by governance deficits such as bureaucratic inertia, top-down policy design, inadequate capacity-building, and unclear legal entitlements over forest resources. In the case of the Similipal Tiger Reserve, while previous research has explored issues of wildlife protection and forest management, there remains a dearth of empirical studies examining how community willingness could be translated into institutional reforms and participatory governance structures capable of supporting long-term ecotourism initiatives. This gap necessitates a critical rethinking of management paradigms to align conservation imperatives with local aspirations.

The central problem this study addresses is the persistent gap between community readiness and governmental action in developing ecotourism within Similipal. Despite demonstrable enthusiasm among indigenous communities, the absence of coherent policies, sustained investments, and inclusive decision-making frameworks has hindered the establishment of a robust ecotourism sector. This misalignment points to deeper structural constraints embedded in governance processes, including limited inter-agency coordination, lack of decentralised authority, and insufficient integration of local knowledge systems. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond tokenistic forms of consultation towards models that institutionalise community participation through shared decision-making powers, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives that enable local actors to take on managerial and entrepreneurial roles. Such a shift would not only enhance the socio-economic conditions of marginalised groups but also foster a sense of environmental stewardship essential for biodiversity conservation.

The persistent failure of the Indian state to effectively facilitate or promote ecotourism, even in regions endowed with rich natural offerings such as the Similipal Tiger Reserve, reflects deeper structural and institutional deficiencies rather than an absence of ecological potential. Ecotourism, by its very design, requires minimal infrastructural intrusion, does not necessitate deforestation, and can serve as a platform for environmental education among both tourists and local residents. Yet, this seemingly low-impact and high-benefit potential often goes unrealised because state mechanisms are constrained by bureaucratic inertia, fragmented institutional mandates, and short-term revenue-centric policy orientations (Bhandari & Bhatia, 2023). Government agencies frequently prioritise extractive industries and large-scale infrastructure projects, which generate immediate fiscal returns, over initiatives like ecotourism whose benefits are more diffuse, long-term, and reliant on participatory governance (Panda & Thakur, 2022). Furthermore, ecotourism requires the devolution of decision-making power to local communities; a proposition that challenges entrenched hierarchical administrative cultures and the centralised control over forest resources. This reluctance to decentralise governance undermines efforts to build local capacities, even though local stewardship is essential for sustainable outcomes. Additionally, the lack of coherent interdepartmental coordination—between forest, tourism, tribal welfare, and rural development departments—creates policy silos that stifle integrated planning (Patra & Mohanty, 2024). Consequently, despite having the ecological endowments and a willing local populace, the state apparatus often remains locked in a path-dependent development model that privileges control over collaboration, thereby impeding the emergence of community-driven ecotourism models.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the perceptions, awareness, and willingness of local residents around Similipal Tiger Reserve to participate in ecotourism initiatives, while simultaneously interrogating the governance and management challenges that impede this participation. By drawing on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations, the research aims to uncover the socio-political dynamics that shape stakeholder relationships and institutional responses in the region.

2. Method of the Study

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions, levels of awareness, and willingness of local communities surrounding the Similipal Tiger Reserve to engage in ecotourism initiatives, while simultaneously examining the governance and management challenges constraining their participation. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for a nuanced understanding of socio-cultural dynamics, lived experiences, and institutional barriers that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study site encompassed several villages located in the buffer zones of the reserve in Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, which are predominantly inhabited by indigenous communities with long-standing socio-ecological relationships to the forested landscape.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field-based observations conducted between January and April 2024. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives, including community elders, youth, women's groups, local entrepreneurs, and members of village forest protection committees. In total, 42 interviews were conducted until the response saturation. The interview guide focused on key points such as perceived benefits and risks of ecotourism, prior experiences with government-led development projects, awareness of conservation policies, and expectations regarding participation and benefit-sharing. Field observations were undertaken to document the existing tourism-related infrastructure, livelihood practices, and ongoing interactions between forest authorities and local residents.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to key point analysis, enabling the systematic identification of salient issues. Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the data collection process, with all participants assured of anonymity and confidentiality. In adherence to ethical standards and to safeguard privacy, all respondents have been fully anonymised.

3. The Locals and Ecotourism

through improved self-confidence, skills upgradation and socially through better societal recognition and acceptance.

The engagement of local communities is widely recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable ecotourism, particularly within ecologically sensitive regions such as the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) in . The lived experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of local inhabitants profoundly shape both the feasibility and sustainability of ecotourism initiatives. Evidence from the fieldwork reveals that communities around STR exhibit a complex mixture of enthusiasm, cautious optimism, and scepticism regarding their potential role in ecotourism. These responses are embedded within broader socio-historical contexts of marginalisation, forest dependency, and contested governance regimes.

Many participants perceive ecotourism as an alternative to increasingly precarious traditional livelihoods such as subsistence agriculture, minor forest produce collection, and daily wage labour. One respondent, a young man from the buffer village of Jashipur, reflected:

“We see tourists coming here every year, taking pictures and going back. If there were proper guest houses and guides from our village, we could also earn. Right now, we only watch from outside.”

This expression underscores a recurrent sentiment among youth who view ecotourism as an avenue for socio-economic mobility and local entrepreneurship. Similar observations have been reported by Banerjee & Choudhury (2020), who found that community participation in homestay operations in the Sundarbans not only enhanced household incomes but also improved local attitudes towards conservation.

Women participants also articulated expectations that ecotourism could foster inclusive development by creating culturally appropriate livelihood niches. For example, a member of a self-help group remarked:

“We can cook local food, make handicrafts, or dance for visitors. These are our traditions. If there is support, our women can earn without leaving the village.”

Such statements highlight the perceived potential of ecotourism to enable gendered economic spaces aligned with cultural practices, as Bhattacharya & Singh (2022) noted that ecotourism initiatives in Kaziranga National Park increased women’s agency by integrating their artisanal skills and culinary knowledge into tourism value chains.

Beyond economic expectations, respondents displayed an emergent ecological consciousness, suggesting that ecotourism could be a vehicle for environmental education and stewardship. An elderly forest protection committee member stated:

“We protect these forests because they are our ancestors’ lands. If tourists come, they should also learn why this forest is sacred. Then they will respect it.”

This articulation foregrounds a moral-ecological logic wherein conservation is entwined with cultural heritage. It suggests that for some communities, ecotourism is not merely a revenue-generating activity but a medium to communicate their cosmological relationships with the landscape. Sharma & Rout (2021) argue that such “cultural-ecological narratives” are critical for fostering visitor sensitivity and long-term conservation ethics.

However, the depth of environmental awareness varied considerably. Several younger respondents associated ecotourism primarily with recreational opportunities rather than conservation goals. One youth commented:

“Tourists can come, see tigers, enjoy waterfalls. I don’t know how it helps the forest, but it will bring jobs.”

This divergence reflects what Honey (2011) describes as the ‘instrumentalist framing’ of ecotourism, wherein economic incentives overshadow conservation imperatives unless complemented by targeted environmental education.

While many locals express willingness to participate, their previous experiences with tourism-related projects have fostered scepticism towards state-led promises of inclusion. Several respondents narrated instances of exclusion from planning and benefit-sharing processes. A middle-aged villager recounted:

“When they built the new eco-cottages near Barehipani, no one from our village was asked. They brought people from outside. We only see the buildings; we don’t get any work.”

This testimony resonates with critiques that ecotourism in India often reproduces centralised governance patterns that marginalise local actors (Banerjee & Mukherjee, 2019). Such tokenistic participation can erode trust and generate perceptions of injustice, thereby undermining conservation legitimacy.

Some respondents also described subtle forms of gatekeeping by forest officials. A woman from a tribal household noted:

“Forest guards say we need permission for everything. How can we start small shops or become guides if they stop us each time?”

These accounts illustrate how bureaucratic controls and ambiguous regulations restrict local agency. Mohanty et al., (2024) similarly observe that unclear tenure rights and restrictive forest laws often discourage community-led ecotourism ventures across protected areas in Odisha.

A recurrent issue evident across the interviews is a pronounced trust deficit between local communities and government agencies. Respondents frequently expressed doubts about whether state institutions genuinely intend to share benefits or devolve decision-making power. One village youth stated:

“Government says ecotourism will help us, but we never see the accounts. We don’t know where the money goes.”

This perception of opacity aligns with Bhatia & Singh (2021), who documented similar grievances in Madhya Pradesh, where communities alleged that revenues were centralised and not reinvested locally. The absence of transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms not only fuels distrust but also undermines the perceived legitimacy of conservation authorities.

Moreover, several participants observed that fragmented institutional structures, spanning the forest, tourism, tribal welfare, and rural development departments, create confusion and stifle collective action. As one local entrepreneur explained:

“We don’t know whom to approach. Forest office says ask tourism, tourism says ask district. After months of running around, we give up.”

This institutional incoherence has also been widely identified as a major barrier to participatory governance in Indian ecotourism contexts (Chakraborty & Banerjee, 2019). This suggests that community willingness alone is insufficient without enabling governance frameworks that clearly delineate responsibilities and ensure accountability.

Despite structural constraints, communities have begun to articulate strategies for asserting greater agency. Youth collectives in some villages have organised informal guiding services and cultural performances for visiting tourists, albeit without official recognition. One youth leader observed:

“We have started taking visitors to the waterfalls on foot. They pay us something. If the government trains us and gives ID cards, we can do this properly.”

This initiative reflects a latent entrepreneurial spirit and a readiness to institutionalise community-led tourism services. Such bottom-up experiments echo the successful community-based ecotourism models in Kerala, where formal training and licensing of local guides transformed informal practices into sustainable enterprises (Mathew & Sreejith, 2020).

Some respondents also emphasised the need for equitable partnerships rather than complete autonomy, suggesting a hybrid governance model. As one elder remarked:

“We are ready to work with the forest department, but not under them. It should be together, with equal respect.”

This assertion encapsulates the normative demand for co-management; wherein communities and state agencies share authority and responsibility. Agrawal & Ribot (2021) argue that such arrangements enhance conservation outcomes by aligning local and institutional incentives. The narratives indicate that communities around Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) exhibit both a strong willingness to engage in ecotourism and an acute awareness of the institutional reforms needed to enable it. Their economic aspirations are interwoven with emerging environmental values and cultural identity concerns. Yet, entrenched governance deficits, marked by exclusion, bureaucratic rigidity, institutional fragmentation, and opaque benefit-sharing, continue to constrain their participation. This aligns with broader scholarship emphasising

that sustainable ecotourism depends less on natural endowments and more on governance quality and community empowerment (Bennett & Dearden, 2024; Singh et al., 2024).

Rather than passive beneficiaries, local communities represent potential co-managers whose knowledge systems, cultural ethos, and livelihood priorities could enrich ecotourism if meaningfully incorporated into governance structures. Realising this potential requires shifting from tokenistic consultation to genuine participatory governance, where local voices are embedded within decision-making. Only then can ecotourism serve as a vehicle for conservation, cultural continuity, and socio-economic justice.

4. The Quest and Concerns of Sustainability & Ecotourism Management

The pursuit of sustainability within ecotourism management represents a complex interplay of ecological conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and economic development, which must be delicately balanced to prevent the commodification of nature and culture. In the context of the (STR), the local narratives and institutional practices reveal that while the rhetoric of sustainability is widely embraced, its operationalisation remains fraught with tensions and contradictions. Ecotourism is ostensibly framed as a sustainable alternative to extractive development, yet the governance mechanisms intended to deliver this vision often reproduce centralised, exclusionary, and short-termist approaches. As Bramwell & Lane (2011) argue, sustainability cannot be achieved solely through policy discourse but requires the establishment of multi-level, participatory governance systems that integrate local knowledge, ecological constraints, and long-term stewardship.

A recurrent theme that emerged from the field interviews is the dissonance between policy narratives of sustainability and the lived realities of local communities. One village elder articulated:

“They say tourism will protect the forest, but we see only buildings and more outsiders. The forest is still ours to protect, not theirs.”

This testimony reflects a fundamental concern that ecotourism, when driven by external actors, risks becoming an extractive practice cloaked in the language of sustainability. Similar patterns have been documented by Brockington & Schmidt-Soltan (2004), who observe that externally driven ecotourism often reproduces neo-colonial dynamics wherein local communities are positioned as passive beneficiaries rather than active stewards. Such exclusion not only erodes trust but undermines the long-term sustainability of conservation initiatives.

Another critical concern relates to the tension between conservation imperatives and livelihood needs. Several respondents expressed anxiety that ecotourism development, while promising income opportunities, could simultaneously impose new restrictions on forest access. As one woman from the buffer village of Astakudar stated:

“If tourism comes, they will close the forest. They will say it is for animals. But what about our firewood, our grazing, our Mahua trees?”

This apprehension underscores what Brockington (2008) describes as the “fortress conservation” legacy, wherein conservation is pursued through exclusionary practices that displace or restrict local communities. Such approaches risk generating resentment and resistance, thereby jeopardising both conservation and tourism objectives. In the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) context, the lack of clear tenure rights and ambiguity in forest access regulations exacerbate these fears, as local residents perceive ecotourism as potentially intensifying state control rather than expanding community agency.

Moreover, the economic benefits of existing tourism activities remain unevenly distributed, with local communities often confined to low-wage, informal labour while external operators capture the higher-value segments of the tourism chain. This pattern echoes findings by Scheyvens (1999), who argues that without deliberate redistributive mechanisms, ecotourism can entrench existing inequalities rather than alleviate poverty. Several respondents noted this disparity, with one young man remarking:

“Tourists come, stay in big resorts owned by outsiders. We get maybe a day’s work as porters. That is all.”

This sentiment illustrates the structural marginalisation that undermines the sustainability of ecotourism by detaching it from local economic systems.

Sustainability in ecotourism management also hinges upon coherent institutional arrangements, yet the governance architecture surrounding STR is marked by fragmentation and policy silos. Responsibilities are diffused across multiple departments—forest, tourism, tribal welfare, and rural development—with little horizontal coordination. This institutional incoherence results in inconsistent regulations, delayed approvals, and overlapping mandates that frustrate local participation. As one local entrepreneur explained:

“We don’t know who to ask. Forest says ask tourism, tourism says ask district. After months of running around, we give up.”

Such governance fragmentation is widely recognised as a barrier to sustainable ecotourism globally (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Buckley, 2012). In India, Panda and Thakur (2023) highlight how institutional compartmentalisation perpetuates top-down planning and discourages collaborative approaches. In STR, this lack of institutional synergy has stymied the creation of integrated management plans that could align conservation goals with livelihood generation, thereby undermining sustainability.

Sustainability also entails safeguarding the cultural heritage of host communities, yet ecotourism often risks commodifying local traditions in ways that dilute their meaning. Several respondents voiced concerns that cultural performances and artefacts are being staged primarily to entertain tourists, rather than to represent authentic practices. A youth collective member commented:

“They ask us to dance for tourists. It feels like a show, not our real festivals. Slowly, the meaning is going away.”

This phenomenon aligns with MacCannell’s (1973) notion of “staged authenticity,” wherein cultural expressions are modified to satisfy tourist expectations, thereby risking the erosion of their intrinsic cultural significance. Cole & Morgan (2008) caution that without community control over cultural representation, ecotourism can devolve into cultural extraction rather than cultural preservation. In the context of Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR), where cultural identities are deeply interwoven with forest-based cosmologies, such commodification could disrupt the very socio-cultural fabric that sustains conservation ethics.

Another pressing concern pertains to environmental carrying capacity. While ecotourism is promoted as a low-impact activity, inadequate planning and unregulated visitor flows can strain fragile ecosystems. Respondents in villages near Barehipani and Joranda reported increasing litter, noise, and disturbance to wildlife during peak tourist seasons. As one local guide recounted:

“Sometimes there are too many vehicles. The animals hide. We also see plastic bottles and loud music. It is not eco anymore.”

This observation aligns with Buckley (2012), who warns that unmanaged ecotourism can replicate the same ecological pressures it purports to mitigate. Yet, environmental monitoring mechanisms in STR remain weak, with minimal enforcement of visitor caps or waste management protocols. This reflects a broader pattern noted by Stone and Nyaupane (2020), who argue that sustainability discourses in Indian ecotourism often overlook carrying capacity assessments, leading to ecological degradation.

Underlying these varied concerns is the fundamental question of governance: who controls ecotourism and how benefits are distributed. The prevailing model in STR remains largely state-centric, with local communities relegated to peripheral roles. Several respondents articulated frustration at being excluded from decision-making. One youth leader asserted:

“We can protect the forest and guide tourists, but they don’t let us decide anything. They call us only after plans are made.”

This critique mirrors the findings of Agrawal and Gibson (2009), who argue that tokenistic consultation erodes local ownership and undermines sustainability. Conversely, empirical evidence from successful community-based ecotourism initiatives—such as those in Kerala (Bhatia et al., 2020) and Namibia (Lapeyre, 2010)—demonstrates that devolved

governance structures, capacity-building, and revenue-sharing arrangements can significantly enhance both conservation outcomes and local livelihoods. In the context of STR, this highlights the necessity of transitioning from hierarchical governance to co-management frameworks that institutionalise community participation.

Ultimately, the quest for sustainability in ecotourism management transcends technocratic planning; it requires fostering an ethos of stewardship among all stakeholders. Respondents who expressed the strongest commitment to conservation were often those who linked ecological care to cultural identity. One elder poignantly remarked:

“We protect these forests because they are our ancestors’ lands. If tourists come, they should also learn why this forest is sacred. Then they will respect it.”

This articulation embodies what Brosius & Russell (2004) describe as “cultural-ecological ethics,” wherein conservation emerges from deeply rooted cultural obligations rather than external enforcement. Embedding such ethics into ecotourism governance requires participatory education programmes, cultural interpretation centres, and platforms for indigenous knowledge transmission. These measures could reframe ecotourism not merely as an economic enterprise but as a cultural-environmental covenant, thereby aligning development with the principles of sustainability.

Establishing an educational institute or university dedicated to sustainability and tourism in the region could serve as a catalytic intervention to address the systemic challenges confronting ecotourism management. The quest for sustainability within ecotourism management necessitates more than rhetorical commitments; it demands structural reforms that embed equity, cultural integrity, and ecological prudence at the heart of governance. The findings from Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) affirm that while local communities exhibit strong willingness to engage in ecotourism, entrenched governance deficits—marked by centralised control, institutional fragmentation, and opaque benefit regimes—continue to impede progress. Scholars have long argued that sustainability cannot be achieved through technocratic interventions alone but requires participatory, multi-level governance that aligns local knowledge with conservation imperatives (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Berkes, 2009). Similarly, Scheyvens (1999) cautions that without deliberate mechanisms for equitable benefit-sharing, ecotourism risks entrenching inequalities rather than alleviating poverty. The STR case echoes these concerns, as local actors remain confined to peripheral roles while external operators dominate lucrative segments. Moreover, cultural commodification threatens to erode indigenous heritage, supporting MacCannell’s (1973) notion of “staged authenticity,” while unregulated visitor pressures risk ecological degradation (Buckley, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires transitioning from tokenistic consultation to genuine co-management (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Stone & Nyaupane, 2020). Embedding community agency within decision-making frameworks is therefore indispensable if ecotourism is to evolve into a truly sustainable endeavour that harmonises conservation, cultural continuity, and socio-economic justice.

5. Conclusion

The pursuit of sustainable ecotourism within the (STR) is less constrained by ecological or cultural limitations than by systemic governance deficits. Although the reserve possesses rich biodiversity and vibrant indigenous cultures, elements that constitute an ideal foundation for ecotourism, the absence of participatory institutional mechanisms has stifled its development. Local communities around STR have demonstrated not only a willingness to engage in ecotourism but also an emergent consciousness regarding the environmental and cultural responsibilities it entails. Their expectations extend beyond mere employment, encompassing aspirations for cultural revitalisation, improved infrastructure, and recognition as legitimate stakeholders. This reflects a latent socio-ecological ethic that could serve as the bedrock of sustainable tourism futures. However, the study reveals that these community aspirations are repeatedly frustrated by bureaucratic rigidity, fragmented departmental mandates, opaque benefit-sharing systems, and the marginalisation of local voices in planning processes. Such governance failures have entrenched a top-down model that privileges external operators while confining indigenous actors to peripheral, low-value roles. This has perpetuated distrust, diminished conservation legitimacy, and thwarted the transition from tokenistic participation to genuine co-management. In light of these findings, the study argues for a paradigmatic shift in ecotourism governance at STR.

Moving forward, sustainability must be pursued not as a technocratic end-state but as a relational process grounded in equity, cultural integrity, and ecological stewardship. Institutionalising local participation within decision-making structures, ensuring transparent revenue-sharing, and fostering multi-stakeholder coordination are essential steps. Only through such inclusive governance can STR evolve into a model of community-based ecotourism—one that reconciles conservation imperatives with socio-economic justice, and transforms ecotourism from a symbolic policy aspiration into a tangible pathway towards sustainable development.

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