



Research Paper

Bangus: The potential ecotourism place of district Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir, India

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Received: 19/06/2018

Revised: 29/06/2018

Accepted: 06/07/2018

Abstract: Tourism is one of the main economic industry of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which is worldwide famous for its natural beauty. However, tourism development is limited to a few places in the valley, which is not only restricting socio-economic benefits but also producing negative environmental impacts on these places due to increasing tourist influx beyond carrying capacity. Bangus is an undeveloped tourist destination which offers many attractions to its visitors in terms of scenic beauty, wildlife and amicable climate. Ecotourism development of the place will not only reduce the tourism pressure to developed sites but will also help in socio-economic upliftment of the area. The study aims to explore ecotourism potential of the Bangus.

Keywords: Bangus, Ecotourism, Carrying capacity, Scio-economic benefits.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Jammu and Kashmir is situated between 32⁰10' - 36⁰35' N latitude and 73⁰15' - 80⁰18' E longitude. The total area of the state is 22,22,236 km² and population is about 10.1 million (Census, 2011). The J&K is divided into three divisions i.e Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. All the three divisions offer different attractions to the visitors in terms of biodiversity, environment and cultural diversity. The Kashmir and Ladakh is worldwide famous for uniqueness of the natural surroundings. Kashmir valley, covered by the mighty Himalaya, is blessed with coniferous forests, large lush green meadows, rich wildlife and fresh water bodies in the form of lakes, rivers, streams

and springs. There are many tourist destinations few to mention are, Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Kokernag, Verinag and Mugal Gardens. However, these places are under the continuous threat of mass tourism hence indicating many negative environmental impacts like water pollution, soil erosion, disturbance of wildlife and loss of vegetation cover. The main objective of this research was to assess the potential for ecotourism in Bangus valley (District Kupwara) of J&K state so as to achieve a decrease in the mass tourism pressure on the already developed tourist sites and also to enable the local people of the most backward area of the state to generate income from local tourism and upgrade their living standards. As tourism is one of the main sources of economy of the state, but unfortunately the income from this sector has remained confined to only in few pockets of the valley. Exploring Bangus valley for tourism will help in equal distribution of economic benefits hence would help in achieving the goal of sustainable development. There are numerous conceptual definitions of ecotourism in literature. According to the World Tourism Organization (2002), "ecotourism is all forms of tourism in which the main motivation of tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature, which contributes to its conservation and which minimizes the negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment where it takes place". A formal definition of ecotourism by the international ecotourism society (TIES) is that, ecotourism involves travelling to natural areas that helps to conserve the environment and promote the wellbeing of the local people (Strasdas, 2002). Martha Honey (Wikipedia, 2010) expands the TIES definition by describing the seven characteristics of ecotourism, which involves:

Travel to natural destinations.
Minimizing the impact on nature and community.
Building environmental awareness.
Providing direct financial benefits for conservation.
Providing financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
All these characteristics can be achieved through the:
Conservation of biological diversities and cultural diversities by protecting the ecosystem;
Promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity, by providing jobs to the locals;
Sharing of socio-economic benefits with local communities and indigenous people;
Create tourism packages to unspoiled natural resources with minimal impact on the environment;
Local culture, flora and fauna being the main attractions; and
Local people benefit from this form of tourism.
Ecotourism is gradually becoming a mainstream tourism around the world. Ecotourism absorbs at least US\$20 billion every year, which is about one quarter of the total income from international tourism. According to the world tourism organization, more than 3 billion people will tour around the world annually and 500 million of them will go to natural environment such as virgin forests (Liu *et. al.*, 2002). The UN international Year of Ecotourism during 2002 reviewed ecotourism experiences worldwide, highlighting three significant aspects: nature, tourism, and local communities. Most of the studies relating to tourism emphasize the economic dimensions at international and national levels (Gray, 1970; Thuens, 1976; Mathieson and Wall, 1982), while very few have investigated local levels (Henderson, 1975). Likewise,

there have been proposals to link cultural and eco-tourism into a more sustainable perspective which is able to acknowledge the natural environment, built environment, icons and attractions of destinations as part of the cultural package (Greathouse, 1997).

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

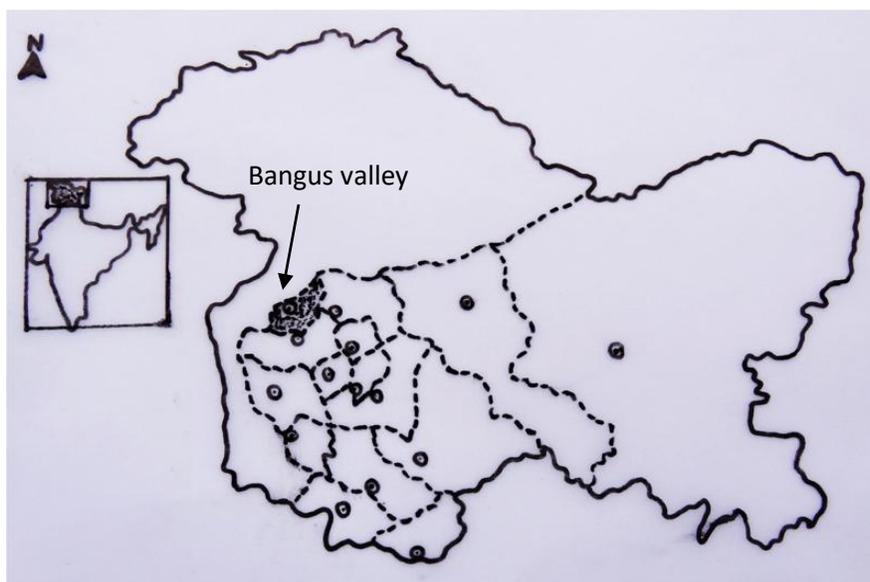
Study area:

The Bangus valley is an unexplored region of district Kupwara (J&K) India. It is situated between 34°22'2"N latitude and 74°3'27"E longitude at an elevation of 3044 meters (10000 feet) above main sea level having an area of approximately 300 km², with sloppy topography. Bangus Valley is about 105kms north from the capital city Srinagar. Bangus is a huge meadow divided into two parts—Bada Bangus (Large Bangus) and Chota Bangus (Small Bangus). The valley is surrounded by Shamusberry hills toward west and kazinag glacier towards East, towards North and are lush green coniferous forests. The valley remains covered under the thick carpet of snow about six months (Dec. to May). The maximum mean temperature remains 28⁰C in the months of June and July and minimum mean temperature remains -12⁰C in the months of January and February. From the air, it resembles a giant bowl of powdered sugar, neither animals nor people,

only the troops who cling on their positions in the face of arctic temperatures interrupt the stillness the Bangus winter. In the month of may, though the ice gives way to a dense turf of grasses and wild flowers, watered by snow melt and a profusion of streams running off the glaciers that surround it. Much of the Bangus plain is in fact a matted weave of grass and peat floating on water, makes the surface spongy and ripples under foot. The soil texture of the region is sandy loam mostly black in colour. No recent census has been conducted on the extraordinary migration that begins in the spring but, by visual observation and the people in Bangus reported that about 25,000 livestock including horses, buffaloes, cows and sheep graze in Bangus valley. Human population about 2000 are present in 300 kohtas (small log huts). This population includes both Kashmiris' and Tribals. The population is non-permanent and stays in the Bangus Meadow only in Grazing season. Bangus valley can be accessed from three routes. One route is from main town kupwara to Bangus via Chowkibal national highway. Other two routes are through Rajwar and Nowgam. Nowgam route is the main route of Bangus valley. This route is motorable upto Kishtiwari and onwards it is about 6.5 kms trekking path through lush green coniferous forests.



Bangus Valley Kupwara (J&K)



Map of Bangus valley kupwara.

Data Collection:

Mostly primary data was generated to study the area. Two principle means of data collection were utilized 1) Interviews with the local community and local authorities, 2) Non-participative observation of natural resources, cultural resources, site analysis and community analysis.

Study Findings:

Qualitative analysis was carried out and following results were obtained.

Natural Resources Analysis: Bangus valley has the potential to be developed as an ecotourism destination. The area is rich in biodiversity. There are hundreds of species of flora including medicinal herbs, the dominant species among flora are *Abies pindrow*, *Cedrus deodara*, *Pinus wallichiana*, *Juniperus squamata*, *Salix alba*, *Betula utilis*, *Berberis lyceum*, *Bergenia stracheyi*, *Medicago polymorpha*, *Ranunculus hertillus*, *Aqualigia* and *Aconitum* and fauna include are Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Spotted Dear (*Axis axis*), Black Bear (*Seleuarctos thibetanus laniger*), Jackal (*Canis aureus indices*), Snow Partige (*Lerwa lerwa*), Red Jungle

Fowl (*Gallus gallus murgi*), The floristic and faunistic diversity will encourage ecotourists to appreciate nature and will also increase their knowledge of Bangus biodiversity. The crystal clear fresh water stream passes through the centre of meadow, nurtures many fresh water fish enhances the beauty of the meadow. The area can be developed as world's finest and largest golf course. The slopes of Bangus can offer trekkers an excellent trekking experience. On the way to Bangus valley via Nowgam route is flowing a fresh water Mavar nalla (stream) meandering of this stream provides an enchanting look and can offer finest mountain trout fishing. In this research first ever effort on tourism carrying capacity was also made, by following the methodology from Cifuentes (1992) it was found that effective real carrying capacity of Bangus valley at present is 14400 visits / day, which can be more improved once the region is developed hence, the area provides best alternative to reduce the pressure of mass tourism on known tourist places of the Kashmir valley.

Cultural Resource Analysis: The local Kashmiri wazwan (cuisine) is identity of the whole Kashmir valley, which tourists can get in this area also, besides local food the area can also offer local folk and different designs of rich Kashmiri handicrafts.

Community Analysis: Bangus valley does not have any permanent residence, people from adjoining villages come to the meadow for six months (June to Oct.) to graze their livestock. However the population of these villages is approximately 2,971 people. These villages have both Kashmiri and tribal communities. Among villages Lovosa occupies 20% Kashmiris' and 80% tribals, Mankal has 100% tribal population, Wader has 50% tribals and 50% Kashmiris', Nowgam has 98% Kashmiris and 2% tribals. Tribal communities include are, Seer, Khatana, Badana, Meelu, Tidwa, Piswal and Chachi. Based on the observations in the research area, the overall condition of the area is not well. Growth is very slow due to negligence from the state Govt.

Economic Activities and Incomes: The main economic activity of the locals is rice farming, maize farming and very few have their own apple orchards. Villagers about 18% also work as potters in Army as the area is near to line of actual control (LOC) between India and Pakistan. Many villagers work as Shepherds who take cattle's of well-off people for grazing in the Bangus Meadow for which they earn Rs150 or 40kgs of paddy for single cattle for a one season (six months). There are very less people 2-3% serving as Govt. employees. Most of the tribals 80-90% are dependent on Bangus forest. Collection of timber, fuel and medicinal herbs and to graze their livestock in the meadow is their daily activity to meet their basic needs.

Site Analysis: Bangus valley is located in the district Kupwara at the extreme north of Kashmir. The distance from the Kupwara

town to Bangus valley is 35kms. The analysis of the areas development indicates that the area is least developed. Electricity and Telephone lines are not available. The road condition is not good. Schools and primary health centre is also not available in the Bangus area.

Tourism Facilities and Services: As the region is unexplored for tourism, there are no tourist facilities available within, only water proof tents can shelter in the Bangus valley for overnight stays. However J&K public works department (PWD) has constructed a 3BHK guest house at Rashiwari, which is just 5kms away from Bangus and can be booked in advance through PWD department.

Discussion and Recommendations: Bangus valley has a great potential to be developed as a new ecotourism destination, but there are lots of improvements to be made such as, accessibility, infrastructure, facilities, public transportation, accommodations and enhancement of efforts towards the involvement and participation of local people in the tourism development. Involvement of local residents in ecotourism could bring about changes in their education and awareness of the consumption of natural resources, which is very important for managing nature reserves (Ma, 2001). There is also need to have a pre-environmental management plan so that Bangus can not face the same ill fate as other developed tourist regions of the Kashmir valley. Ecotourism helps to sustain the livelihoods of the locals and increase their living of standards (Wearing, 1993). Community participation as described by Murphy (1985) is central to the ecotourism concept, with proponents arguing that participation in planning is necessary to ensure that benefits reach residents in destination areas (Simmons, 1994). Cater (1994) suggest that ecotourism business development promotes

higher economic multipliers, and that a community approach to decision-making helps to ensure traditional lifestyles and community values are respected. Ecotourism can help to sustain the livelihoods of the locals in the adjoining villages of Bangus valley. Attractions are mainly found in the livelihood of the local villagers and the resources are abundant. Ecotourism has been a catalyst in poverty alleviation in many Asian countries such as, Laos, Thailand, Mongolia, China, Nepal and others. For tourism industry to work on sustainable basis there is need to share ecological burden and economic benefit to other hidden tourist regions of the Kashmir valley. Making traditional handicrafts is an income generator, if the locals of Bangus are taught skills and are carried out commercially, their dependence on the Bangus forest will get reduced, which in turn will help in the conservation of the biodiversity.

Conclusion: This research paper has discussed the potential for development of Bangus valley as a new eco-tourism destination. The new ecotourism attraction of Kupwara is hoped to achieve the following objectives:

To protect and preserve the natural resources of the Bangus.

To reduce the increasing pressure of mass tourism on the already developed tourist regions

To upgrade the infrastructure, facilities and services, i.e public transportation in the area which encourages the local employment and to strengthen the economic well-being of the local community.

To encourage participation from local communities in the development of rural tourism.

The study can provide valuable input to the J&K government and stakeholders to start ecotourism in the rural area, a way to

preserve the natural environment and eradicate poverty of the local people.

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