Chapter - VII

Environmental Impact of Eco-tourism

Environment covers all those circumstances in which it asserts influence on the individual since conception to death. It is everything that affects the individual, except its genes. The quality of the environment, both natural and man-made is essential to tourism because it attracts tourists, enables them to enjoy their itinerary and makes them feel comfortable. Tourists are also conscious of good environment and tourism cannot get a fillip in polluted and ill-maintained sites on the other hand poor environment negatively affects, clean and protected environment is always appreciated and visited more by the tourists. Again, quality of tourism is very important for environment, because the tourists, particularly domestic, pollute tourist sites, tourists bring diseases, tourists drop junk like plastics, polythenes etc., in visiting places. It involves many activities that can have adverse environmental effects. The negative impact of tourism development can gradually destroy the environmental resources on which it depends.

On the other hand, tourism has the potential to create beneficial effects on the environment by contributing to environmental protection and conservation. It is a way to raise awareness of environmental values and it serve as a tool to finance protection of natural areas and increase their economic importance.

Eco-tourism, which is primarily meant to create awareness about conservation, has been suggested as a key to sustainable development of protected areas. It presents a mix of threats and opportunities for protected areas. Eco-tourism emphasizes care of the natural environment and often involves local people in the provision of tourist facilities. Obviously, it gives a chance to people to see plants and animals in their natural habitats and is a source of income to the locals. The following are the positive and negative impacts:
Positive Impacts:

1. **Direct Financial Contributions:**
   Eco-tourism can contribute directly to the conservation of sensitive areas and habitat. Revenue from park entrance fees and similar sources can be allocated specifically to pay for the protection and management of environmentally sensitive areas.

2. **Contribution to Government Revenues:**
   It generates money from natural environments by encouraging tourists to visit and during their stay; they pay for items like entrance fees, concessions and licenses. The Indian government through the Tourism Department also collects money in more far reaching and indirect ways that are not linked to specific parks or conservation areas. User fees, taxes on sales or rental of recreation equipment and license fees for activities such as rafting and fishing can provide governments with the funds needed to manage natural resources. Such funds can be used for overall conservation programs and activities like park rangers’ salaries and park maintenance.

3. **Rising Environmental Awareness:**
   Eco-tourism has the potential to increase public appreciation of the environment and to spread awareness of environmental problems, when it brings people into closer contact with nature and the environment. This confrontation heightens awareness of the value of nature among the community and leads to environmentally conscious behavior and activities to preserve the environment.

4. **Protection and Preservation of Environment:**
   Eco-tourism can significantly contribute to environmental protection, conservation and restoration of biological diversity and sustainable use of natural resources. Their attractiveness, pristine sites and natural areas are identified as valuable and the need to keep the attraction alive, can lead to creation of national parks.
Cultural Impact:

Eco-tourism can have a cultural impact on local communities. Eco-tourists are often partially motivated by the chance to experience local culture, which can have a positive and affirming effect on that culture. Involving local people in decision-making not only tends to make them more positive about tourism, but also empowers them as a community.

Negative Impact:

Eco-tourism has become one of the fastest growing sectors of tourism industry growing annually by 10-15% worldwide. Negative impacts from tourism occur when the level of visitor use is greater than the environment’s ability to cope with this use within the acceptable limits of change. Eco-tourism has been broadly defined as tourism that is based on the natural environment and that seeks to minimize impacts on that environment. But the increasing number of eco-tourists also provides a threat to the quality and sustainability of natural ecosystems. Although eco-tourism is intended for small groups, even a modest increase in population, puts extra pressure on the local environment and necessitates the development of additional infrastructure and amenities. Eco-tourism has its deleterious impact.

Solid waste and littering:

In areas with high concentration of tourist activities and appealing natural attractions, waste disposal is a serious problem and improper disposal can be a major despoiler of the natural environment – rivers, scenic areas, hill stations and roadsides. Trekking tourists generate a great deal of waste. Tourists on expedition leave behind their garbage, oxygen cylinders and even camping equipment. Such practices degrade the environment particularly in remote areas because they have few garbage collection or disposal facilities.

Sewage:

Construction of hotels, recreation and other facilities often leads to increased sewage pollution. Waste water has polluted seas and lakes, surrounding tourist attractions
and damage the flora and fauna. Sewage problem can threaten the health of humans and animals.

**Environmental hazards:**

Industrialization, urbanization and unsustainable agriculture practices of human society are considered to be having a serious effect on the environment. Eco-tourism is now playing a role in this depletion. One of its most serious impacts is its consumption of virgin territories. These invasions often include deforestation, disruption of ecological life systems and various forms of pollution, all of which contribute to environmental degradation. The number of roads has disrupted the grass cover which has serious effect on plant and animal species. The laying of hill roads also causes irreparable loss to ecological environs of a region.

**Population Problem:**

During the peak tourist season, the arrival of visitors is maximum. Huge congregation of tourists causes heavy congestion at the tourist sites. Sudden increase of population makes stress on the infrastructural amenities and creates shortage of water supply, fuel, transport and food supply at the site. This creates hazards to the local population and ultimately resentment against the heavy progress of tourists.

**Threats to Indigenous Cultures:**

Eco-tourism often claims that it preserves and enhances local cultures. But on the other hand, the establishment of protected areas has made local people to loose their homes illegally with no compensation very often. Pushing people into marginal lands with harsh climate, poor soils, lack of water and infested with livestock and disease does little to enhance the livelihoods even when a proportion of eco-tourism profits are directed back to the community. The establishment of parks can create harsh survival realities and deprive the people of their traditional use of land and natural resources.
Mismanagement:

Though the governments are typically entrusted with the administration and enforcement of environmental protection, they often lack the commitment or capability to manage eco-tourism sites effectively. The regulations for environmental protection may be vaguely defined, costly to implement, hard to enforce, and uncertain in effectiveness. The influential groups can pressure and sway the interests of the government to their favors. The government and its regulators can become vested in the benefits of the eco-tourism industry which they are support to regulate, causing restrictive environmental regulations and enforcement to become more lenient.

Unplanned and unregulated urbanization that tourism promotes for beyond the carrying capacity of a place puts huge pressure in the context of scarcity of drinking water and the vastly inadequate sewage treatment facilities, smoke and noise pollution caused by the massive influx of thousands of vehicles, new roads, up gradation of existing ones through prime forest areas in the name of tourism, poses a grave hazard to ecological integrity.

Uncontrolled proliferation of establishments around forest areas has lead to habitat fragmentation. This may cause or increase human-animal conflicts as fragmentation may lead to displacement of animals and their subsequent entry into human habitation and agricultural areas. This issue is further aggravated when many shops, restaurants and other smaller establishment come up on access roads and resting places. Apart from adding to fragmentation problem, that also tends to be a problem with constant garbage pile-ups, medicine bottles and packaging materials. Garbage also attracts other wild animals especially monkeys which may create management challenges and issues of tourists’ safety.

The Forest Departments of respective states have been instrumental in developing tourism inside protected areas and unprotected areas under their jurisdiction. This activity has intensified under the guise of ‘eco-tourism’ wherein more and more areas are being opened up. To support eco-tourism, additional infrastructure has also been installed in the form of roads, guest houses, cottages, camping sites and watch towers for wildlife
viewing within protected areas. Tourism remains largely unregulated while both government and private establishments often claim self-regulation. While there may be the occasional individual establishment that is mindful of the law, the cumulative impact of a number of establishments on local area gets paid less attention with the show-casing of a few eco-friendly practices. Conservation stewardship is often hijacked with these few practices by the tourism industry.

Though, there is an awareness about all these problems at different levels, a concerted plan for optimization of tourism and development of tourist facilities is still absent. The tourist rush into sanctuaries and national parks has been counter productive to the well-being of these protected areas. The Ministry of Environment and Forest have suggested guidelines for promoting tourism in sanctuaries and national parks which will help in environmental education and public awareness with regard to conservation. But outside the sanctuaries and national parks, the control of tourism is with the state Tourism Department, which are purely operated under short term commercial interests and their contribution to the conservation of nature and natural resources has been insignificant. If well planned, developed and managed, tourism can help to pay for conservation of local natural areas.

However, if not well planned, developed and managed properly, tourism can create congestion, pollution and other environmental problems.