Visitor Preferences of Landscape Components in Kashmir Region, India

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Abstract

This paper explores visitors' perceptions of landscape preferences in Kashmir, India. Using purposive sampling, data were gathered from 500 respondents through a self-administered questionnaire consisting mainly of closed-ended questions. Among them, 120 (24%) were foreign tourists, 251 (50.2%) domestic visitors, and 129 (25.8%) local excursionists. Vegetation ranked highest in visitor preference (score: 7.30), followed by heritage (6.93), landform (6.45), water (6.23), and builtform (2.42). Except for built form, significant differences were observed among visitor groups based on their origin. Additionally, statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) were found between male and female preferences for primary landscape components, except for built form ($p>0.05$). These findings highlight how landscape preferences vary by visitor demographics, emphasising the need for landscape development plans that accommodate such differences. This is crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability of fragile tourism destinations like Kashmir.

Keywords: landscape, tourism, landscape components, visitor perceptions, visitor preferences

1. Introduction

The term landscape has several connotations, but from the tourism point of view, landscape includes the visual/scenic beauty of natural and cultural aspects of a region. It is a composite of physical and natural components, viz., topography, water bodies, vegetation, etc., in various combinations; supplemented by the culture and heritage that gives a homogenous visual character to an area. (Purushothaman, 2012). The Dictionary of Human Geography defines landscape as "the appearance of an area".

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Physical geographers consider landscape as synonymous with landform or topography. (Naveh & Lieberman, 1984).

> Landscape is the "polysemic term referring to the appearance of an area, the assemblage of objects used to produce that appearance, and the area itself…By the early seventeenth century, however, under the influence of the Dutch landschap painters, the term landscape came to refer to the appearance of an area, more particularly to the representation of scenery" (Gregory et al., 2011).

Natural resources are the "stocks of materials that exist in the natural environment, that are both scarce and economically useful in production or consumption, either in their raw state or after minimal processing" (World Trade Organisation, 2010). A more encompassing definition of resource considers it as "means of attaining given ends" with ends ranging from individual satisfaction to social well-being (Zimmermann, 1933). Water, land, timber and minerals are the more basic resources. Apart from these, intangible aspects like good health, knowledge, freedom, social harmony and so on also fall in the category of resources. So, resources include tangible as well as intangible commodities which have a function beneficial to man and satisfy his wants. But, as Zimmermann (1993) has aptly said, "resources are not what they become", so in the process of becoming, they are neither fixed nor finite (De Gregori, 1987). And it is the knowledge that gives birth to resources. For example, coal, petroleum and iron ore were available there since man evolved, but for the prehistoric man, these things were neutral stuff as they were of no use to him.

1.1. Scenic landscapes as economic resources

Landscapes in their natural setting started to be viewed as resources only recently. The more natural a landscape, the more preferred it is for visual perception. (SIMONIČ, 2003). With the advancements in civilisation, travelling became an important aspect of the elite class, and with further improvements in transportation and an increase in economic well-being, travelling for recreation became fashionable and indispensable for a healthy life. The scenery itself became a "potential asset to the land" (Linton, 1968) and tourism, which thrives practically on the scenic landscape resources, became one of the biggest and fastest-growing industries in the world (Sofronov, 2018). With the spread of urbanisation, the need for recreation increased as the so-called "virgin" lands became scarce. Since a high-quality landscape, which mostly refers to the scenery (Gregory et al., 2011), doesn't occur everywhere (Price, 2017) Attractive landscapes started to gain importance for both cultural and economic development. (Hudson, 1986). With urban areas mostly associated with congestion, the rural landscapes and attractive, serene areas got the attention of urban dwellers and their

holidays provided economic benefits to the rural people. (Bhattarai, 2005; Domon, 2011). Hence, rural and natural landscapes have long been used as a 'territory for visitors and tourists to gaze at (Domon, 2011).

Tourism, which primarily thrives on scenic beauty, is the largest industry in the world, employing more people than any other industry. In 2019, travel and tourism contributed 10.4% to the global GDP, amounting to US$10.3 trillion and accounted for 10.5% of all jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), 2024). Landscape scenery is utilised as an economic resource, especially in those regions where geographical conditions are not conducive to other economic activities. For example, in Nepal, beautiful natural scenery has provided a viable economic activity in remote areas (Bhattarai, 2005). This resource doesn't need fossil fuels for extraction or industrial infrastructure for processing, but yes, it needs proper management and care to sustain.

1.2. Landscape perception & tourism management

The demand for tourism experience in high-quality natural settings is growing, which has created a need to recognise landscape aesthetics as a tourism resource (Williams et al., 1996). The landscape is not only the tangible physical or cultural entity, but the perception and experience of the visitor. It is a qualitative intangible resource (Williams et al., 1996; Zube et al., 1975). The visual experience of the landscapes is comparable to any other commodities or services consumed by the end user and can be equated to a resource, a visual resource (Price, 2017). The addition of 'intrusive elements' into the landscape, which ultimately degrade the 'scenic quality', has prompted the planners to undertake scenic evaluation (Crofts, 1975). Landscape and visual assessment is considered an essential environmental management tool and has been in use since the 1970s (Landscape Institute & I.E.M.A., 2013). Knowing the perception of the consumers of the landscape and their visual experiences is important because of increasing pressure for change in the landscape, and equally growing need to protect the landscapes with high scenic qualities, which are diminishing (Scott & Bullen, 2004). It must be noted that landscape preference studies are an integral part of land use decisions and tourism planning, and as a means to understand the value of the landscape perceived by the 'landscape users' or tourists. Landscape setting is a major and fundamental base for tourism development (Purushothaman, 2012). For better management of landscape resources, therefore, it is pertinent to understand the behaviour, perception and preferences of visitors towards the landscape they travel for enjoyment. In fact, the landscape preference value can be a good precedent to tourism planning (Craik, 1975). Evaluation of the quality of the landscape is necessary to preserve it (Zube, 1992), and, thus, land use like national parks and recreation may serve the purpose of saving the scenic beauty and making it available for the observers who bring economic benefits to the local hosts (Acar et al., 2006; Burden et al., 2002).

1.3. Landscape as a natural resource of Kashmir

The Kashmir region is deficient in natural resources (Ahmad & Hussain, 2011) but its landscape scenic resources are of very high quality. Although perception of the scenic beauty varies among 'recreationist groups' (Sanderson et al., 2012) but the Kashmir valley has almost everything to offer to scenery appreciators and nature lovers. It has abundant clean water streams, numerous freshwater lakes of vast expanse, majestic mountains with snow-capped peaks, eternal glaciers, extensive lush green meadows, a great variety of flowers and fruits, a perfect combination of valleys, hills and plains and the invigorating climate (Mir, 2014). Moreover, the region has enough supplementary tourism products, like a rich cultural heritage, religious tourism resources (Chaudhary & Ul Islam, 2020), architectural distinctiveness, a unique handicrafts industry and a hospitable population. Moreover, Kashmir's landscape has the advantage of falling in the category of 'landscape ephemera' (Mir, 2014), changing its appearance with the change in seasons, thereby multiplying the scenic diversity. The ephemeral components of the landscape have a major influence on the perception of observers. (Brassley, 1998).

Kashmir is famously considered a 'paradise on earth' owing to its high-quality landscape (Malik & Bhat, 2015). The combination of water, vegetation, mountains and the superimposed built-form and heritage has been viewed and used as an important resource for economic development of the region for a long time in history (Jain et al., 2022). Tourism, which is largely dependent on landscape, is one of the major sectors of the economy in this otherwise resourceless region (Wani, 2022; Iqbal, 2021; Singh, 2016). For the sustainability of landscape economy, it is imperative to protect and preserve the visual environment on which the visitors gaze and pay for their experiences (Price, 2017). Although the region is bestowed by nature with very high-quality landscape, it is ultimately the subjectivity of the users to determine which landscape components provide them with maximum satisfaction (Tukamushaba et.al. 2016). It is also very important to look at the tourism products through the lens of the visitors. Owing to the interrelationship between the landscape quality and people (Zube et al., 1982), the landscape preference of diverse groups needs to be evaluated (Purcell, 1992) before any new developments or modifications are made to the landscape. Evaluating the value of landscape is difficult, but there are methods suggested by many researchers (Acar et al., 2006). These methods include photographic questionnaires (Zoderer et al., 2019) as well as survey research techniques (Brown, 2006).

1.4. Aims of the study

From the section above, it can be established that landscape is an important natural resource for the Kashmir region of India. For a period of more than

two decades, since the late 1990s, the landscape resources of this area have not been utilised for tourism purposes due to the political turmoil. But with normalcy coming back to the region and tourists thronging to the area in millions (about 12 million in 2022), there is going to be high pressure for the conversion of landscapes into hotels, parks, and other infrastructure (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). The scenic resources that people pay to enjoy while in Kashmir may be degraded or lost, which can lead to a decline in tourism and associated economic problems. Knowing the preferences and perceptions of people towards landscape components will help in better management of the landscape resources and can lead to a sustainable development of tourism in the Kashmir Valley. This paper, therefore, attempts to answer two important questions: (1) What are the landscape preferences of visitors to the Kashmir region? (2) Do different types of visitors perceive these landscapes differently? (3) Is gender a factor in landscape preferences? Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to bring out the perception of visitors about the quality of the landscape of the Kashmir region. Moreover, an attempt is made to understand the differences in perception of various landscape components based on the gender and origin of visitors.

2. Methodology

Primary and secondary components of the landscape of the Kashmir region were identified keeping in view the global classification of landscapes. A literature survey was conducted to establish that landscape components are important resources of Kashmir and visitor perception, and preferences are good indicators for the management of these scenic resources. To bring out the landscape preferences of visitors, a sample survey was conducted. The sample design included visitors to the Kashmir region, both foreign and domestic, as well as the local excursionists. Owing to the high mobility of tourists, it is difficult to draw the sampling frame and apply random sampling, so the samples were selected using a purposive method of sampling in which it was ensured that foreign, domestic, and local visitors were part of the sample. Data was collected from a total of 500 respondents through a self-administered questionnaire consisting mainly of closed-ended questions. Subjective assessment of landscape quality has been attempted through quantitative analysis of data collected from the respondents. The preference Technique of evaluation of the quality of scenery is employed, where visitors are asked to give likeness/preference scores to different landscape components. Perception of landscape quality is also established using Likert scale analysis.

A detailed survey of landscape preferences for 5 primary landscape components (vegetation, landform, water, builtform and heritage) and 17 secondary landscape components was conducted. Also, preferences were collected for a combination of landscape components (Table 1). Data was

collected using a 9-point Likert scale, where 1 represented 'least preferred', and 9 indicated 'most preferred'. Data was cleaned, and analysis was done in MS Excel. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to test whether the visual preferences of three respondent groups (foreign, domestic and local visitors) were significant. To understand the variances due to gender, a *t*-test was performed. Results are then presented in tabular form, which is followed by discussion and conclusions.

2.1. Results

Out of a total of 500 respondents who participated in this study, 24 per cent are foreign tourists, 50.2 per cent are domestic visitors, and 25.8 per cent are local excursionists. The majority of the respondents (71 per cent) were male, and the remaining 29 per cent were female (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender and place of origin attributes of respondents

Gender	Place of Origin			Total (500)
	Foreign Tourists (n1=120)	Domestic Tourists (n2=251)	Local Visitors (n3=129)	
Male	59	164	129	305
Female	61	87	47	195

The preferences of visitors for primary and secondary landscape components available within the Kashmir region are given in Table 2. Among the primary components, visitors' preference for vegetation has the highest rank (score, 7.30), followed by landform (score, 6.45), heritage (score, 6.93), water (score, 6.23), and builtform (score, 2.42). Among the secondary landscape components, within the vegetation category, 'forests' are most preferred, followed by 'meadows' and 'agricultural tracts'. Mountainous and hilly areas are highly preferred when compared to plain lands. Lakes and springs, because of their unique nature, are more preferred than rivers and wetlands. Built form in Kashmir has got a very low score, while historical monuments are more preferred than the religious and cultural components.

Table 2: Preferences for primary and secondary landscape components

Primary Landscape Components	Secondary Landscape Components	Average Score (Out of 9)	Order of Preference
Vegetation (Overall Score = 7.30)	Forests	8.20	I
	Meadows	7.93	
	Agricultural Lands	5.79	
Landform (Overall Score = 6.45)	Mountains	7.69	II
	Hills & Valleys	7.52	
	Plateaus	5.49	
	Flat Plain	5.10	

Water (Overall Score = 6.23)	Lakes	7.73	III
	Springs	6.86	
	Rivers	6.36	
	Glacial Lakes	6.12	
	Marshes/Wetlands	4.09	
Heritage (Overall Score = 6.93)	Historical	7.12	IV
	Religious	6.88	
	Cultural	6.80	
Builtform (Overall Score = 2.42)	Rural	2.73	V
	Urban	2.10	

When preference scores of different tourist types are compared (Table 3), variations are found. Foreign tourists generally give a higher preference for the heritage component (M = 8.12; S.D. = 0.19), followed by vegetation (M = 6.89; S.D. = 0.32), landform (M = 6.72; S.D. = 0.53) and water (M = 5.77; S.D. = 0.99). For domestic tourists, it is the vegetation which has the highest score (M = 7.88; S.D. = 0.78), followed by water (M = 6.96; S.D. = 0.37). However, one thing common between the two is their least preference for the built form, for which foreign visitors' overall mean score is 3.82 only and for domestic visitors it is 4.81. Local excursionists have shown the highest preference for vegetation (M = 7.13; S.D. = 0.57) and landform (M = 7.02; S.D. = 1.03), and the lowest preference is for builtform (M = 4.15; S.D. = 1.32). Water component (M = 5.91; S.D. = 1.08) and heritage component (M = 5.44; S.D. = 1.76) have almost the same preference.

Table 3: Preference for primary landscape components according to the type of visitor

Visitors (N=500)	Stats	Primary Landscape Components					p
		Vegetation	Water	Landform	Builtform	Heritage	
Foreign Tourists	Mean	6.89	5.77	5.61	3.82	8.12	
	SD	0.32	0.99	0.53	2.73	0.19	0.043
Domestic Tourists	Mean	7.88	7.01	6.72	4.81	7.23	
	SD	0.78	0.37	0.98	1.13	1.16	0.033
Local Visitors	Mean	7.13	5.91	7.02	4.15	5.44	
	SD	0.57	1.08	1.03	1.32	1.76	0.001
Rating scale: 1 = least preferred; 9 = most preferred							

Preferences of foreign tourists, domestic tourists and local visitors were compared to find out if there are any differences in their preferences for primary landscape components. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used

to test whether these three groups had identical or different landscape preferences (Table 4). The table reveals that, except for built form, significant differences exist between the preferences of visitor groups based on their place of origin.

Table 4: *ANOVA table showing variance in the landscape preference of visitors according to their place of origin*

Primary Components	Sources of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F value (Calculated)
Vegetation	Between groups	102.445	2	51.222	64.188*
	Within groups	396.555	497	.798	
	Total	499.000	499		
Water	Between groups	99.025	2	49.512	61.505**
	Within groups	399.975	497	.805	
	Total	499.000	499		
Landform	Between groups	172.373	2	86.186	131.181*
	Within groups	326.627	497	.657	
	Total	499.000	499		
Builtform	Between groups	189.002	2	5.393	5.491
	Within groups	309.998	497	.982	
	Total	499.000	499		
Heritage	Between groups	10.786	2	94.501	151.444**
	Within groups	488.214	497	.624	
	Total	499.000	499		

* = p<.01; ** = p<.05

To know if the gender of visitors affects the preferences of landscape components, a student's *t*-test was conducted. The results are given in Table 5. Statistically significant (p<0.05) differences were found in male and female preferences for primary landscape components of the Kashmir valley, except for built form (p>0.05). Males have shown a higher preference than females for vegetation, landform and heritage, whereas females have given a higher preference score to the water component.

Table 5: t-test results comparing landscape preferences of male and female visitors

	Male (n=305)	Female (n=195)			
	Mean	Mean	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Vegetation	7.62	6.98	498	2.11	0.045*
Water	5.41	6.99	498	2.57	0.036*
Landform	7.35	5.45	498	2.32	0.043*
Builtform	2.12	2.68	498	1.89	0.635
Heritage	7.89	5.91	498	2.88	0.011*

* p < 0.05

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Landscape consists of physical, cultural, visual and perceptual components. Physical components are categorised into universal or primary components and local or secondary components. Primary components include vegetation, water, landform and builtform. Although perceptual components, viz., civic and space-related, are also used in most of the studies, here the analysis has been restricted to the four primary physical components and one cultural component. The mere presence or absence of these four primary components and their combination determine the quality of the landscape. The primary components are further divided into secondary and tertiary components, which are more determined by the local character of the landscape and are, hence, site-specific. For example, water is the primary physical component available almost everywhere, but the same water components can be in the form of rivers, streams, canals, lakes, ponds, wetlands, backwaters, sea or oceans.

Since a landscape is the amalgamation of different components (both physical and cultural), the combination of these components makes a particular landscape unique. These landscape elements have been divided into primary and secondary subdivisions. Kashmir's landscape is a combination of four primary physical components, viz., vegetation, landform, water and builtform. Subdivisions of these primary components determine the diversity in a particular destination. The landscape and the associated scenery of the Kashmir region are splendid and peculiar in nature and quality, respectively. Moreover, it is the only natural resource abundant in the otherwise resourceless (in terms of minerals) region. One important characteristic of this intangible resource is the association with native fragile ecosystems. If such a landscape is put to industrial use and if 'chimneys' are given a green signal in the region, the delicate ecological relationships will be easily disturbed, rendering this biologically rich area misbalanced. Instead, if this magical combination of physical and cultural landscape components is put to the use it deserves, i.e. recreation, it will bring economic development without changing the basic structure and character of the landscape. Landscape assessment, in terms of visitor preferences, perceptions and likeness, shows that human intervention with the natural landscape is downgrading its quality for which Kashmir is famous. Noticing the increasing importance of the landscapes, many countries have put forth laws and plans to preserve them. For example, the designation of 38 regions as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in England under the 1949 National Parks Act had the primary aim of preserving and enhancing the beauty of these areas for recreational purposes. The Kashmir region needs a similar plan under which the areas having extraordinarily beautiful landscapes are protected as per legislation and managed in such a manner that their natural beauty is enhanced. The assessment of preferences for the

studied views in various landscape units can be evaluated and used for land-use decisions and future planning in the Kashmir Valley.

Foreign visitors show more preference for the heritage components because most of the foreign travellers are from Europe, where the physical landscape is more or less identical to Kashmir. Domestic tourists prefer vegetation, especially forests, more because such vegetation types are not available in mainland India, which is the main market for the region. The least preference of local tourists for the heritage component reflects the lack of knowledge, and hence the appreciation, of the historical and cultural heritage of their own region.

Tourist movement in the Kashmir region depends on the recreational opportunities provided. Different tourists have different demands, depending upon their attitude, socio-economic status, age, etc. Some may demand solace and calm and loneliness, others may like popular destinations. Some may prefer to stay in comfortable hotels, while others love adventure and may prefer to spend their nights in tents and camps. Some like to travel alone while others move in groups. Younger people may want to go for trekking, hiking and mountaineering, while older tourists would not. The preferences may range from liking of natural, wild, inaccessible places like forests, to the art appreciating and urban-loving.

It can be concluded that landscapes are natural resources which are important for both cultural and economic development. In their relatively undisturbed state, these are utilised mainly for recreational purposes. Consumers of this intangible resource, the tourists, come mainly from the areas where the natural landscape has been turned into built-up urban spaces. The main motive of a recreational traveller is to experience diverse landscapes. Conscious human intervention may improve the quality and value of the landscape by building cultural and heritage monuments. However, irrational human intervention may have negative impacts on the perception and preferences of visitors. For a better management of landscape resources, it is pertinent to understand the behaviour, perception and preferences of visitors towards the landscape they travel to consume scenic resources. The preferences and likings of different landscape components differ according to the origin and gender of visitors. Landscape development plans must be made keeping such differences in consideration. Having diverse landscapes provides diverse recreational opportunities to visitors, thereby enhancing their satisfaction needs. This is an important requirement for the long-term sustainability of fragile tourism destinations like Kashmir.

2. Limitations and Future Directions

Future research needs to be done to determine the economic value of the landscape in its natural form. In India, the value of Kashmir's landscape in

terms of social and cultural value is immense, and researches need to be done in those areas as well. Apart from these, Kashmir's landscape has a huge value for national integration and political stability. With the tourist rush to Kashmir, there is certainly going to be the conversion of natural landscapes into built-up areas in the form of roads, buildings and other commercial purposes. Such research is important for planners to look at before they implement any such plans, which include the conversion of landscapes into built-up areas. Visitor perception of different combinations of landscape components must be taken into consideration and should form an integral part of any planning in areas of scenic landscape like the Kashmir valley.

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