

## Public Participation and Ecotourism: The role and the right of people in Sikkim

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on studying the role and rights of Sikkim citizens in engaging in ecotourism management through qualitative research. The research uses public participation theory as a method for the analysis of policy and organizational structure related to ecotourism. The role and right of the people to participate in ecotourism management has been growing and expanding ever since the adoption of the Sikkim Ecotourism Policy in 2013 and through the Sikkim Ecotourism council, Ecotourism Directorate, and ecotourism management at the community level.

### Introduction

India, although a millenary civilization, is technically one of the youngest countries in the world. The present national boundaries and territories are a consequence of the legacy of the British colonies as transformed through independence on August 15, 1947. The influence of British colonial rule focused on "divide and rule" through the support of religious and caste regimes as well as the granting of rights to the princely states with secondary ruling kings (Duff, 2015, pp. 15-17). After independence, India has faced the problem of national unity out of a great diversity in political forms, religion, language, culture, etc. Therefore, the fundamental idea in creating an Indian national identity and establishing a modern state is based on a federalism that seeks to promote the diversity of languages and cultures; this is the underlying rationale of the Republic of India.



Currently, the Republic of India consists of 29 state governments and 7 Union territories. One of the major states that joined the Republic of India (nearly 30 years after independence) was Sikkim. Sikkim was the 22nd state to access to the Indian Union, in 1975, after approval by referendum (Bhutia, 2017, pp. 97-98). In the past, Sikkim was a British colonial protectorate, ruled by a local king. Chogyal is a term used by the Sikkim people to refer to the king. The said king is also referred to as Dharma King, Dharma being a Buddhist term meaning merit or goodness (Coelho, 1971, pp. 12-15).

The integration of Sikkim into India has played an important role in the development of the local economy. Sikkim is a landlocked, small state, located in the Himalayas, with an area of 7,096 square kilometres. The northern and eastern borders are shared with China; Bhutan is a neighbour to the east, Nepal to west; the southern borders are common to the Indian state of West Bengal. Sikkim's accession to the Indian Republic facilitated the expedition of its goods and services to other parts of India, as well as the export of goods to other countries by sea through Kolkata.

Sikkim remained highly dependent on agriculture. Geographic constraints hindered the development of its transport system and other infrastructures; the industrial development has been particularly problematic. (Sinha, 1975, pp. 64-66).

Sikkim economic development is thus below the national average. It is moreover a relatively small state with around 600,000 people (Chaube, 1985, pp. 118-121). All these circumstances led the administration of Sikkim to seek new ways of developing the state's economy. Although geography proper has set limits on local development, the state does possess a significant environmental treasure.

The excellence of the local environment, its location along the Himalayas, its high biodiversity and abundance of woodlands (more than 47% of the area; Government of Sikkim, 2017, p. 11) became therefore a major focus of the state's economic development strategy. The Khangchendzonga National Park in the state has been registered by UNESCO World Heritage Sites and is considered to be the only Mixed Heritage of India (Maharana, Rai and Sharma, 2000).

The government developed an ecotourism system on the basis of these environmental resources. (Sarkar and Lama 1986, pp. 13-16). The state has issued a number of policies and investments ultimately aimed at turning Sikkim into one of the major ecotourism destinations in India and the

world. Following the government's policy of promoting tourism workers increasingly moved from the agricultural into the service sector.

These phenomena lay the background for this study. The paper aims to analyse citizen interaction with and involvement with the Sikkim government as it designs development policies related to ecotourism. The main theoretical body followed is the theory of public participation. We use qualitative research methodology as an important resource in the quest for information. Real-time observation is another method used. Primary resources used in the study include policy-related and regulatory documents issued by the Sikkim government on ecotourism. Secondary documents used by the researcher include books, textbooks, academic articles, newsletters, and electronic documents related to the subject of citizen rights and public participation theory. To collect the primary resource, it included the fieldwork in Gangtok and Pelling on December 8-15, 2016.

### **Ecotourism and public participation: The alternative economic sector**

Environmental concerns have gained a lot of attention from the international community since the last quarter of the 20th century; the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, in 1972, was one of the first symbols of this trend. The World Commission on Environment and Development, report, 1987, presented sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present while not negatively affecting future generations. The sustainable development concept had a significant impact on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference was key in shifting the international focus from simple economic growth into environmental human development.

Sustainable development and its related notions (such as green economy and renewable energy) impacted also the tourist industry in many countries, changing it from a pure revenue producing activity to an activity limited and or aiming at preserving the environment (ecotourism and sustainable tourism, (Fennell, 2015, pp. 63-64). Ecotourism approach centres on nature-oriented tourism, both motivated by natural riches and bound by the objective of minimum environmental impact, while providing a positive economic effect on the indigenous community through the development of related services such as guided tours, accommodation and other facilities.

Ecotourism is an important consequence both of the growing popularity of environmentalism and the emerging trend for a more selective tourist experience (Reid, 2003). Ecotourism shares some

characteristics with nature-based tourism, yet they are different since nature-based tourism does not imply a necessity to preserve or restore nature. For example, nature-based tourism focused on hunting and fishing is essentially detrimental to the local environment (Fennell, 2015, pp. 19-21). By contrast, the protection of natural resources and the environment are fundamental characteristics of ecotourism. As noted above, Sikkim is an area that is very suitable for this activity (Government of Sikkim, 2015, pp. 40-42). Currently, the growth of tourism in Sikkim has been increasing steadily: the number of domestic and foreign tourists increased from 15,434 in 1980 to 813,355 in 2016. The calculation of the impact of tourism on Sikkim's economy is unclear as precise quantitative economic data is lacking. However, it is estimated that in 2015-2016 tourism has generated around \$ 21201 million in state income (Government of Sikkim, 2017, p. 14).

Ecotourism is not only inherently protective of the environment; it is also directly linked to the economic welfare of the people. Public participation can be understood as a political or policy process that focuses on encouraging people to take part in the political process. It may reflect ideals of direct democracy leading roles for citizens in public administration. Increasing the role of the public through participation in policy formulation and design is also a way to increase transparency and oversight of the public sector oversight, which helps to fight corruption and increase accountability.

Ecotourism requires the involvement of people in designing and driving policies, including those relating to environmental issues. The key reason why ecotourism requires the participation of citizens is that the environment is one of the most important public goods that people can directly grasp and exploit (Chhetri, 2013, pp. 1478-1480). Past failures of management, efficacy and community consensus regarding ecotourism-related policies have led to new approaches in citizen involvement.

### **The development of ecotourism: Policy and organisation**

India is a Federal Republic and one of the most decentralised countries in the world. Sikkim is one of the most empowered states in terms of constitutionally enshrined state rights. However, the Sikkim government still needs to share taxes and follow policies and laws under the Indian Constitution, as must all federated states. Policy formulation and economic management are important obligations of the state, although sometimes the central government may advise or press the local government to pursue an economic policy in line with the federal powers. In India, the

central government interferes with state government work through its civil service. Natural resource and environment management are one of the key competences shared between the central and state governments (Chaudhary and Lama, 2014, pp. 241-243). Although state governments have the power to plan economic management, such as the use and conservation of natural resources, the central government has the constitutional prerogative to interfere with these activities at any time. This leads to conflicts between the central and state governments.

Sikkim was officially opened for tourism in the mid-1970s. The early growth in tourism was domestically driven. Foreigner's access to the state was affected by official regulations. Moreover, some areas of Sikkim are disputed between India and China (Joshi and Dhyani, 2009, pp. 34-36). These factors affected the early stages of tourism in Sikkim.

However, Sikkim's tourism has grown rapidly afterwards, especially in 2002-2010, making tourism the major economic and political driver. This in turn has led to a new policy for Sikkim's tourism based on the concept of sustainable development. Sikkim hosted the South Asian Regional Conference on Ecotourism and defined a new ecotourism policy designed to face the early 21st century.

The growth of both domestic and international tourism, combined with a growing global interest in ecotourism, led to the adoption in 2012 of a new policy under the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project. Its vision is to offer an ecotourism experience that combines great memories and high-quality learning experiences to customers with the reduction of poverty among the local citizenry and the preservation of the environment (Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project, 2012, p. 4). This policy places citizen participation as a key goal of ecotourism development. For example, it promotes accessibility to natural beauties by the local youth in order to foster pride in the values of nature and local culture.

The state aims to promote ecotourism based on standards, principles, and development guidelines in line with international standards in the field. At the same time, Sikkim's ecotourism policy has identified several ways of empowering local communities (Dafflon, 2011, pp. 107-109), namely, by providing increased income. In addition, the government aims to foster cooperation among stakeholders such as local communities, NGOs, government organizations and tour operators in planning, policy implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and networking related to ecotourism.

The Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation and the Department of Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management are key players framing and driving ecotourism policy into action.

The state's Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation is responsible for the promotion of tourism. The organization is moreover responsible for publications and media relations related to the promotion and support of tourism within Sikkim so that both Indian and foreign tourists can gain insights into the endeavour. One of the organization's major missions is to promote and support the growth of community-based tourism to create jobs and opportunities for new income opportunities in rural areas (Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim, 2014, pp. 5-20). Overall, the role of the Tourism and Civil Aviation Department is to serve as a planning and policy framework for tourism. (Tambe, Arrawatia and Ganeriwala, 2012).

The Forests, Environment & Wildlife Management Department is another important organization that is involved in ecotourism. It has for mission the planning, supporting, and coordination of central government's policies, on natural resources and environment in the region. Overall, the organization's primary function is to protect and safeguard natural resources and the environment in domains such as biodiversity, wildlife and forest, and the reduction of pollution in the area.

The Sikkim Ecotourism Policy was developed by the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP), a collaboration between the Sikkim government led by the Forests, Environment & Wildlife Management Department and Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Institutionally, it translated into the Sikkim Ecotourism Council and the Ecotourism Directorate. The council acts independently, whereas the Ecotourism Directorate works under the Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department. At the same time, the council will operate at the local level fostering partnerships with community organizations. Overall, the Sikkim Ecotourism Council will act as a policymaker and will guide ecotourism, while the Ecotourism Directorate will bring this policy into practice.

### **Public participation and ecotourism: The role and the right of people in Sikkim**

Public policy design and management are undertaken by a few individuals or groups. Most of those who design and manage public policies are politicians and government officials who decide on a policy that will help solve some problems at the local level. This top-down approach means that

policymakers often design a policy and apply it at the local level without the necessary education or respect for community-based decision (Das, 2011). This kind of decision-making and policy implementation also diminish the value of democratic roles and civil rights. Here, we analyse the role of Sikkim citizens in the design and decision-making of ecotourism policies.

The ecotourism management of Sikkim reflects the government's willingness to involve stakeholders in the issuance and implementation of policies. The community has become a key driver of ecotourism (Rai and Sundriyal, 1997).

The Sikkim Ecotourism council will work at the village and community level by building a network with local representatives, community-based organizations (CBO), the Tourism Board, and NGOs (Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project, 2012, p. 8). The council is expected to reflect the political space that embraces government, civil society, civic sector, tourism professionals, and ecologists. The Sikkim Ecotourism Council, therefore, marks a significant milestone in the government's open cooperation with the people on ecotourism. The reason for this is that the Sikkim Ecotourism Council has a lot of authority over ecotourism. As a whole, this council has the authority to issue regulations and directives that directly address ecotourism that government agencies are required to follow. The council is also responsible for monitoring and evaluating the impact of ecotourism activities on the environment. It is moreover tasked with approving ecotourism action plans and designing standards for the regulation of ecotourism activities in Sikkim. Although the Council has a major role in policymaking rather than policy implementation, public or other actors can play a role in shaping policies that affect themselves. These have resulted in the elimination of the paradigm of top-down government administration through by increasing the role of stakeholders.

At the formal organizational level of government, which is involved in ecotourism, the public sector and other sectors are key to the development of ecotourism through policy formulation, monitoring, evaluation, and policy implementation (Figure 1).

Although the Sikkim government has set the initial guidelines for public use as a guiding principle for economic activities related to ecotourism, this study found that local communities had the power to seek direct benefits from ecotourism that did not affect natural resources and the environment, such as the design of hiking trails in the area, the construction of homestays for tourists, etc. The



local community is the primary agency responsible for implementing ecotourism policy. At the same time, the local community is also important in defining policy trends. The expansion of ecotourism in Sikkim is community-based, giving citizens the right and role to play in driving and designing policies, reflecting the value and culture of strong democracies. In the same way, increasing the role of public participation also reflects the understanding of the problems and constraints of the government in implementing policies such as budget, personnel, and knowledge.

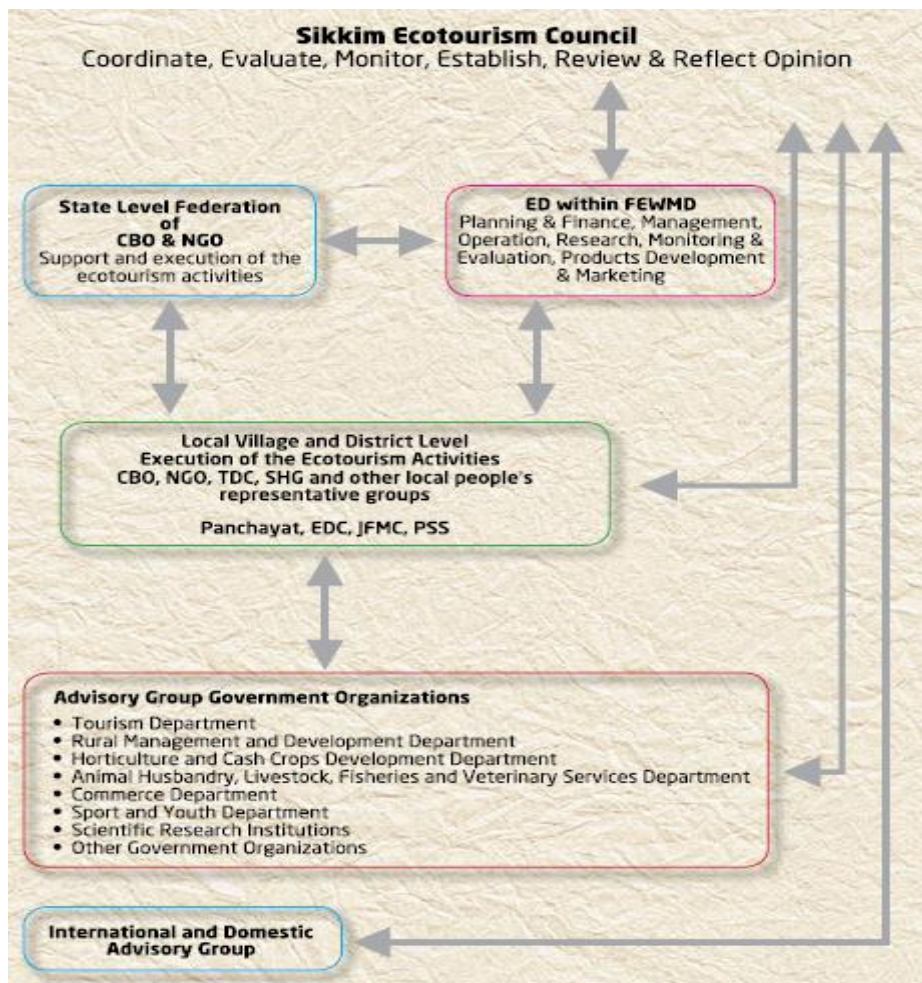


Figure 1 the organisation structure of Sikkim Ecotourism policy  
Source: Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project

## Conclusion

In our time, public administration moved from traditional administration to so-called governance administration. The improvement of traditional administration is taking place all over the world,



namely by empowering the civil society. Public participation is based on the perception that local problem-solving is often the most efficient method. The advent of the concept of public participation leads to the democratically-oriented policy where all citizens have a say through management participation.

In this article, the researcher selects the issue of ecotourism in Sikkim, India, to study the role and rights of citizens in the management of ecotourism, using the concept of public participation as an analysis instrument. The ecotourism of Sikkim is one of the most important sources of income. Since 2002, this led the Sikkim government to develop policies and infrastructures enabling ecotourism to spread across the state. The government decided to cooperate with the Japan International Cooperation Agency to design ecotourism policy. This decision led to the adoption of the Sikkim Ecotourism Policy in 2013, which is a key policy change and tool in managing ecotourism. In the past, tourism management, including ecotourism, was under the management of the Tourism and Civil Aviation Department. It has the characteristics that the government has the power to lead, and the government is the centre of regulation or policy related to tourism. This often led to policies or regulations damaging the operational level and not reflecting the needs of the people or stakeholders in ecotourism.

Sikkim Ecotourism Policy is an important tool that changes the paradigm of government in ecotourism management. This policy promotes the establishment of independent organizations such as the Sikkim Ecotourism Council, which has its own power, not directly related to government agencies. The Sikkim Ecotourism Council is a stakeholder engagement organization, such as the Chief Minister, the Head of Government, the President of the Chamber, the President of the Hotel Business, the People's Representative, etc. In this regard, the important function of the Sikkim Ecotourism Council is to define and plan ecotourism policies. The Sikkim Ecotourism Council is the first official organisation in Sikkim to give citizens the opportunity to participate in corporate governance that directly impacts on themselves. The council is comprised of a subcommittee at the community level who is responsible for gathering information for the general meeting.

The Ecotourism Directorate acts as a policy-implementation agency. It is required to operate within the framework of stakeholder engagement, for monitoring, evaluation, policy implementation, etc. At the regional level of project management, the public sector has the power to conduct ecotourism policies, such as the design of hiking trails or the utilization of natural resources for tourism. The

implementation of ecotourism activities is based on ecotourism policies and regulations issued by the Ecotourism Council. Finally, Sikkim's ecotourism has contributed to economic success while maintaining a balanced natural environment. The community has the right to rule and design ecotourism policies. The growth of civil rights and the role of civil society through its involvement in policymaking and policy implementation has further strengthened the democratization of Sikkim and India.

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