

Strengthening Sustainability: A Thematic Synthesis of Globally Published Ecotourism Frameworks

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Abstract

Ecotourism is considered to be one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. Countries all over the world have been trying to develop sustainable ecotourism frameworks for protecting the environment and achieving high economic growth, but very few have succeeded. So, the objective of this study is to examine successful sustainable ecotourism frameworks implemented globally since 2006-2020 and find similarities that can help to achieve and develop sustainable ecotourism in other parts of the world where ecotourism sustainability was found to be difficult. This was achieved by doing a thematic analysis of the finalized articles. This study identifies four important themes which can be used to develop sustainable ecotourism in destinations where past attempts of ecotourism implementation were not fruitful. Ecotourism can be made sustainable for the long run if there is a proper understanding of the stakeholders, management of the destination, and the key stakeholders are involved in the planning, decision making, management of ecotourism in the destination. The study fulfils the gap of lack of thematic analysis review of sustainable ecotourism frameworks and provides analysis for academicians and practitioners to understand already published ecotourism frameworks. It was also established that to enrich the findings of this research, regional studies of successful ecotourism frameworks should be conducted.

Keywords: Ecotourism framework, management, conservation, stakeholders

Introduction

Tourism is considered to be one of the fastest-growing sectors in the world (Putra, Wijaya & Nurpratiwi, 2015; Sarhan, Abdelgalil & Radwan, 2016). Globalization has stormed tourism and has boosted the economic growths of the countries. With the help of tourism, countries have generated billions of dollars as revenues (Corina, 2015; DAM, 2013; Abdullah, Weng,





Afif & Fatah, 2018; Chan & Bhatta, 2013). Tourism also helps to improve living, increase knowledge, and protect natural heritage (Libosada, 2009; McCool & Spenceley, 2014). Tourism and its types are continuously evolving and, at the same time, benefiting the host community (McCombes, Vanclay & Evers, 2015) and destination (Buckley, 2012). The economic impact of tourism is positive, but there are conservation and environmental impacts that come with it, such as environmental destruction and loss of natural resources (Rivera, Gutierrez & Rivera, 2018). The significant increase in tourism, also known as mass tourism, will give rise to different environmental and social issues such as loss of culture, loss of biodiversity, and loss of natural resources. (Boley & Green, 2016; Hatipoglu, Alvarez & Ertuna, 2016; Jashveer, Boopen & Kesseven, 2011). This negative impact of mass tourism on the environment and loss of natural resources has given rise to the term “ecotourism.”

Ecotourism helps to protect nature and encourages environmentally-friendly travelling. Now ecotourism is considered to be one of the fastest-growing sectors of tourism (Ecotourism Society, 2015). Ecotourism was defined as environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Candrea & Herțanu, 2015). Countries are trying to implement ecotourism to promote natural and environmental friendly travelling. However, despite the drastic increase in the ecotourism as a tool for sustainable tourism, frameworks to develop a long term sustainable ecotourism are very few (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). So, the objective of this study is to conduct a thematic analysis of the successful ecotourism frameworks developed to understand the similarities regarding the issues that can help to the achieve sustainable ecotourism in other destinations as well.

As discussed in the above section, ecotourism promotes environmentally friendly and natural travel to the area. It also focuses on understanding and learning about the flora, fauna, landscapes, and cultural heritage of the destination (Kiper, 2013; Sarhan et al., 2016). In order to attain sustainable ecotourism development in the area, proactive planning should be done to forecast the issues mass tourism that can arise in the future and to find out the alternate solution to different environmental and social problems occurring in the destination. Many researchers such as Sarhan et al. (2016); Natalia, Yosef and Halog (2019); Hoppstadius and Dahlström (2015); Lerdsuchatavanich et al. (2016); Eshun and Tagoe-Darko (2015) have tried to understand ecotourism to achieve a sustainable balance between environment, social and economical aspects of the destination area and have identified it as a time taking process with difficult implementation due to the various factors and varied interests of multiple stakeholders involved in the destination. Even though it is difficult to implement, ecotourism is still thought to be a tool to achieve sustainability, especially in the biosphere reserves.

United Nations Environmental Program also known as UNEP, recognized ecotourism as one of the sustainable green economy sectors meaning that it can help an area to become economically stable with the help of tourism without damaging the environment (Sukhdev, Stone & Nuttall, 2010; Osman, Shaw & Kenawy, 2018). It was also notified by researchers that ecotourism helps to develop resources to sustain and enhance the quality of life, increase tourist experience of the area and conserve and promote local culture and participation (Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail & Islam, 2011; Anup, Rijal & Sapkota, 2015; Ștefănică & Vlavian-Gurmeza, 2010; Kiper, 2013). The aim behind implementing ecotourism is to protect the environment, conserve the resources especially the biological diversity and to be certain that the use of the resources is done in such a way that it remains sustainable and brings economic



benefits to the area (Kiper, 2013; Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux, 2018; Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Ștefănică & Vlavian-Gurmeza, 2010).

In order to attain sustainable development in the area, it is vital to achieve sustainability in all three above mentioned sectors (Reed & Massie, 2014; Byrd, 2008; Zolfani & Sedaghat, 2015; Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux, 2018; Lerdsuchatavanich et al., 2016; Kayne, 2010). UNESCO states that sustainable tourism development should be ecologically sustainable, socially equitable, and economically viable. Researchers have pointed out that sustainability in the area can be achieved by understanding the impacts of the human on the environment such as mass tourism, pollution, and consumption of the resources in the area (Few, 2000; Khallaf, 2014; Hardy & Pearson, 2016). Even though the concept of sustainability has been rising since the last few decades, there is still a need to understand the complexities and dimensions related to it. Different factors such as personal, ecological, political and social are involved that can lead to the sustainable development of an area (Adongo, Taale & Adam, 2018).

Ecotourism is considered to be a substitute option for mass tourism and the adverse effects of mass tourism, such as environmental destruction, cultural loss, and social instability. Effective ecotourism is a result of good principles utilization and stakeholders engagement (collaboration, management, planning, and participation) (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017; Brenner, 2019; Byrd, 2012; Eshun & Tagoe-Darko, 2015; Halis, Halis & Ali, 2017; Lerdsuchatavanich et al., 2016; Osman, Shaw & Kenawy, 2018; Pasape et al., 2013; Su, Wall & Ma, 2014; Waligo, Clarke & Hawkins, 2013). Researchers have stated that the solutions to the problems of sustainable development such environmental damage, loss of biodiversity, economic instability can be found by understanding and analyzing stakeholders of the destination (Byrd, Cárdenas & Greenwood, 2008; Lappi, Karvonen & Lwakatare, 2018; Lozano-oyola, Javier, González & Caballero, 2012; Nigar, 2017; Van Cuong, Dart, Dudley & Hockings, 2018). Ecotourism, if implemented with the help of stakeholders, can produce much more robust results for the area (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Therefore, in order to observe the successful ecotourism frameworks to identify the indicators of successful ecotourism, this study conducts a qualitative thematic analysis of the articles and extracts the parts that reveal information on developing a sustainable ecotourism framework.

Now the question arises, how is the success defined in ecotourism sites? Success in the ecotourism site is based on the results and achievement. Researchers in the field of ecotourism have identified the results as positive or negative. The results that give positive output are considered as best practices or successful scenarios in case of ecotourism. Some researchers have stated that the community involvement is the indicator for ecotourism success while some have argued that enhancement of the socio-economic goals, protection of the environment and the conservation of the resources are the key success indicators of ecotourism (Hunt & Stronza, 2009; Lindberg, 1991; Thomlinson & Getz, 1996). Some researchers have also pointed out the cultural protection as a key indicator for successful ecotourism sites. They stated that cultural preservation would enhance the ecotourism activities in the destination and thus support it in making ecotourism implementation successful in the site (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2017; Litheko & Potgieter, 2019). So, this paper highlights only those articles that represented a successful sustainable ecotourism framework along with the best practices that can help to achieve positive results in the destination.

The different success indicators present among the frameworks will provide sufficient understanding in terms of implementing successful ecotourism in the destination where it is currently not successful. It is not the purpose of this research to provide an explanation of why different indicators are used at different places, nor is it the purpose to attempt to understand and evaluate the administrative functions or stakeholder roles in the ecotourism destination on



which a variety of studies are already present. The study contributes to the literature by providing a thematic analysis of successful ecotourism frameworks and analyzes the elements of success for these frameworks. The study can guide as a roadmap for literature for both academicians and practitioners and help stimulate further interest.

Methodology

This section determines the methodology used in this study. This includes study design, eligibility criteria, information sources, and search strategies, the review process, and the analysis of the data. For the study design, the ‘thematic synthesis’ of the studies was done following the guidelines of Thomas and Harden (2008). Thematic analysis guides a researcher to identify and analyze themes occurring in the data. Thomas and Harden (2008) provided four-step guidelines to conduct thematic analysis, i.e., searching, selecting, extracting, and thematically synthesizing.

Searching

The search for appropriate studies started in September 2019 using various relevant databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus. Since the focus of this paper was on analyzing the successful ecotourism frameworks, so the search considered cognate terms such as “Ecotourism”, “sustainable development”, “successful ecotourism,” and “ecotourism framework”. These databases were selected because Scopus contains more than 22800 journals and 5000 publishers globally, while Web of Science consists of 33000 journals. The results generated 84 articles from which the researchers started to select and finalize the articles. Since every database and its related search engine works differently, so adaptive searches were important.

Selecting and extracting

After identifying the keywords and searching for the articles, the next phase was the selection and extraction. Cautious screening was done in this phase, where duplicate articles were deleted. The timeline for the selection of the paper was selected from 2006-2020, which was more than enough to understand the similarities and issues that are vital to achieving ecotourism sustainability in the destination. It was also made sure that the topic was consistent with the study, and the main focus was on the already established successful ecotourism framework. As discussed in the earlier section that successful ecotourism and its long-term sustainability is quite difficult to achieve, so less than 12 % of all the hits using the search above have satisfied the criteria of successfully implemented ecotourism framework. After careful investigation of the articles, only ten articles fulfilled the criteria where they identified that the ecotourism framework was already implemented. Other than Thomas and Harden (2008), this inclusion and exclusion are also in line with Moher et al. (2009). Figure 1 below shows the complete process.

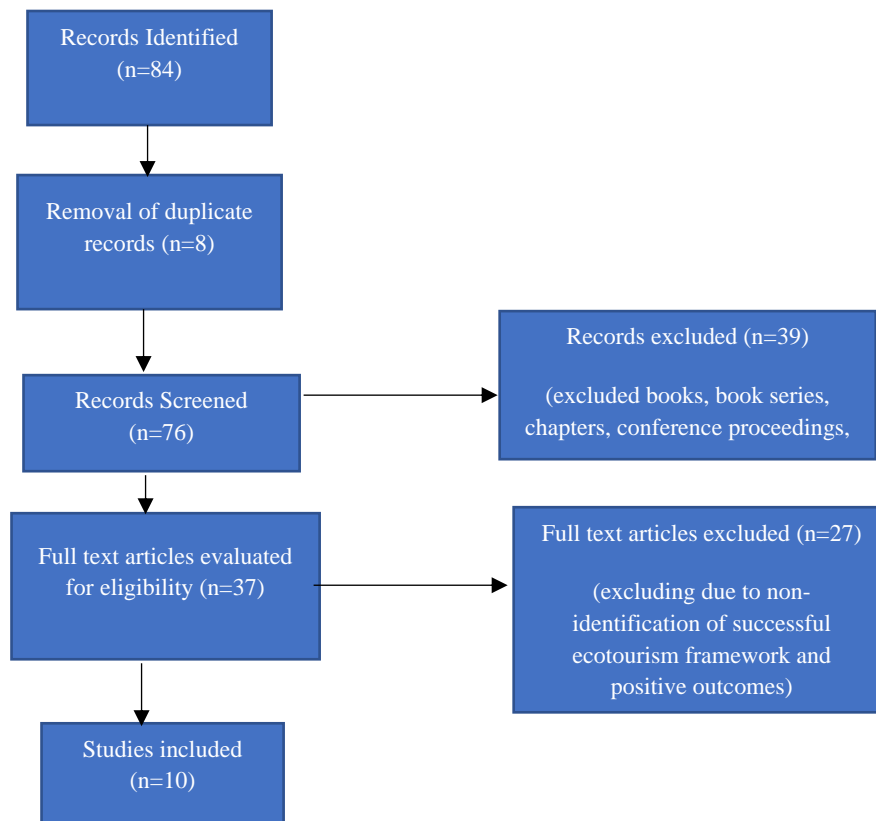


Figure 1: The flow diagram of the review of successful ecotourism frameworks
 (Adapted from Moher et al., 2009)

Results

The articles selected for this study are those which represent and identify successful ecotourism framework. Table 1 below shows the list of thematically synthesised articles.

Table 1-Thematically Synthesised Articles

No	Author	Geographical Area	Ecotourism			Management		Conservation			Stakeholder	
			ED	EI	EPD	DM	MMS	CA	BC	EC	SC	KSI
1	Courvisanos & Jain (2006)	Costa Rica		✓						✓	✓	✓
2	Pipinos & Fokiali (2009)	Northern Karpathos, Greece					✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Chan & Bhatta (2013)	Nepal	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
4	Grievess, Adler, & King (2014)	Mexico				✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
5	Ramos & Prideaux (2014)	Australia	✓				✓			✓	✓	✓



6	Candrea & Herțanu (2015)	Romania		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
7	Cobbinah, Black, & Thwaites (2015)	Ghana				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
8	Ayachi & Jaouadi (2017)	Island of Farasan				✓				✓	✓	✓
9	Rivera, Gutierrez, & Rivera (2018)	Philippines		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
10	Wondirad, Tolkach, & King (2020)	Ethiopia	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Ecotourism	Management	Conservation	Stakeholders
ED= Ecotourism Development	DM= Destination Management	CA= Conservation Activities	SC= Stakeholder Collaboration
EI= Ecotourism Integration	MMS= Management of multiple stakeholders	BC= Biodiversity Conservation	KSI= Key stakeholder involvement
EPD= Ecotourism Policy Development		EC= Environmental Conservation	

Thematic synthesising of the study was done in two steps. First, all extracts were summarized, and themes were identified. Second, the synthesis was done by categorising and grouping the types of similarities and issues observed in the papers. Four themes emerged during the observation of the papers, and they are 1) Ecotourism development, 2) Management, 3) Conservation, and 4) Stakeholders.

The success of the ecotourism is measured through the outcomes. Stakeholders usually desire a positive outcome to make the destination successful. Since this study pointed out four main themes, the success of the ecotourism destination can be considered to be surrounded by these theme elements. The first theme that was identified was ecotourism development, which included focusing on ecotourism development, ecotourism integration, and ecotourism policy development. Management emerged as the second theme for this study, which comprised of destination management and management of multiple stakeholders. The third theme of this study was conservation. The conservation theme consisted of conservational activities, biodiversity conversation, and environmental conservation. The final and the fourth theme that was observed was the stakeholder in which focus on stakeholder collaboration, and key stakeholders involvement was seen.

Ecotourism development

According to the reviewed studies, ecotourism is not easily implemented in a destination. Researchers have been trying to develop a sustainable ecotourism framework for almost a decade, but still, long term sustainable ecotourism is considered to be difficult because of the continuous changes required. In order to implement ecotourism and then sustain it for the long term, studies point out that the ecotourism development should be treated as a separate sector focusing on ecotourism principles. Greater emphasis on ecotourism development should be done with the help of the present government of the destination (Mendoza-Ramos & Prideaux,



2018; Nigar, 2017). This focus on ecotourism development can also lead to socio-economic benefit by generating more jobs, gaining more funding and services (Khallaf, 2014). Furthermore, it was also observed in the studies finalized for this paper that ecotourism should be integrated into tourism to achieve more beneficial results. Additionally, they also stated that ecotourism needs to be integrated and monitored as part of a range of sustainable activities. They stressed that the local community inputs and recommendations during the strategy development should be studied to gain better results in sustainability (Courvisanos & Jain, 2006).

A more holistic approach to ecotourism would allow decision-makers to be as adaptive and integrative as possible in ecotourism growth. Ecotourism development based on ecotourism activities of the destination will help to generate policies that are easily accepted by the community and the tourists of the destination. This type of integration will help reduce the habitat and biodiversity loss, protect the endangered species and reduce the pollution in the destination. The studies also indicated that ecotourism policy should not only be based on the development, but the policies should also be implemented for the controlling development or stopping it altogether for the protection of the ecotourism destination.

Policies should be implemented for the long term sustainability of ecotourism in the destination. Establishing policies regarding ecotourism and its development will help to develop environmental awareness and will also enforce a code of conduct for tourists and service providers (Ashok, Tewari, Behera & Majumdar, 2017). Moreover, the ministry of tourism of the destination should be responsible for the overarching ecotourism policy for protected areas and the development of community tourism attractions (Cobbinah et al., 2015).

Conservation

Conservation of natural resources and the protection of biodiversity is vital for achieving sustainable ecotourism in a destination. Protected areas can be used as a tool for the conservation of biodiversity. Conservation activities can help to boost up the ecotourism implementation process by collaborative and participatory approaches of the stakeholders of the destination (Chan & Bhatta, 2013). It was also pointed out in the studies that environmental conservation and the concerns related to sustainability have become increasingly challenging, and it is vital to make people understand the importance of environmental conservation. Environmental conservation was one of the important indicators for achieving sustainable ecotourism in the destination (Rivera et al., 2018; Pipinos & Fokiali, 2009). Environmental conservation can be achieved by increasing environmental education and awareness among people (Blum, 2008). Conservation in the ecotourism destination can be enhanced by generating financial means through tariffs, admission charges and voluntary donations or contributions which as a result will enhance the reputation of the ecotourism destinations and bring more benefits.

Management

Management was observed to be one of the most important themes that emerged from the observation of the articles. The studies point out that management plays a vital role in achieving sustainable development through ecotourism. The studies also indicate that destination management is one of the key factors in achieving sustainable ecotourism development (Candrea & Herțanu, 2015). Ecotourism successful implementation can not only help to protect the environment but also to improve the living standards of the community and promote economic development in the destination. However, for this to happen, careful planning and management is required.



Furthermore, it was also pointed out in the studies that every successful ecotourism destination has multiple stakeholders. The need to understand and manage these stakeholders is vital to achieve sustainable ecotourism in the destination (Cobbinah, Amenuvor, Black, & Pephrah, 2017). The governments should focus on the management of stakeholders for efficient ecotourism development (Grieves et al., 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Rivera et al. (2018) also noted that multiple stakeholders' management should be understood for better implementation of ecotourism in the destination.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are vital for the success of any tourist destination. They are also considered to be of crucial importance when it comes to the implementation of ecotourism in the destination (Grieves et al., 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Their role and participation are essential to achieve ecotourism sustainability (Rivera et al., 2018). The studies reviewed point out that the collaboration among the key stakeholders is vital for the successful ecotourism in the destination (Wondirad, Tolkach, & King, 2020). Local community involvement was considered to be vital during the development of strategies, policies, and planning of the destination (Courvisanos & Jain, 2006). Furthermore, Chan & Bhatta (2013) also identified the importance of including and understanding stakeholders, especially the local community, tourism industry, institutions, and the government, to speed up the process of achieving sustainable ecotourism and conserve the resources.

The researchers pointed out that community involvement and participation is the key and that strong relationships among stakeholders should be established for making ecotourism implementation successful. Moreover, it was also highlighted that stakeholders such as local community and the government are considered to be vital for developing ecotourism because they can control the conservation of resources and the make plans for successful ecotourism implementation. Government support and its participation is required and is considered to be a must to achieve sustainable development (Rivera et al., 2018). Stakeholders collaboration can guide to reach a consensus and develop a framework that can benefit the destination. The studies indicated that sustainable development could be problematic when there are ideological differences between stakeholder groups and the unequal distribution of power. If stakeholders are properly managed, a number of community-related matters such as power and conflict will be resolved, which, as a result, will lead to sustainable ecotourism development (Candrea & Herțanu, 2015).

Discussion and implications

The literature and the past ecotourism frameworks show that the understanding of ecotourism, conservation, awareness, and stakeholders involvement and management is crucial for developing a sustainable ecotourism framework. All the reviewed ecotourism frameworks observed since 2006-2020 point out the importance of including stakeholders in the sustainable ecotourism development process. The key commonality observed in all of the studies mentioned in section 2 was the involvement of the stakeholders, management of the destination, and awareness of ecotourism. All the studies stressed the point that the involvement of the stakeholders is critical for achieving sustainable development. The studies also point out that the non-involvement and lack of awareness among the stakeholders creates severe issues like mismanagement of the area, inefficient resource conservation, mass tourism and economic disruption for the biosphere reserves and is considered to be hindering the success of sustainable ecotourism development



As part of the theoretical implications and generic relevance, this paper seeks to contribute to the literature on the successful ecotourism framework in two significant ways. First, the paper provides a systematic thematic analysis of the successful ecotourism frameworks published globally. Despite the rising ecotourism literature, the studies related to successful ecotourism frameworks and the success indicators are still lacking. So, this paper tries to fill in the gap in understanding and developing successful ecotourism frameworks. Secondly, the findings that surfaced from this study are instructive in providing important information regarding the indicators that can lead in developing successful ecotourism framework and as a practical implication, this study can help to guide policymakers in making better decisions in ecotourism destinations.

The studies reviewed highlighted that the local community inputs and recommendations during the strategy development should be studied to gain better results in sustainability. Even though there have been successful cases of ecotourism implementation in the world but still there were gaps like understanding the involvement of the key stakeholders, focusing on community empowerment and generating awareness among the people. Moreover, community decision making and community involvement should be further studied. The local community should accept ecotourism and should focus on conservation activities.

Stakeholders especially local community should be provided proper education related to the ecotourism and also that in order to develop a long term sustainable ecotourism framework; environmental conservation, environmental education, and local community empowerment should be further researched (Courvisanos & Jain, 2006; Pipinos & Fokiali, 2009; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Grieves et al., 2014). The review of studies also pointed out that collaborative approaches to motivate stakeholders and achieve a strong relationship between them should be studied to achieve sustainable ecotourism. Generating awareness regarding ecotourism was recommended to be vital for ecotourism development. Studies point out that the education coalition of stakeholders is significant for successful ecotourism development (Grieves et al., 2014; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014). Moreover, it was recommended that the strategy development of ecotourism should be according to the area, and activities of the visitors should be carefully monitored. Also, future research on dealing with multiple stakeholders, their interests, attitudes, and intentions could be done to increase ecotourism implementation success (Candrea & Herțanu, 2015; Rivera et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Researchers agree that the ecotourism framework development should include environmental conservation principles along with the involvement of the stakeholders especially the local community, but there is still a gap that incorporates multiple stakeholders interest and their influences for the development of the ecotourism framework. The four themes identified in this study identify some robust points that can help to achieve long term sustainability with the help of ecotourism. Ecotourism development should be focused on the ecotourism principles, and the policies should be developed accordingly to the guidelines of the ecotourism.

Some researchers have specifically focused on constructing the ecotourism model by understanding the environmental conservation issues, the relationship among the stakeholders, their participation in the ecotourism and have stressed explicitly on the importance of managing and creating awareness among stakeholders. The frameworks observed indicate that stakeholders are the key players in the development of sustainable ecotourism. Strategies for the successful implementation of the ecotourism is dependent on the stakeholders and the proper management of the stakeholders. The acceptance of the ecotourism from the stakeholders will boost sustainable development in the area.



The researchers also found that stakeholders collaboration is also a significant factor in sustainable ecotourism development. All the stakeholders such as the local community, government, NGOs, tourists, research institutions should work together to enhance the community well being and the conservation of the resources. NGOs and the local government should collaborate with the community for a better understanding of the issues of the area. Moreover, awareness activities like natural resource conservation and environmental conservation should also be stressed upon in order to implement ecotourism in the destination successfully.

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