



Responsible Tourism Practices and Community Involvement in Darap, Sikkim: The Role of Local Communities in Ecotourism Development

Jigmie Wanchuk Bhutia*, Sonam Gyamtso Bhutia* and Ruth Marie Bhutia†

Abstract

Community engagement in responsible tourism is critical for the sustainable development of destinations where residents can benefit from tourism activities. The community's perception regarding sustainable tourism can significantly impact residents' behaviours, attitudes, and involvement toward environmentally responsible practices. This study investigates and analyses community participation and RT practices at Darap, Sikkim, an acclaimed ecotourism and cultural destination, from the perspectives of the local community. Results indicate that residents perceive Darap's significant potential for development as a responsible ecotourism destination that provides tourism advantages. Local communities nevertheless only contribute an insignificant degree to the growth of ecotourism and responsible practices. About 48.2% of respondents are employed in the tourism industry, which is broadly consistent with the overall economic and social demographics of the local community. The main obstacles to community involvement and participation in ecotourism development are limited funds and knowledge, the absence of continued training, and capacity-building programs on responsible tourism practices, which need to be highlighted for sustainable destination development.

Keywords: responsible tourism, sustainability, RT practices, community involvement, community-based tourism, eco-tourism development, sustainable destination management.

* Department of Tourism, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim, India; jbhutia@cus.ac.in; s.gyamso@gmail.com

† Department of History, Nar Bahadur Bhandari College, Gangtok, Sikkim, India; ruthmarielepcha11@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Eco-tourism is an alternative strategy to conventional tourism development in ecologically fragile and culturally sensitive areas (Sajib, Nicolli, & Alietti, 2022). It aims to support a balance between community development and environmental conservation, thereby ensuring the future sustainability of tourism destinations. In Himalayan regions like Sikkim, where delicate ecosystems interact with rich indigenous traditions, ecotourism is frequently advocated as a sustainable tourism approach, capable of generating employment and income opportunities while protecting both cultural and natural resources (S. Bhutia, J. Bhutia, & Mahapatra, 2022). Darap village in West Sikkim is an ideal representation of such an eco-cultural tourist destination due to its close proximity to the UNESCO World Heritage site, Khangchendzonga National Park and its distinctive indigenous local culture (Cajee, 2014; Chaudhary & Lama, 2014).

However, Darap village is confronted with multiple challenges that have threatened its sustainable future. The negative environmental, social, and economic implications of mass tourism, such as inadequate garbage management systems, limited inclusivity of communities in tourism planning and activities, incidents of greenwashing, and climate-related vulnerabilities, have become increasingly evident. These are prevalent problems among many growing ecotourism sites, where explosive, unregulated, and inadequately managed expansion of tourism has undermined its sustainability goals (Font & McCabe, 2017). Mitigating such impacts necessitates a responsible tourism strategy framework that transcends traditional sustainability discourse and directly involves community members in planning, decision-making, sharing of benefits, and tourism resource management for positive destination outcomes (Tehseen, Hossain, Ong, & Andrews, 2024).

2. Review of Literature

RT is frequently highlighted as a more sustainable approach to minimising the detrimental impacts of tourism on a destination. RT supports the TBL framework of social, environmental, and economic responsibility, which measures and evaluates stakeholders' implementation of responsible practices for destination sustainability (Stoddard, Pollard, & Evans, 2012; Fonseca & Carnicelli, 2021). Mathew and Sreejesh (2017) highlighted that RT management and practices implemented by the tourism industry positively contribute to the long-term sustainability of destinations while simultaneously improving community wellbeing. It further provides profitable business opportunities and meaningful holiday experiences; contributes to socio-economic benefits for residents; and ecological protection while increasing consumer market demand for responsible products (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Ijatuyi, Yessoufou, & Patrick, 2025). However,

several factors, including the perceived time and cost associated with RTP, a very competitive marketplace, an absence of government support and awareness, and inappropriate guidelines, prevented tourism stakeholders from implementing RT practices (Frey & George, 2012; Chan, 2023).

Previous research on RT draws attention to shared responsibility among tourism stakeholders such as the tourism and hospitality industry, destination management organisations (DMOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government institutions to achieve destination sustainability through community cooperation, collaborative policy, and operational actions (Sharples, 2012). RTP has benefited disadvantaged local communities and the dynamic tourism industry, significantly contributing to local economic development by providing sustainable livelihood opportunities, improving tourism linkages, social entrepreneurship, promoting culture, traditions, indigenous knowledge, and the conservation of natural environments (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017; Saarinen, 2019; Mathew & M, 2022). According to previous literature, there is limited community engagement in ecotourism activities in protected areas surrounding national parks due to several factors like poverty, religious and cultural beliefs, minimal government support, insufficient availability of land, Lack of knowledge on sustainable/RT practices, and absence of community cohesion (Choudhury, 2001; Dam, 2013; Lama, 2014; Bello, Lovelock, & Carr, 2016; Gumede & Nzama, 2020). As a result, insufficient benefits were received by local communities in protected areas from ecotourism development.

Community participation is central to RT practices, particularly in the context of ecotourism destinations where livelihoods, cultural identity and ecological stewardship are closely intertwined with tourism development (Mihalic, 2016; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017; Tiwari, Marahatta, & Devkota, 2024). RT is increasingly recognised as an internationally accepted instrument that corresponds with the United Nations' (UN) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It promotes responsible production and consumption, inclusive economic growth, cultural heritage preservation and environmental protection (Chan, Marzuki, & Mohtar, 2021). Conversely, although RT has been extensively discussed and effectively implemented in the hospitality and tourism sector (Budeanu, 2005; Frey & George 2012; Musavengane, 2019; Chan et al., 2021; Achmad & Yulianah 2022), there remains limited research on community-level RT practices in ecotourism destinations in the Eastern Himalayan region.

Several exploratory studies have been conducted to investigate community perspectives on sustainable tourism development and its impacts on local economies, cultural heritage, and ecosystems (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2011; Hanafiah & Hemdi, 2014; Harun, Chiciudean, Sirwan, Arion, & Muresan, 2018; Eslami, Khalifah, Mardani, Streimikiene, & Han,

2019). The perceived concept of RT practices and its impact on destination sustainability depends on stakeholder values and local strategies for sustainable tourism development. The perspectives, behaviours, attitudes, and level of commitment concerning communities and the impacts of tourism serve as key indicators in understanding the destination's support and engagement for sustainable tourism development (Lee, 2013).

In the context of Darap village, there is a significant research gap addressing community participation in RT practices; their perceptions and attitudes, and problems faced when adopting and implementing responsible tourism practices. The present research seeks to address this gap by evaluating the level of community participation in RT operations in Darap village, highlighting significant issues and challenges affecting residents, and contextualizing these findings within the wider development trajectory of ecotourism development. The research utilizes Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model to assess the different stages of ecotourism development in Darap and to identify how community-driven RT practices could contribute to destination sustainability and community well-being.

3. Objectives of the study

1. To investigate community participation in ecotourism at Darap Village
2. To explore the problems and challenges confronting local communities in Darap Village, Sikkim, regarding the implementation of responsible tourism practices.
3. To formulate actionable strategies and recommendations to support the local community in adopting responsible tourism (RT) practices.

4. The Study Area: Darap Village, West Sikkim

Darap village is a prominent eco-cultural tourism destination located on the fringes of Khangchendzonga National Park, about six to eight kilometres from Pelling, in West Sikkim. Darap originates directly from the Limboo dialect "Tan-lop", which translates as "plain land", and comprises a total geographical area of 565.1 hectares at an elevation of 1554.48 m above sea level (Cajee, 2014; Bose & Chattopadhyay, 2019). The area is distinguished for its abundant natural resources, biodiversity, pleasant climatic conditions, and exquisitely preserved landscapes. Darap has considerable potential for ecotourism and community-based tourism development which could help generate sustainable livelihood opportunities for residents and result in local economic development and environmental conservation. The area's proximity to important natural and cultural attractions such as Rimbi River and waterfalls, Sewaro Rock Garden, Yuksom, Khecheopalri Lake, Rabdentse ruins, and Tashiding Monastery have contributed to its emergence as a prominent off-beat tourism destination offering activities such as trekking,

bird and butterfly watching, angling, village walks, traditional farming experiences, and homestay-based cultural immersion.

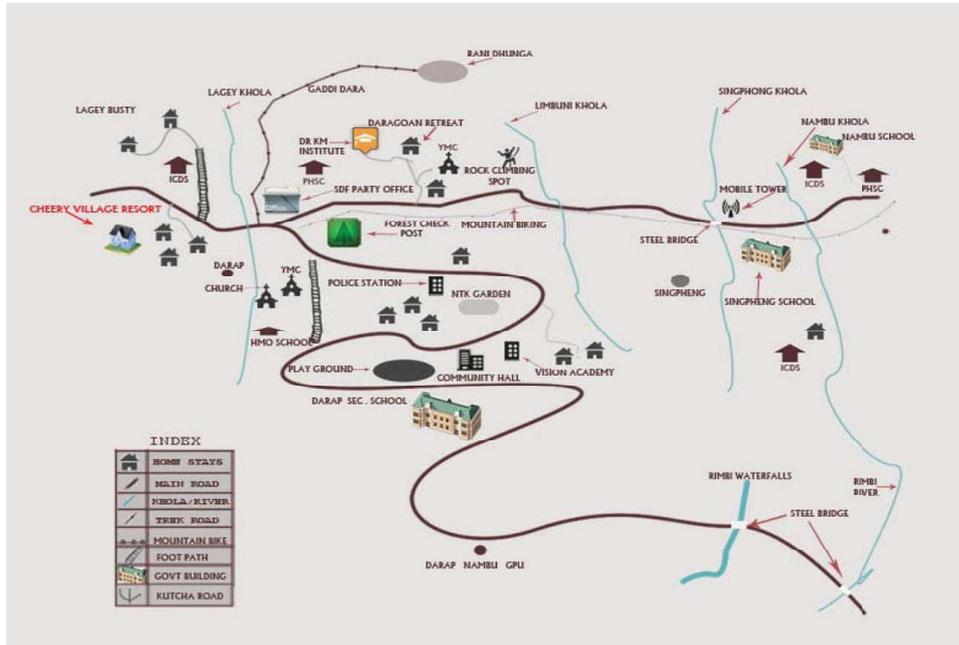


Figure 1: Location of Darap Village, Sikkim

The village has an estimated population of 1743 people, predominantly from the Limboo community, with small concentrations from Chettri, Bhutia, Lepcha, Tamang, and Gurung households (Cajee, 2014; Chaudhary & Lama, 2014; Chakraborty & Chakma, 2016). The primary source for livelihood is generated from Agriculture, horticulture, livestock rearing, forestry, and rural ecotourism, with a high reliance on forest and ecosystem benefits like medicines, food and building materials (Cajee, 2014; Chaudhary & Lama, 2014; Subba, 2014; Chakraborty & Chakma, 2016).

Since the inception of village and ecotourism in 2005, tour operators, travel agents, and the Darap ecotourism committee have established lodges, homestays, and resorts to encourage community participation in tourism. Approximately 30 ethnic houses were converted to homestays between 2005 and 2009, with each family providing 2-3 rooms to accommodate guests (Cajee, 2014). Apart from accommodation facilities, homestays also provide a range of services which include guide services, traditional farming activities, ethnic food cooking classes, brewing techniques, drinking of local wines, meditation, yoga, sharing folklore, and teaching local languages. Local communities are also involved in various natural and cultural tourism programs providing income-earning opportunities from trekking, hiking, birdwatching, mountain biking, fishing, cultural programs, traditional carpet weaving, handicrafts, and village walks. The villagers have also benefitted from tourism activities through employment and ownership of homestays,

restaurants, cafes, travel agencies, and food supplies such as rice, maize, vegetables, poultry, and meat products to tourism facilities. The growing interest among community members in ecotourism and cultural activities has contributed to the area's continued success in ecotourism development. Despite its popularity, the destination confronts critical challenges such as limited livelihood diversification, waste management, pressure from resource use, and gaps in education and training on responsible/sustainable tourism practices, emphasizing the need for strengthened responsible tourism initiatives to ensure future destination sustainability.

5. Methodology

The study adopted an exploratory cum mixed method research design integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine community participation and RT practices in Darap Village, West Sikkim. Field based data survey was conducted from January 2021 to May 2021, which included survey questionnaires that were self-administered and distributed to 150 respondents (125 from the survey and 25 from focus group interviews) engaged in tourism-related activities. In the initial stage, a structured questionnaire was developed based on literature on ecotourism, responsible and sustainable tourism using a conceptual structure. To ascertain contextual relevance and understanding, the questionnaire was translated into Nepali language and pre-tested among 30 respondents for reliability before the final data collection. The questionnaire was designed to capture socio-demographic characteristics and community perceptions on RT practices and the stages of ecotourism development in Darap Village. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), employing descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages.

The final stage involved conducting focus group interviews with 25 people selected from the survey and directly involved in tourism operations in Darap and the neighbouring Nambu village. The FGIs were carried out between February and June 2021, with a semi-structured discussion framework to elicit diverse in-depth insights and regarding community-level problems, perceptions of RT implementation, and collaborative recommendations for developing responsible ecotourism outcomes. Thematic analysis was adopted to collect qualitative data within a phenomenological framework, which included systematic coding, theme formulation, and interpretation of ecotourism, responsible tourism, and destination sustainability in accordance with the study objectives.

6. Results and Discussions

6.1. Respondents' / Villagers Profiles

According to Table 1, respondents were primarily male (66%), with women accounting for 34%, and they were mainly young people, with 44.6% aged 20-30 and 25.3% aged 31-41. The Limboo population represented about half of the sample (49.3%), followed by Lepcha (13.3%), Bhutia (8.6%), Gurung (8%), and other ethnic groups (20.6%). The majority of respondents (64% overall) had primary or secondary school, while 32% held a diploma, degree, or postgraduate certification, and only 5.3% had no formal education.

Table 1: Survey Participant/ Villagers Information
(Survey and FGI: N = 150)

Characteristics	Frequency (N=150)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	99 (66%)
	Female	51 (34%)
Age Group	Less than 19 years old	9 6
	20-30 years old	67 44.6
	31-41 years old	38 25.3
	42-52 years old	24 16
	Above 53 years old	12 8
Ethnic group	Limboo	74 49.3
	Lepcha	20 13.3
	Bhutia	13 8.6
	Gurung	12 8
	Others	31 20.6
Educational background	No Formal Schooling	8 5.3
	Primary Education	48 32
	Secondary Education	46 30.6
	Diploma/Degree Recipients	33 22
	Masters/PhD Holders	15 10
House Hold Income	Less than INR5000.00	27 18
	INR5001.00-INR10000.00	22 14.6
	INR10001.00-INR15000.00	38 25.3
	INR15001.00-INR20000.00	43 28.6
	INR20001.00 and above	20 13.3
The size of a household	> 5 Households	98 65.3
	5-10 Households	49 32.6
	< 10 Households	3 2
Duration of Stay	> 5 Years	32 21.3
	5-10 Years	18 12
	< 10 Years	100 66.6

Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data

Economically, household earnings were concentrated in the INR 10,001–20,000 range (53.9%), with 18% earning less than INR 5,000 per month. In regard to household characteristics, 65.3% lived in households with less than five individuals, and the vast majority (66.6%) had lived in Darap Village for more than 10 years, indicating a stable and long-established community.

6.2. Participation of Local Communities in the Development of Ecotourism

The findings indicate a low level of community involvement in ecotourism, with only 48.2% of respondents participating in tourism-related activities in Darap Village. Homestay operations account for (62.5%) of residents participating, while transportation (10.4%) and food and beverage services (8.3%) are underrepresented. Other ecotourism occupations, including guides, supply contracting, and support services, each accounted for less than 5%, demonstrating an extremely low concentration of livelihood prospects in the local ecotourism industry.

Table 2: Participation of Respondents in Ecotourism Activities in Darap

Tourism linked Employment	Frequency (N=48)	Percentage (%)
Tourism linked Operations	2	4.1
Contractual Supplier (products and services to Resorts/Homestays)	2	4.1
Transportation Services	5	10.4
Homestay Participants	30	62.5
Tour Guides	1	2
Food and Beverage Staff (Resorts and Lodges)	4	8.3
Housekeeping Staff	2	4.1
Bird watching experts	1	2
Operation Staff (Lodge Boy/Helper)	1	2

Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data

According to Table 3, over half of the respondents, 26 (54.1%), working in the tourism industry earned between INR5001.00 and INR 10000.00 per month. Approximately 7 (14.5%) made more than INR 20001.00 per month, 6 (12.5%) earned less than INR 5000 per month, 5 (10.4%) earned between INR 15001.00-INR 20000.00 per month, and 4 8.3% earned between INR 10001.00-INR 15000.00 per month. This indicates that tourism provides greater economic advantages to community members in the form of income and employment opportunities.

Table 3: Monthly Income Derived from Ecotourism Activities

Monthly Income	Frequency (N=48)	Percentage (%)
> INR5000	6	12.5
INR5001-INR10000	26	54.1
INR10001-INR15000	4	8.3
INR15001-INR20000	5	10.4
INR20001 and above	7	14.5

Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data

Regarding the duration of engagement in the Darap village ecotourism sector, the findings presented in Table 4 revealed that over fifty percent of the respondents 26 (54.1%) with tourism-related occupations were involved with the industry for a period of less than five years, whereas 10 (20.8%) were employed in the industry between five to ten years. Only 8.3% were employed in the tourism sector for more than 20 years.

Table 4: The duration of years involved with the Tourism Sector

Years of Involvement	Frequency (N=48)	Percentage (%)
> 5 Years	26	54.1
5-10 Years	10	20.8
11-20 Years	8	16.6
< 20 Years	4	8.3

Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data

6.3. The Tourism developmental process stage as perceived by Local Residents

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, developed by Butler (1980), was employed to provide additional analytical guidance. Therefore, it is acceptable to depict the developmental evolution of the destination and to investigate the perceived stage of tourism growth within Darap village through the perspective of the residents. Butler (1980), characterizes tourist destination development as an asymptotic curve encompassing exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation stages in the evolution of a destination.

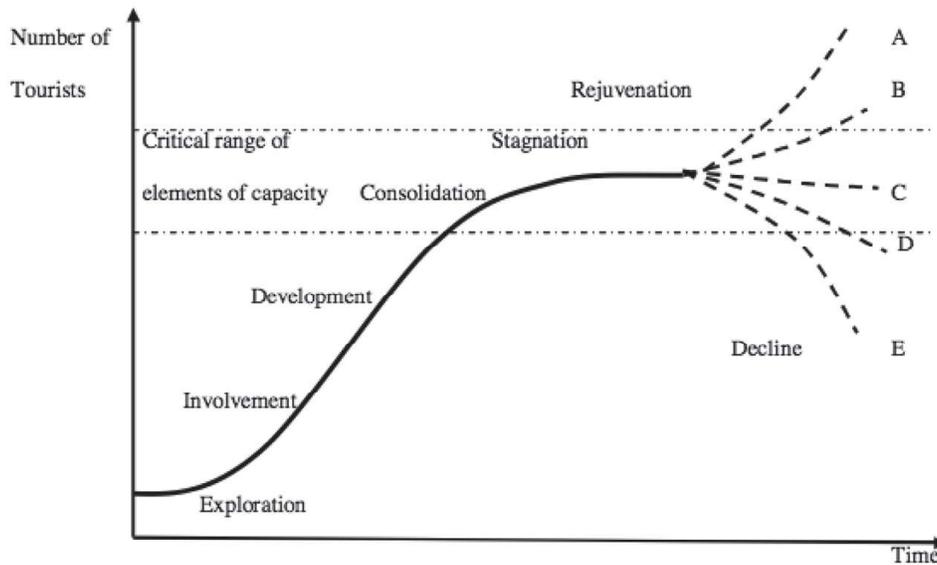


Figure 2: Butler’s model for the life cycle of a tourist destination

Source: (Butler, 1980)

According to survey results, 66.6% of respondents perceived Darap Village as in the exploration and involvement phase of tourism development. Approximately 22.6% of survey participants perceived the tourism destination to be at the development stage, while 5.3% of survey participants perceived tourism areas to be at the consolidation phase. However, only 2.6% of respondents indicated that the destination had reached its full potential and was beginning to stagnate. While just 1.3% speculated that Darap village was experiencing a rejuvenation or decline stage, as indicated in Table 5. Table 5 below illustrates the detailed tourism development phase of Darap village.

Table 5: Perceived Ecotourism Development Phase in Darap Village

Phase of Development	Description (adapted from Butler, 1980)	Percentage (%) (Survey and FGI: N=150)
Exploration	Darap village's natural beauty and culture both contributed to the arrival of eco-tourists. There were only a few ecotourists, facilities, and services available to tourists. Tourism opportunities and socio-economic benefits received by the local community are minimal.	33
Involvement	Local community participation in providing tourism facilities continues to remain low due to foreign investments. Tourism operators assessed tourist markets and seasons to forecast the expected arrivals of several ecotourists. Communities pressured the local Government to improve Road and transport infrastructure and health care provision.	67
Development	Foreign investments and tour operators influence the massive influx of tourism and development. There is increased social media and promotional marketing of the destination. Cross-cultural conflicts arise between tourists and natives in economic and social matters.	34
Consolidation	Tourism has become an important sector and economic contributor to the village. As a result, several places of interest have become overcrowded, with deteriorating amenities and services over which the community has no control in destination management.	8
Stagnation	Tourist arrivals have peaked. Due to developmental constraints, globalization and increased business expansion by tourism vendor operations; tour operators and hospitality units like homestays and resorts are unable to meet the needs of tourists.	4

Rejuvenation/ Decline	Destinations have revalued, revamped, and reinvigorated developments in tourism infrastructure and provision as a result of substantial renovation and the establishment of new tourist attractions. Through implementing sustainable/responsible tourism methods and practices, resorts may be substituted and used by alternative lodging units to attract more tourists.	2
Source: <i>Author's self-compilation from primary data</i>		

Respondents who believe Darap village is in the consolidation phase (5.3%) perceive ecotourism as an important industry with numerous economic advantages for local community members, including employment opportunities and revenue generated from tourism businesses and homestay enterprises. These have been associated with the presence of multiple resorts and homestays, in addition to a significant proportion of green and cultural tourists that visit the village. However, a significant participant of those surveyed (44.6%) claim that ecotourism is still in the initial stages of development. The majority of respondents acknowledged that Darap village continues to possess an abundance of opportunities for the advancement of ecotourism because of the sustainable livelihood possibilities that it offers to the villagers. The capacity of ecotourism development can also be achieved through residents' active participation and engagement, which could help the village economically and contribute to community development.

To engage in sustainable and eco-tourism activities. As a result, it will contribute to revenue streams and help the local community generate greater economic benefits from tourism. Similarly, a large percentage of respondents recognised that community participation in Darap village tourism development should be encouraged, considering residents perform crucial functions and responsibilities in ecotourism development and operations. However, approximately 8% of respondents

6.4. Community perspectives, behaviours, and support for the development of ecotourism

Table 6 summarises FGI data on the perspectives, attitudes, and support of local communities. It firmly proves that sustainability in tourism development is dependent on cooperation from stakeholder groups in destinations, wherein local stakeholders perform vital responsibilities throughout the development process, from planning, decision-making, to the implementation of sustainable tourism approaches. More crucially, perceptions of residents concerning several relevant tourism factors are examined regarding their impact on the future development of tourism in the region. These impacts address physical infrastructure-related issues and social, economic, and environmental problems. The community

at large is receptive to tourism growth and its upward trajectory, as evidenced by positive perceptions and attitudes toward social, cultural, and economic generating opportunities. The local population expects the tourism sector in the region to enhance community well-being, thereby inadvertently contributing to Darap village's sustainability and destination competitiveness.

Table 6: Local Community Perception, Behaviour, and Support for Ecotourism Development

Component	Perception and Support FGI: N=25 Participants)
Participation of Residents in Tourism Development	The local population possesses a strong awareness of Darap's natural assets, complemented by their rich cultural heritage, both of which serve as key attractions for tourists. However, the community's participation in the tourism industry in Darap remains limited.
Implications of Tourism Development	The local community generally agrees that ecotourism has a positive impact on community development in Darap. The local community acknowledges ecotourism's contribution to the preservation of Darap's natural resources. Tourism development provided additional economic benefits, including more employment and business prospects.
Local Community Perspectives	Since tourism was still in the early stages of development, the local community could be perceived as apathetic, which is why they welcomed more tourists to visit Darap. More than one-third of respondents believed that tourism development in Darap was still in the beginning stages and that the destination's tourism potential remained mostly undeveloped. The majority of respondents wished to participate in tourism, where they influence and control operations while being actively involved in specific conservation efforts.
Local Community Support for Ecotourism Development	The local community is often optimistic about tourist development and enthusiastically supports its expansion in the region, given the economic benefits derived by the community.

Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data

The study's findings indicate that ecotourism is becoming increasingly popular in Darap village and has gradually improved community knowledge and awareness about the protection of natural assets such as biodiversity and forests, which are primary attractions that lure eco-tourists to the destination. Cultural and heritage assets of the Limboo community have the potential to broaden the authentic immersive experience for visitors, which needs to be preserved to further the development of tourism attractions and services while providing supplementary income to the local community. Furthermore, those surveyed claimed that currently, the immediate participation of residents in the development of ecotourism remains limited,

even though there are several alternatives available, including employment at lodges, participation and volunteering in conservation initiatives, and the provision of accommodation. Among the issues and challenges impeding their continued involvement in ecotourism are an absence of continued monetary assistance from the Government, limited knowledge and skills of community members regarding managing tourism-related operations and businesses.

A large proportion of the participants associated with ecotourism in Darap Village agreed that ecotourism has a beneficial impact on the population, particularly in terms of generating additional sources of livelihood, providing sustainable livelihood opportunities, revitalising cultural heritage, developing public infrastructures, and transmitting knowledge and expertise to the population in the spheres of micro-businesses and management of natural resources. Collaboration and involvement of stakeholders comprising government agencies, NGOs, and environmental institutions, in addition to tourism operators, have contributed to the development of ecotourism and environmental conservation, as well as the social and economic development of Darap residents, and helped to reduce the negative impact of tourism towards sustainable destination management.

The survey data (N = 125) indicated that ecotourism development continues to be in the initial stages. As a result, opportunities exist for the creation of novel products, diversification of tourism and restoration activities, and development of tourist services and facilities. These perspectives can be associated with a certain degree of 'apathy' as implied by Doxey's Irridex Model (Doxey, 1975). The local population's favourable perspective can be correlated to economic variables, as expansion is perceived by residents to have the capacity to boost income and employment prospects when contrasted to traditional occupations like agriculture as a commercial activity. Residents are optimistic about the future of ecotourism in Darap village, which can be improved further with the cooperation of stakeholders, allowing residents to participate in the planning, management, and control of community assets according to the availability of tourism resources in the village.

6.5. Major issues and challenges in the implementation of responsible tourism practices by local communities

The study's findings confirmed eight (8) significant challenges encountered by participants (local communities) when establishing and implementing responsible tourism RT practices for sustainable development in Darap village. Table 7 summarises critical challenges, encompassing environmental, social, cultural, and economic factors. The analysis highlighted the community's financial, infrastructure, management, safety, and marketing

concerns. There are other difficulties related to establishing homestays and tourism businesses, including limited financial support, training, and land availability for communities to actively engage in the industry. All of these challenges are considered fundamental to promoting the sustainable future of Darap village as an ecotourism site.

Table 7: Key Challenges Faced by Local Communities in Adopting Responsible Tourism Practices

Specific Issues	Problems and Challenges in RT Practices (Focus Group Interview: N=25 Participants)
Environmental Problems	<p>Poor proper waste management infrastructure in Darap-Nambu Village.</p> <p>Decreasing topsoil fertility and instability due to climate change and Global warming.</p> <p>Decreased number of wildlife and loss of biodiversity (Red panda, Snow leopard, Frogs, Fireflies, Birds, Medicinal plants, etc.)</p> <p>Natural resources are threatened due to the extraction of edible plants, timber felling for construction, firewood, and charcoal.</p> <p>Visual Degradation in the quality of the physical landscape due to high-rise buildings (5-storey buildings).</p>
Socio-Cultural Issues	<p>Insufficient efforts to safeguard and protect cultural heritage resources.</p> <p>(e.g., ancient structures and traditional architectural mud and stone house design, limited studies have been conducted on the Limboo language and literature (Sirijunga script).</p> <p>The immense value of cultural heritage as a tourist attraction has not been entirely utilised in Darap.</p>
Local Community Participants Issues	<p>Community members have lower involvement levels associated with the tourism industry.</p> <p>Locals find it difficult to obtain a tour guide license since it is prohibitively expensive.</p> <p>There is limited land for building a new homestay.</p> <p>Inexperienced homestay participants require continued training and education in homestay and hospitality.</p> <p>Delayed financial assistance to Homestays</p>
Community Support	<p>The local community is usually receptive to the development of tourism and actively promotes the continued growth of the industry within its locality, recognising economic benefits from tourism activities.</p>
Economic/ Financial Issues	<p>Unstable income and revenue generated due to the seasonality of the tourism business.</p> <p>Higher overhead expenses in maintaining a homestay.</p> <p>Fund constraints to build Tourism Infrastructure and Parking at Darap Bazar and beautification of Limbuni Falls.</p>

Management Concerns	An absence of cooperation between tourism businesses and the local population in addressing concerns related to visitor distribution and pollution. Travel agents, resorts, hotels, and homestays have high competition for clients and visitors.
Safety and Security Concerns	Landslides (safety) during the monsoon season, for example, negatively impact visitor arrivals.
Marketing Issues	Lack of effective online marketing and promotion for eco-tourism products and services by stakeholders.
Source: <i>Author's self-compilation from primary data</i>	

The Focus Group Interviews (FGI) revealed environmental concerns that could adversely affect eco-tourism activities and development in the future. The prospects of eco-tourism and sustainable development in Darap village may be negatively impacted by issues such as waste management, reduced soil fertility owing to climate change, biodiversity loss, and visual degradation of the natural surroundings. Forest resources and wildlife are threatened due to the extraction of edible plants, timber felling for construction, firewood, and charcoal.

Although participants in the survey acknowledged community-specific culture and heritage as authentic experiential products to attract and motivate tourists, little progress has been undertaken to develop and market Darap village's unique cultural values, customs, and heritage assets. Depending on the cultural resources available in Darap village, residents may be constructively involved in tourism by developing and promoting ancestral properties like Heritage House- Mud House, Stone House Dokarmi, Bamboo Handicrafts, Traditional Limboo Village, and intangible facets of culture.

In terms of community engagement at the local level, respondents believe that it remains relatively poor, which is consistent with the study; the primary reasons are correlated with a lack of and delayed funding, higher overhead expenses, limited land availability, and incompetent skills of youths in operating a tourism enterprise. These aspects are considered prevalent issues among local communities that hinder residents from engaging in tourism-related activities. As a result, consistent financial support, continued capacity building, and training programs are crucial for stimulating community involvement to ensure every stakeholder may gain from ecotourism development, depending on an equitable predicament, which constitutes one of the integral components of responsible tourism for sustainable tourism development.

Research findings indicated the level at which the coordination between tour providers and the residents at large remains poor, particularly in dealing with concerns like visitor distribution and pollutants, which is a serious issue

for inhabitants in Darap village, affecting the quality of the water and air, as well as the village environment. Furthermore, local residents encourage tour operators to engage in including visitors in collaboration with community-run tourism initiatives such as traditional organic farming, village and homestay tourism, and community-based ecotourism. This is crucial to ensure the positive impacts of ecotourism in Darap village that benefit locals, along with the tourism sector. Recognising the growing significance of partnerships involving tour operators and residents, the Darap Ecotourism Committee and Darap-Nambu GPU Tourism Society frequently involve individuals in training, social activities, and environmental conservation initiatives.

Participants expressed safety and security concerns, particularly regarding frequent landslides caused by prolonged rainfall during the monsoon season. Landslides have been detrimental not just to the local residents but also to commercial and tourism operations, including trekking trails near Darap village. It further affects road infrastructure, transportation, and visitor safety en route to the destination, resulting in a negative perception of traveller safety, which indirectly discourages tourists from visiting the destination.

Stakeholders have failed to successfully market and advertise ecotourism products and services through the Internet and social media-based platforms. In a collaborative effort with the state tourism agency, destination management organisations, and tourism businesses must develop and maintain websites to responsibly promote the destination's nature and culture as Unique Selling Products (USP).

6.6. Proposed Approaches and Specific Recommendations for RT Practices and Participation of Communities in Ecotourism Development

Table 8 outlines specific strategies and recommendations for promoting or strengthening community engagement while encouraging RT practices in the Darap village ecotourism industry, based on the findings of Focus Group Interviews (FGI). The recommendations concentrate on the development of tourism products, resorts, and homestay operations, infrastructural amenities, marketing, HR development, capacity-building programs, cooperation, conservation of the environment, and repercussions of tourism. The aforementioned specific strategies and recommendations have implications for establishing Darap as a competitive, community-resilient, and environmentally conscious ecotourism destination.

Table 8: Proposed Strategies and Specific Recommendations for Responsible Tourism Practices (RTP)

Specific Strategies/ Recommendations	Specific Recommendations (FGI): N=25 Participants)
Product Development	<p>Establish a "Traditional Bamboo Village" in collaboration with the community to promote traditional practices of bamboo handicrafts and architectural information in Darap.</p> <p>Development of Village Walk & Nature Cycling - Bird Watching and Butterfly Trails.</p> <p>Develop Cultural Haat Centre facilities to promote cultural programs that are beneficial to the tourism sector and the community at large.</p> <p>Promotion and marketing festivals like Sansaari pooja, good farming, Savang Tamnang (Celebrating the Birth of Yumamang (Goddess).</p> <p>Develop adventure tourism activities like Rock climbing, Zipline, Mountain Biking, and Trekking trail routes to Nub Decehenphug (Holy Cave) and Rani Dhunga (Holy Queen Stone).</p> <p>To leverage ecotourism as a vital economic sector by establishing Smiti Ban Medicinal and Herbal Plantation, Wild Orchid Centre to educate tourists and local communities on the conservation of endemic species of plants.</p> <p>To elevate the quality of tourist destinations by building eco-friendly homestays and resorts for tourists, in addition to creating a code of conduct to encourage responsible behaviour among tourists.</p> <p>Financial Incentives to the local youths to establish tourism-related enterprises like Bamboo and cane handicrafts, horticulture, food processing units, herbal products industry, and organic farming.</p>
Infrastructure Development	<p>Development of Alternative Link Road: Darap-Ipsing to Sky Walk Pelling.</p> <p>Construction of an Entry Gate, Tourism Infrastructure, and Parking at Darap Bazar to facilitate residents, tourists, and the tourism industry.</p> <p>Sustainable infrastructure development (such as solar street lights and rainwater harvesting, etc.) that is both reliable and cost-efficient while also improving community safety and well-being.</p>
Marketing and Promotion	<p>Promote Darap village ecotourism products through the development of websites.</p> <p>Develop a strong image of Darap ecotourism by marketing the destination's distinctive advantages or USPs.</p>

Resort and Homestay Development	<p>Encourage a greater number of resorts and homestays to invest in the green certification program, which focuses on sustainable tourism criteria for India.</p> <p>The construction of resorts and homestays must incorporate local architectural design, utilising sustainable materials like mud, stones, etc. and recycled waste in partnership with schools, such as eco-bricks built from plastic waste.</p> <p>Increase local employment in homestays and resorts.</p> <p>Encourage improved waste management and conservation techniques in homestays.</p> <p>Promotion of traditional indigenous cuisines by conducting cooking classes in homestays.</p> <p>Improve tourism linkages and shared value by sourcing food products and services from local communities (e.g., meat products, vegetables, hiring local cooks, guide services, etc.)</p>
HR Development and Capacity Building Programs	<p>Generate greater employment prospects for locals and prioritise their positions in resorts or homestays.</p> <p>Promote community awareness and knowledge about the positive effects of ecotourism development in Darap village.</p>
Partnerships and Cooperation	<p>The development of cooperation networks, partnerships, and participation of residents and stakeholders in planning and management processes.</p> <p>Sharing information on the sustainability agenda and local priorities.</p>
Management of Tourism Impacts	<p>Implement a systematic and efficient waste management strategy (promoting the reduce, reuse, and recycle concept among resorts/homestay operators and local Communities).</p> <p>Educate residents on the significance of ecological conservation and sustainability.</p> <p>Establish guidelines for ensuring the long-term sustainability of Darap village.</p> <p>Involve residents in conservation initiatives, primarily through international agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government departments.</p>
Source: Author's self-compilation from primary data	

7. Implications of the Study

The proposed study seeks to highlight the need for a new paradigm in ecotourism planning in Darap, shifting from an infrastructure-oriented strategy to community-led management and governance. Identifying local residents as key stakeholders in tourism planning, decision-making, and management is critical to maintaining legitimacy, responsibility, and a sustainable future. The research findings highlight the significance of timely financial and simplified tourism-related credit assistance, continuous capacity-building and skill-development initiatives, and enhanced promotion and marketing tailored to community-driven ecotourism

destinations. Strengthening institutional collaboration and partnership among destination management organisations and community-based stakeholders like the Darap Ecotourism Committee and the Darap-Nambu GPU Tourism Society is also critical to fostering cooperation, ensuring inclusive and ethical engagement and equitable benefit sharing at the early stages of destination development.

The research proposes perspectives on management and sustainability that impact the continuity of capacity-building and training programs provided to community members on areas such as homestays, tourism entrepreneurship, environmental responsibility, and digital marketing; all of which are critical to improving the Darap-Nambu GPU Tourism Society and reducing reliance on third-party actors. Increased community involvement has the potential to significantly contribute to environmental conservation outcomes, varied product offerings, equitable sharing of benefits, and overall resilience and destination sustainability. The results also suggest that community-led ecotourism experiences need to be strategically branded and promoted with the aim of achieving maximum local economic benefits while strengthening responsible tourism principles. The study provides theoretical preliminary findings from the Indian Himalayan Region, emphasising the need to conduct further comparative and longitudinal studies to methodically investigate the overarching economic, environmental, and social consequences of RT practices across various stages of destination development.

8. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that community participation in Responsible Tourism (RT) practices in Darap village continues to be low, despite widespread awareness of the potential of ecotourism to bring significant economic advantages. The case identifies three primary constraints: lack of and delayed capital assistance, Insufficient availability of private land for homestay development, and inadequate skills required for managing tourism operations. These constraints suggest that minimal participation is predominantly organisational and institutional in nature, rather than a result of low community interest or negative perceptions regarding ecotourism.

Using Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, Darap village is placed within the involvement in the early development stage of tourism growth. During this stage, RT practices are particularly crucial because they influence the long-term strategy, sustainability, and inclusivity of destination development. While residents are involved in some RT-related activities, including infrastructure construction, product creation, ecological protection, marketing, and stakeholder collaboration, the success of these initiatives is limited by a lack of community-wide participation. This

accentuates the value of local participation as a prerequisite to responsible tourism development in emerging ecotourism destinations. As a result, the study addressed various issues and challenges associated with ecotourism to ensure the sustainable development of the destination. The study presented proper methods and additional suggestions on RT practices for residents, which are regarded as fundamental prerequisites to the further development of ecotourism.

The current study makes a significant contribution to existing literature on Responsible Tourism (RT) Practices by highlighting the importance of recognising local communities as key stakeholders in consultative tourism planning, decision-making and management processes. The study highlights the significance of conducting systematic assessments of community perceptions and behaviours as baseline data to assist policy makers, destination management organisations (DMOs) like the Darap Ecotourism Committee, the Darap-Nambu GPU Tourism Society, and local governance agencies in gaining valuable insights into the challenges and integrating ecotourism development with local priorities of Darap village. The findings underscore the importance of developing sustainability standards, a code of conduct, and context-specific triple bottom line (TBL) indicator metrics for adopting RT principles prior to large-scale tourism growth in Darap village.

The research suggests that increasing Responsible Tourism implementation in Darap village involves timely financial support mechanisms, continuous capacity-building and skill-development initiatives, and enhanced promotion and marketing of community-led ecotourism products. Strengthening institutional collaboration and partnership between stakeholders is also critical to ensuring inclusive engagement and equitable benefit sharing.

The findings, however, include contextualised constraints, such as the exclusion of other tourism stakeholders and the distinct geographical, cultural, and sociopolitical aspects of Darap village. As a result, future research should use comparative and multi-stakeholder techniques to assess the long-term implications of RT practices on destination sustainability and community development in various Himalayan ecotourism contexts.

References

- Achmad, W., Yulianah, Y. (2022). Corporate social responsibility of the hospitality industry in realizing sustainable tourism development. *Enrichment: Journal of Management*, 12(2), 1610-1616.
- Bello, F. G., et al. (2017). Constraints of community participation in protected area-based tourism planning: The case of Malawi. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 16(2), 131-151.

- Bhutia, S. G., et al. (2022). Analyzing the issues and challenges of homestays for sustainable tourism development in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. *Orissa Journal of Commerce*, 43(4), 73-88.
- Bose, I., Chattopadhyay, S. (2019). Glimpses of Sustainable Tourism in India: Cases and Discussions. *IPE Journal of Management*, 9(2), 27-39.
- Budeanu, A. (2005). Impacts and responsibilities for sustainable tourism: a tour operator's perspective. *Journal of cleaner production*, 13(2), 89-97.
- Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources. *Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*, 24(1), 5-12.
- Cajee, L. (2014). Eco-cultural tourism: a tool for environmental, cultural and economic sustainability (a case study of Darap Village, West Sikkim). In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 12, p. 01029). EDP Sciences.
- Caruana, R., et al. (2014). Tourists' accounts of responsible tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 46, 115-129.
- Chakraborty, S., Chakma, N. (2016). Economy and social development of rural Sikkim. *Space and Culture, India*, 4(2), 61-79.
- Chan, J. K. L. (2023). Sustainable rural tourism practices from the local tourism stakeholders' perspectives. *Global Business & Finance Review (GBFR)*, 28(3), 136-149.
- Chan, J. K. L., et al. (2021). Local community participation and responsible tourism practices in ecotourism destination: A case of lower Kinabatangan, Sabah. *Sustainability*, 13(23), 13302.
- Chaudhary, M., Lama, R. (2014). Community based tourism development in Sikkim of India – A study of Darap and Pastanga villages. *Transnational Corporations Review*, 6(3), 228-237.
- Dam, S. (2013). Issues of sustainable ecotourism development in Sikkim: An analysis. *South Asian Journal of Tourism and Heritage*, 6(2), 32-47.
- Deery, M., et al. (2012). Rethinking social impacts of tourism research: A new research agenda. *Tourism management*, 33(1), 64-73.
- Doxey, G. V. (1975, September). A causation theory of visitor-resident irritants: Methodology and research inferences. In *Travel and tourism research associations sixth annual conference proceedings* (Vol. 3, pp. 195-198).
- Eslami, S., et al. (2019). Community attachment, tourism impacts, quality of life and residents' support for sustainable tourism development. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 36(9), 1061-1079.
- Fonseca, A. P., Carnicelli, S. (2021). Corporate social responsibility and sustainability in a hospitality family business. *Sustainability*, 13(13), 7091.
- Font, X., McCabe, S. (2017). Sustainability and marketing in tourism: Its contexts, paradoxes, approaches, challenges and potential. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 25(7), 869-883.

- Frey, N., George, R. (2012). Responsible tourism and the tourism industry: A demand and supply perspective. In *Responsible Tourism* (pp. 135-156). Routledge.
- Goodwin, H., Francis, J. (2003). Ethical and responsible tourism: Consumer trends in the UK. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 9(3), 271-284.
- Gumede, T. K., Nzama, A. T. (2020). Enhancing community participation in ecotourism through a local community participation improvement model. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 9(5), 1252-1272.
- Hanafiah, M. H., Hemdi, M. A. (2014). Community behaviour and support towards island tourism development. *International Journal of Economics and Management Engineering*, 8(3), 804-808.
- Harun, R., et al. (2018). Attitudes and perceptions of the local community towards sustainable tourism development in Kurdistan regional government, Iraq. *Sustainability*, 10(9), 2991.
- Ijatuyi, E. J., et al. (2025). Sustainable tourism and green space: exploring how green spaces and natural attractions contribute to local tourism economies and revenue generation in Gauteng province. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1), 236.
- Lama, R. (2014). *Community based tourism development (a case study of Sikkim)* (Doctoral dissertation, Kurukshetra University).
- Lee, T. H. (2013). Influence analysis of community resident support for sustainable tourism development. *Tourism management*, 34, 37-46.
- Mathew, P. V., M, N. P. (2022). Sustainable tourism development: discerning the impact of responsible tourism on community well-being. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 5(5), 987-1001.
- Mathew, P. V., Sreejesh, S. (2017). Impact of responsible tourism on destination sustainability and quality of life of community in tourism destinations. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism management*, 31, 83-89.
- Mihalic, T. (2016). Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse-Towards 'responsustainable' tourism. *Journal of cleaner production*, 111, 461-470.
- Musavengane, R. (2019). Small hotels and responsible tourism practice: Hoteliers' perspectives. *Journal of cleaner production*, 220, 786-799.
- Saarinen, J. (2019). Communities and sustainable tourism development: Community impacts and local benefit creation in tourism. In *A research agenda for sustainable tourism* (pp. 206-222). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Saarinen, J. (2021). Is being responsible sustainable in tourism? Connections and critical differences. *Sustainability*, 13(12), 6599.
- Sajib, S. S. A., et al. (2022). Problematizing tourism for conservation: An eco-cultural critique on sustainability. *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 12, 11094.
- Sharpley, R. (2012). Responsible Tourism: whose responsibility? In *The Routledge handbook of tourism and the environment* (pp. 382-391). Routledge.
- Stoddard, J. E., et al. (2012). The triple bottom line: A framework for sustainable tourism development. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 13(3), 233-258.

- Subba, B. L. Limboo Indigenous Knowledge of Traditional Healing: A survey. *Understanding of Historic Geographic Approaches*, 1.
- Tehseen, S., et al. (2024). Sustainable Tourism in a Changing Climate: Balancing Growth and Environmental Responsibility. In *The Need for Sustainable Tourism in an Era of Global Climate Change: Pathway to a Greener Future* (pp. 69-94). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Tiwari, S., et al. (2024). Aspects of community participation in eco-tourism: a systematic review. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Advancements*, 2(1), 71-79.
- Waligo, V. M., et al. (2013). Implementing sustainable tourism: A multi-stakeholder involvement management framework. *Tourism management*, 36, 342-353.