

An Evaluation Of The Tour Operators' Role In Sustainable Tourism: Evidence From Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan



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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of tour operators in promoting sustainable tourism within the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. In light of growing environmental, socio-cultural, and economic challenges, the research explores the potential of tour operators as key actors in advancing sustainable tourism practices. The study applies the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) framework to assess the awareness, implementation, and effectiveness of sustainability measures among tour operators in the region. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, alongside document analysis, to gain in-depth insights into operational practices and challenges. Findings reveal that while tour operators demonstrate moderate awareness and partial alignment with GSTC criteria, sustainability practices remain fragmented and largely guided by short-term economic interests. Key barriers identified include inadequate government support, outdated regulations, limited training opportunities, weak enforcement of policies, and low consumer demand for sustainable tourism. The study underscores the critical need for government intervention, stakeholder capacity building, and increased public awareness to foster a sustainable tourism landscape. It proposes strategic recommendations for regulatory reform, professional development, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. This research contributes to the academic discourse on sustainable tourism in developing countries and offers practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote sustainability within the tour operation sector in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Tour operators, GSTC Criteria, capacity building, tourism policy

Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the major contributors to the global economy; however concerns have been arise regarding its adverse impacts. In response to it sustainable tourism emerged as a strategic way of managing and reducing such negative impacts. It is not a form of tourism but a condition that takes into account its present and future socio economic and

environmental impacts to meet the needs of visitors, industry, environment, and local communities ('Sustainable development | UNWTO', 2015).

In Pakistan, the studies on sustainable tourism is still limited despite the detrimental impacts on tourist destinations in terms of environmental, social and economic (Fahim et al., 2023).

Sustainable tourism necessitates the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. The tourism businesses includes hotels, destination management organizations (private, governmental, and both), tour companies, restaurants, as well as communities. The sustainability becomes compromised when every business strives to expand its market share. (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006)

Among these players, Tour operators (TOs) have a pivotal position in Tourism supply chain for encouraging sustainable practices both downstream towards tourists and upstream the towards suppliers (Zhang et al.,(2009). TOs are involved in touristic experiences. The TOs are individuals who purchase tourism services and amalgamate them into tour package either sells it directly or indirectly through travel agencies to tourists. Therefore, as they influence the suppliers, tourist choices, behaviors, and overall experiences in meaningful ways, integrating sustainability principles into their services can pave the path towards sustainable tourism (Carey et al., 1997). However, the tour operating market's high competitiveness resulted in the sustainability challenges for many destinations (Lin, Yu, & Chang, 2018). According to Carey et al., tour operators are not very interested in the long term development. They merely focus on seasonal and short term gains. After reaping all the benefits from one destination they focus on another. The adverse impact of mass tourism has raised concerns about the way TOs direct tourist towards destinations. Sustainable tourism, however, depends on the long term perspectives of suppliers as well as tourists. A collaborative involvement from both sides is necessary to ensure sustainable tourism.

This research is driven by three key motivating factors. Firstly, to tackle the emerging detrimental impacts which resulted in climate change and the loss of many valuable tourism products in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) while CSR and sustainability practices remain underdeveloped in the business organization in Pakistan (Kamran, 2020). Secondly, the crucial role that tour operators play in encouraging sustainable practices. Finally, it aims to bridge

the gap in knowledge by providing guidance for sustainable practices among tour operators in the region

This study follows the following objectives.

1. To get an understanding of the tour operators in promoting sustainable tourism in KP.
2. To evaluate the practical efficacy of GSTC criteria in KP.
3. To provide strategic interventions for promoting sustainable practices in tour operation sector in KP.

Literature Review

Pakistan shows strong potential for untapped tourism growth because of its varied landscape and climate characteristics. The country maintains 1000 kilometer coastline along the Arabian Sea that presents many possibilities to develop beach tourism and other recreational facilities. Southern areas showcase vast desert regions which draw visitors through their distinctive natural features while the northern regions are well known for their charming mountainous regions and beautiful valleys and attractive hill stations. People choose adventure tourism in northern Pakistan specifically for its combination of mountain peaks rivers and glacier. (Imran, Alam, & Beaumont, 2014; Sajjad et al., 2018). Ancient archaeological sites of the Indus Valley civilization along with archaeological remains from the Kalasha culture and old Buddhist settlements can be found throughout the country. This combination of historic sites with natural scenic beauty creates excellent opportunities for tourism in Pakistan, despite of this strong tourism potential it still fails to achieve the desired growth. The major factors include lack of support from the government and periodic volatility because political instability and security challenges in the country

However, the government of Pakistan demonstrates growing interest in developing tourism while the sector has proven significant for the national economy (Sajjad, Jillani, & Raziq, 2018). The tourism sector reached USD 7.6 billion in 2016. It is predicted that the

tourism sector would generate PKR 1,432.1 billion for the national GDP by 2027 while achieving an average growth rate of 5.6% (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2018). Ullah et al. (2021) predicted the sector would rise to 7.2% of GDP by 2027 and continue to grow at an annual rate of 5.8%. This industry can make a significant contribution however the current socioeconomic challenges hinders the expected economic growth. Political uncertainties together with economic stagnation and corruption problems, public unrest and terrorism create multiple obstacles that affect both Pakistan's overall business environment and specifically its tourism and hotel industry. Nevertheless, the tourism industry demonstrates slow yet stable development despite facing multiple operational hurdles. This make it a relevant and crucial topic of investigation. Further, the research into sustainable business practices stands deficient in Pakistan particularly limited empirical studies within the tourism sector (Moses, Che-Ahmad, & Abdulmalik, 2020).

Today's corporate recognizes sustainability as the fundamental managerial approach for corporate operations. This idea requires organizations to combine their strategic planning with sustainable development principles that integrate social responsibility with environmental stewardship and economic and cultural priorities (Amini & Bienstock, 2014). Managing business sustainably means to enhance the overall performance of the company by addressing and improving its environmental, social, and economic aspects (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015). Developed economies frequently considers sustainability as foundational while numerous companies independently follow self-regulatory systems. Favorable institutional environments compel businesses to adopt sustainable practices because they include environmentally conscious markets combined with active consumer engagement and strong regulatory bodies as well as social accountability mechanisms (Graham & Woods, 2006; Utting, 2000).

On the other hand, Buckley, Doh and Benischke (2017) stated that the sustainability challenges

faced by developing countries are unique from developed nations encompassing financial, ecological, social, and governmental (Dobers & Halme, 2009). The main obstacles to sustainable adoption extend beyond resource limitations because developing countries lack an enabling framework to promote sustainable growth. Additionally Consumer demand remains minimal while public understanding remains low and legal structures lack both enforcement mechanisms and proper implementation. The institutions in developing countries tend to be unstable while government bodies lack effective monitoring capabilities and support mechanisms for sustainability practices (Utting 2000). Resource constraints and the degree and diversity of issues hinders government ability in developing nations to resolve sustainability complex issues systematically. (Raza & Jawaaid, 2013). As a result there is a dire need for business community to take a leading role in addressing these challenges by adoption of sustainable practices in their business operations.

There is lack of research in the context of Pakistan about corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability. Existing literature shows that sustainability has started gaining recognition throughout different industries in Pakistan though it remains a developing idea for the country (Sajjad & Eweje, 2014a). Most firms now recognize their limited knowledge in sustainable practice but substantial awareness remains at an initial level. Moreover, the general public lacks sufficient knowledge about the significance and long-term impact of sustainability (Ehsan & Kaleem, 2012). A substantial gap exists between stakeholder groups including customers and businesses and communities alongside their perception of corporate sustainable development activities (Hall, 2019; Sajjad & Eweje, 2014a). The need for sustainability awareness has become immediate because people need better knowledge about sustainable development within business environments and society at large.

Sustainable tourism is a central focus in the broader framework of Global Sustainable

Development Goals 2030. Hence, in recognition to its crucial role the United Nations declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (Pomeroy et al., 2011). Sustainable tourism promotes destinations by considering its economic, social, and environmental factors. Economically, it stimulates development by creating employment, support local businesses and diversification of tourism product (Buhalis, 2022). Furthermore, it support community involvement by empowering them to participate in decision-making. (Andereck et al., 2005). While socially, it supports local culture, customs, traditions and preserve cultural heritage (Weaver, 2018). Environmentally, it aims to minimizes ecological harm through waste management, energy efficiency, and conservation activities (Buckley, 2012).

Two key players in the tourism business include the consumers of products and services (tourists) and mediators responsible for making these services and products available to tourists (tour operators and others) (Sigala, 2008). This study specifically focuses on tour operators, who play a central role by offering tour packages and services. According to Holloway, (1992) they purchase different tourism components and amalgamate them into tour packages, sold directly or indirectly to tourists. Their influence to shape tourism flows and stakeholders attitudes enables them as catalysts for positive change (Sigala, 2008). While historically criticized for their role neglecting environmental and social responsibilities, TOs now recognize their role in promotion of sustainable tourism (Budeanu, 2005).

In Pakistan, despite the substantial employment contribution by the tourism sector, it suffers from a shortage of qualified workforce. This deficiency is particularly evident among frontline service providers (Maryam et al., 2020). The existing regulatory structures such as The Pakistan The Travel Agencies Act 1976, Tourist Guides Act 1976, and The Pakistan Hotels and Restaurants Act 1976, are only partially enforced, which resulted in unregulated practices, particularly within the domain of tour operation (Maryam et al., 2020). The legal

provisions do not address sustainable tourism while the Department of Tourist Services (DTS) which is responsible for regulating tour companies faces operational challenges due to outdated regulations and lack of technical expertise (Elahi & Khan, 2017). Since the 18th amendment, provincial tourism departments assume control over DTS offices, impacting coordination and standards. Although sustainable tourism requires stringent rules and certifications, key players like tour operators exhibit inconsistent commitment to these practices (Arshad et al., 2017). Overcoming these issues requires strategic interventions to enhance workforce skills and regulatory efficacy to develop sustainable tourism landscape.

Methodology

This study adopted mixed method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the role of tour operator in sustainable tourism. Quantitative method such as structured questionnaire were used to assess the tour operator compliance with sustainable practices in their operation, while qualitative methods such as semi structured interview allowed for in-depth exploration of the tour operator understanding and challenges related to sustainable tour operation. In addition to the mix method approach the study also adopted case study method to examine international good practices in sustainable tourism.

The study population comprised of domestic tour operators in KP. Their operation serves tourist from either the domestic or international tourist market visiting tourist attractions in KP, Pakistan. KP was selected as the study area because of its rich tourism resources which are exposed to unsustainable tourism activities and environmental degradation. Sampling was conducted using a simple random sampling technique for the questionnaire phase, this method guarantees that every individual within the population possesses equal chance of being selected, without the selection of one influencing the selection of another. While purposive sampling guided the selection of interview participants. To get a deeper insight, those identified with adequate experience and

knowledge in the field of tour operation was interviewed.

In order to collect data, the researcher used document analysis and internet search as, according to Bailey (2005), The analysis of documents on the topic of the research provides the contextual and policy insight. Examining official documents and scholarly articles, the researcher managed to obtain a clearer picture of the policy setting, industry practices, and academic discussion on promoting sustainable tourism in Pakistan. The primary data collected in this study includes structured questionnaire and semi structure interview schedule. Primary data refers to data that is collected specifically with the aim of solving a specific research problem, (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The structured questionnaires collected quantitative data using Likert-scale items to assess the compliance of tour operators with sustainable practices. The results of the questionnaire analysis identified certain directions which seemed to be demanded of further exploration and which then became the foundation for the semi structured interview with respondents. Therefore, the interviews determined the underlying problems, perspectives, and operational restrictions that limit tour operators to adopt sustainable practices and ultimately enhanced the depth and contextual richness of the qualitative findings.

Sadeghi & Smith (2024) reinforced the need to prioritize the idea of ethical consideration in research and emphasize the importance of the

terms that are not mere formalities like the informed consent and confidentiality but are basic in getting the research to be conducted ethically. In the process of the study, the researcher sought the consent form all of the respondents and participants retained full autonomy to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Further, the confidentiality was maintained by utilizing the data solely for academic pursuits.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) framework, evaluating the awareness, compliance, and sustainability practices among tour operators in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Organized around the four core GSTC criteria (A–D), the findings address the study’s three objectives: assessing operator awareness, evaluating the applicability of GSTC standards in KP, and identifying insights for developing a regionally grounded model for sustainable tour operations. The results offer a structured understanding of current practices, highlight gaps, and lay the foundation for the proposed model discussed in the subsequent chapter

GSTC Section A—Demonstrate Effective Sustainable Management

This criterion assesses the existence of a well-managed system that takes in sustainability issues, sets environmental aims and sustainably runs tours.

Table 1. *Tour operators performance regarding sustainable management*

Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	P Value
Familiarity with the concept of sustainable tourism	1.4272	0.52	0.03	<0.001
Awareness of sustainable practices in Tour operators	3.01	0.50	0.08	<0.001
Priotization of sustainable practices in tour operation	3.09	0.61	0.08	<0.001
customer feedback system	4.62	0.23	0.22	<0.001
Tourist demand for sustainable tourism	2.54	0.70	0.07	<0.001
provision of equal employment opportunities	3.70	0.65	0.04	<0.001
Government support for implementing sustainable practices	1.78	0.66	0.07	<0.001

Provision of tour guide trainings	3.18	0.72	0.07	<0.001
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The table 1 shows finding related to the sustainable management practices among tour operators in the study area. The respondents were fairly familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism. However the understanding remained superficial for many when asked about the terminologies like “Triple bottom line”. this Implies the need for systematic learning on sustainable tourism as suggested by Y. Guo et al., (2019). Further the interview revealed that the awareness of tour operator regarding sustainable practices in their operation was limited. These data correlate with the findings Scheyvens, (2002) and Ullah et al., (2021) that operators cannot effectively operate toward sustainability because of the absence of specific educational intervention. Further, the sustainable practices is not a core operational objective, the emphasis is placed on short term business interests. This resembles the works of Hunter & Green, (1995) who argue that long-term environmental consideration is swept aside by short-term profitability in developing countries. The study revealed that this issue is rooted in the lack of demand for sustainable tourism in the tourist market. This observation aligns with earlier studies that highlighted that limited demand for sustainable tourism as a barrier to its development (Baddeley et al., 2011;; Cavagnaro et al., 2015; Dodds & Kuehnel, 2010). This study emphasize that there is need for awareness on the both the supply and demand sides.

The provision of equal employment opportunities was observed positively. This practice is consistent with the GSTC which advocates for balancing economic growth with community well-being. However, TOs were not providing training and advancement opportunities to their tour guides. Consequently, this study underscores the urgent need for training initiatives focusing with an emphasis on product knowledge, language skills and interpretive guiding abilities. Thereby

emphasize the recommendations of Weiler & Ham, (2002), who stress the training required to enhance the competencies of tour guides in delivering high-quality services and enhancing tourist experiences.

Moreover, the findings reveal that tour operators have implemented customer feedback systems, which shows positive alignment with the GSTC criterion. Feedback is primarily collected through social media platforms, forms, or through direct contact. This input is important in meeting the customer needs effectively (Suharto et al.2019). However qualitative analysis shows that it is largely service-oriented and did not emphasize sustainability metrics. The lack of government support in implementing sustainable tourism is found a significant barrier for tour operators in adopting sustainable practices. Currently, tour operators in the region are primarily focused on obtaining the 'tour license' mandated by the Tour Companies Act 1976, and does not bound them to incorporate environmental or social responsibility. To promote sustainable tourism, government intervention is crucial. as suggested by Scheyvens, (2002) Government-led awareness campaigns can create consumer demand for sustainable tourism, thereby encourage tour operators to align their services accordingly. Additionally, government initiatives in capacity building, as highlighted by Jamal & Getz, (1999) can provide tour operators with the skills and expertise for integrating sustainable practices within their operations.

GSTC Section B: Maximization of social and economic benefits to the local community and minimize negative impacts

The second criterion pertains to the development of policies, procedures, and initiatives aimed at mitigating adverse impacts and optimizing positive outcomes for both society and local communities

Table 2. *Tour operator performance regarding socio economic benefits to local communities.*

Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	P Value
Prioritization of Hiring Local Tour Guides by the Tour Company	3.4	0.85	0.08	<0.001
Provides support to local entrepreneurs in selling their products to tourists	3.9	0.59	0.08	<0.001
Consideration of local livelihood	2.5	0.56	0.05	<0.001
consideration of exploitation and harassment issues	4	0.61	0.04	<0.001

The second criterion of the GSTC emphasize the need for tour operators to provide socio economic benefits to the local communities while minimize the negative impacts. The findings in table 2 shows mixed performance across the relevant indicators.

To begin with, most of the emphasis on the employment of local guides seems lacking. Regardless of the moderate average score (M=3.48), the interview data showed that most tour operators conduct tours either on their own or are more concerned with cost-effective personnel rather than employing locals. The practice does not correlate with the GSTC criterion that place greater focus on local guides in cultural interpretation, enhancing visitor experience and socio-economic development (Ho et al.2022). Likewise, the study found that TO do not provide sufficient support for promoting local businesses. Even though the survey produced a high average (M=3.96), the interviews proved that the minority of tour operators are involved in the joint venture or even encouragement of local products and the majority of them are deferring the responsibility to the preferences of tourists.

Consideration of local access to livelihood is emphasized as an important practice to mitigate the adverse effect. However, the study found

that tour operators do not conduct prior research on the selection of destination and discloses that destination selection is driven by tourist market as well as seasonal interest. The tour operators need to conduct prior research by considering carrying capacity of tourist destination during peak seasons. Moreover, this practice assists in identifying areas where tourism can positively contribute to local livelihoods, supporting businesses, artisans, and entrepreneurs, thus fostering the socio- economic development as noted by Douglas & Fairer-wessels(2020). In contrast, the process of embedding ethical protections against exploitation and harassment appeared to be in a positive correlation with sustainable norms. The results of the mean score 4.0 (M=4.0) and the interview findings give support that the KP companies are committed morally and legally to prevent such behavior. This, however, can only be effective with proper reporting procedures and policies which are lacking.

GTSC Section C: Maximize Benefits to Cultural Heritage and Minimize Negative Impacts

This criterion encompasses the policies and procedures tour operators must enact to ensure the protection, promotion, and conservation of the local cultural heritage.

Table 3. *Tour operator performance regarding cultural heritage protection and promotion*

Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	P Value
The tour advertisement reflects the actual attraction and activities	3.95	0.78	0.27	<0.001
Visitors are prevented from damaging cultural	4	0.78	0.77	<0.001

heritage				
The tour company provide interpretation of culture heritage to tourists	3.72	0.44	0.44	<0.001

This criterion encompasses the policies and procedures tour operators must enact to ensure the protection, promotion, and conservation of the local cultural heritage. The survey findings in table 3 show a positive but partially executed commitment by TOs in the study area towards the protection of cultural heritage. The results indicate that TOs acknowledge the importance of cultural sustainability however faces challenges in its consistent application

Authentic advertising was found as well practiced area as received a mean score of 3.95 and the result was found statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) that implies that the greatest number of TOs are advertising tour experiences that really disclose the actual attractions. This is also supported by the data on the interview where most of the operators claimed that they sell what they advertise and that they deliberately make efforts to match the cultural sensitivity of the locals. This practice of accurate promotion has been discussed in Global sustainable tourism council criteria (GSTC) "do not promise more than is being delivered". Further inaccurate advertisement of destination can create biased perception in the tourist mind, the tourist visit the destination with a different set of minds which can lead to violating socio-cultural norms of local community this phenomenon has been obvious in Kalash valley of Chitral. Misleading promotions can create a conflict between the tourist anticipation and expectations are issues that touch both the field observations and the literature (Csapó-Horváth, 2021).

Prevention of Tourist Destruction to the Sites of Culture was also greatly supported, with large mean agreement ($M = 4.05$) and affirmation of respondents during an interview. People frequently discussed cultural heritage as "Qaumi Assasa" which has surpassed the cultural significance and turned into its national significance. However, more detailed

understanding emerged when nine of the TOs expressed concerns about specific tourists showing a lack of concern, resulting in adverse effects on cultural heritage. This highlights the challenges faced by tour operators in enforcing guidelines, especially when dealing with tourists who may disregard rules, such as throwing stones at cultural sites. These findings are not consistent with the study conducted by Marin-Pantelescu et al., (2019) wherein tour operators made sure that tourists were informed of rules and proper etiquette. Further there is need for proper interpretation of the cultural heritage sites. The study unveils that despite an attachment to cultural heritage sites, KP's TOs provide information in a superficial rather than a comprehensive interpretative manner. This practice contrasts with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criterion, revealing the partial alignment of KP's TOs with such standards. Interpretation, as defined by Tilden, (2009) aims to convey more than just factual data; it seeks to reveal meanings and relationships through firsthand experiences with original objects.. Howard, (2003) emphasizes interpretation as the process of making heritage understandable to visitors. This study emphasize the need for trained tour guides in tour operation to prevent the adverse effects of tourist while highlighting the importance of the rich culture heritage of the region

GSTC Section D: Maximize Benefits to the Environment and Minimize the Negative Impact

This criterion pertains to the actions, policies, measures, and regulations implemented by tour operators to preserve natural resources, landscapes, mitigate pollution, uphold biodiversity, and contribute to environmental conservation efforts, thereby advancing sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Table 4. *Tour operators performance regarding Environmental Sustainability*

Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	P Value
The waste recycling during tours	4	0.82	0.17	<0.001
Prefer large number of tourist regardless of environmental footprint	4	0.59	0.52	<0.001
use designated trails and paths during its tours to natural tourists spots	3.6	0.61	0.60	<0.001
Encourage clients to partake in eco-friendly practices	2.7	0.98	0.01	<0.001
Use of sustainable transport	2.70	0.98	0.09	<0.001
inclusion of bonfire in tour to natural spots	4.3	0.70	0.06	<0.001

The table 4 shows finding regarding tour operator performance in environmental sustainability. The results reflect that tour operators have inconsistent yet developing approach to this criterion. To begin with, tour operators lack organized waste recycling policies, which underscores a massive deficiency in environmental accountability. Even though the average score ($M = 4.08$) is a mere superficial indicator of a positive prospects, the reality on the ground and interviews substantiates that there is no formal system of recycling employed. Such a lack of alignment between perception and making reveals a shallow approach toward sustainability ideals. Some researchers, including Gössling et al., (2012) & (Goodwin, 2011). focus on the importance of formalized policies on recycling in reducing the environmental impact of tourism, but this process has not yet been established in KP as confirmed by Ullah et al., (2021)

Secondly, the strong preference of large groups of tourists with large mean score of the best, 4.46 indicates that economic benefits supersede environmental injury. This practice though economically feasible, is against the principles of sustainable tourism that prefer small tourist groups to limit environmental degradation (Peeters et al., 2018; Colin Michael Hall, 2008)). The interviews also indicate that majority of the operators have the deliberate intention of maximizing group sizes by use of aggressive marketing. The threat of a phenomenon of excessive tourism, as Peeters et al., (2018) noted, is the possibility to overload the ecological capacity of the region, which, in turn,

can leave a mark of pollution, destruction of ecosystems, and lost visitor experiences. This inquiry emphasizes that over tourism is not problem but under management particularly in the region can cause harm the fragile tourist attractions.

The GSCTC practices of using designated paths in natural spots were not positively observed. While positive tendency on the level of the statistic (mean = 3.67), the interview results showed that some of the operators were not aware of the significance of the environment of adhering to the marked path. Neglecting the use of designated trails in tours can have detrimental impacts on the natural environment, as noted by Knight & Cole, (1995) and Pickering & Hill, (2007) highlighted the fact that when people go off their trails, this action harms biodiversity and feeds into the rising spate of soil erosion. These results emphasize the necessity of educational interventions and effective tour management to stop the destruction of nature in nature reserves. Kolasinska et.al., (2015) highlighted that groups guided by tour leaders are less likely to leave the trails. The work of Newsome et al.,(2012) emphasizes the role of tour operators in raising awareness about the potential environmental impact of tourist activities, empowering tourists to make informed decisions and minimize their ecological footprint. This study found that tour operators encourage tourists to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors. This encouragement involves advising tourists to minimize waste generation, responsibly dispose of waste, promote water-saving practices, educate them about the significance of preserving natural habitats and emphasize the

importance of wildlife. Further the results revealed that tour operator uses diesel-powered coasters and buses—vehicles known for their high emissions and environmental harm. Yet Gössling et al., (2012) advocate for strategies that reduce travel distances to mitigate air pollution, however, participants were of the view that they were not concerned about the destination distance and prefer the destination which appeal more to the tourist. Similarly the results revealed prevalent inclusion of bonfire in tours without considering their negative impacts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study evaluated the role of tour operators in sustainable tourism in KP, Pakistan based on the internationally recognized GSTC criteria. The study found that although the tour operators exhibit the moderate awareness and desire to contribute to the sustainable practices, their current involvement is fragmented and limited in terms of operations. This study found barriers which limit Tour operators' ability to promote sustainable tourism in the region.

The poor institutional environment within which these operators operate is one of the key challenges identified. Insufficient regulatory measures, outdated licensing systems, and a poor provision of governmental support in terms of subjecting tour operators to certification schemes, promoting awareness, and providing incentives undermine the tour operators to make sustainability their primary business strategy. Sustainability initiatives are left up to an individual discretion without any state-driven support which results in inconsistent outcomes with little scalability. Further, this study found persistent absence of knowledge on how tour operators can involve in sustainable. While TOs have basic familiarity with sustainability, their understanding often remains superficial. Crucially this lack of knowledge extends into the spheres of operation as little understanding of the potential impact that the tour planning can have on the cultural integrity, the livelihood of the locals, and ecological resilience. This was found in several operational practices. Tour operator reported the lack of emphasis in employing local guides, having minimal or no

assistance on green concept, and failure to assist local entrepreneurs to incorporate local products on tours. Likewise, behavior to use unmarked paths, support bonfires in sensitive ecological areas, and choosing destinations without considering the potential negative impacts on the tourist attractions.

The low levels of consumer demand towards sustainable tourism in the region further complicate this landscape, hence corroborating the low levels of sustainability practices adopted by tour operators due to lack of market-based incentives for them. This has led to supply side focus which places more emphasis on economic benefits and large-scale-tourism rather than environmentally friendly and socially responsible tourism. Therefore, there is a dire necessity to induce the demand-side awareness as well as promote responsible tourist behavior to facilitate the more balanced and sustainable tourism framework in the region. One of the key conclusions that can be drawn based on this research is that promotion of sustainable tour operation in KP also faces constraints in terms of professional capacity gap. Although a normative sense of ethical obligations of many tour operators does exist, this research highlights the fact that these commitments are yet to be performed because they lack the technical and managerial competencies to effectively engage in sound practice. Without systematic approach in environmental stewardship, cultural communication and impact-surveillance, then sustainability is a fringe-benefit; and wished-for, instead of a reality. This absence of feedback mechanisms dedicated to the pursuit of sustainability paired with insufficient destination research and lack of training opportunities for guides is indicative of the fact that sustainability needs to be instilled as an integral part of the discourse, competencies, routines, and assessments of tour operations.

The results of this research work underscore the importance of well-structured multi-stakeholder strategy concerning the impediments to a sustainable tour operation in KP, Pakistan. The lack of coordinated government support, lack of knowledge on sustainable tourism, and insufficient skills on applying sustainable

practices, coupled with the lack of market interest, limit the move towards the sustainable tour operation.

In response to it, this study suggests a strategic framework (Figure.1) in which the government agencies and private sector act as the key drivers of sustainable tourism. Regulatory and incentive measures coupled with awareness campaigns will constitute the tasks of government agencies, in particular those involved in tourism development, which should deliver this through the policy support and public awareness functions. These are the direct action towards regulatory deficiencies and establish enabling environment in regards to sustainability-oriented practices. At the same time, the NGOs are positioned as the facilitators of capacity building towards sustainable tour operations, able to ensure that the tour operators know how to act as well as conduct sustainable tourism

practically through knowledge and skills. This two-pronged approach addresses the gaps in knowledge and skills that were found in this study and it will not only make the operators aware of the principles of sustainability, but they will also have the skills to put them into their practices.

As illustrated in figure. 1, the synergistic effect of these interventions can facilitate the development of a responsible tourist market. The combination of these elements creates a coherent pathway in which the support of the institutions, and the operational capacity to perform, as well as the consumer awareness, come together to result in a sustainable tourism. This approach emphasize that overcoming these challenges requires not only top-down governance but also bottom-up capacity development and transformation on the demand-side.

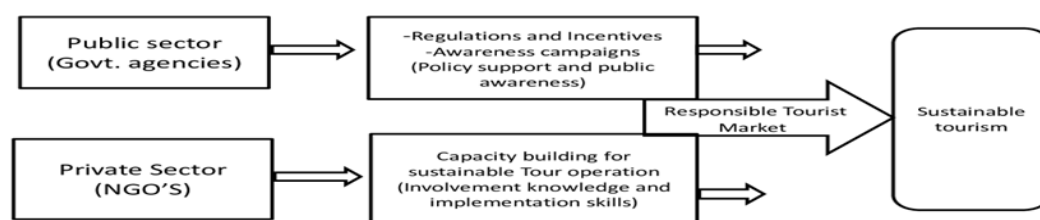


Figure 1. *Strategic model for sustainable tour operation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan*

Recommendations

Based on this research findings and conclusion, some of the areas of future development are encompassed to enhance learning and practice of the sustainability tourism in the KP region. It is possible to follow changes to the attitudes, behavior, and environment results with longitudinal studies and observe how sustainable tourism has changed and how the adaptive policies were developed. The role of socio-cultural, policy and environmental contexts may be illuminated by comparing across regions or countries to provide a chance to develop context-specific solutions. The range

of involvement of stakeholders could be extended by conducting surveys of the sector that would bring valuable insights into the dynamics of governance, decision-making, and interdependencies between governmental bodies, local communities, and visitors.

The conceptual model proposed in this research paper provides a framework for addressing the identified barriers. The effectiveness of the model in various contexts, the role of collaboration between government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and tour operators, and optimization of regulatory awards, capacity development and cooperation

by the stakeholders in facilitating the development of responsible tourist market and a sustainable tourist outcome could be tested under empirical research. Further, theoretical and empirical inquiry into community participation and capacity building is also warranted, with a focus on how empowering local communities in decision-making and management can enhance the social dimension of sustainability. Equally, understanding tourist behavior—attitudes, motivations, and preferences—will be critical in aligning tourism services with market expectations while promoting environmental stewardship and cultural heritage preservation.

Given that capacity development is central to the success of sustainable tourism initiatives, future research should identify key competencies for tour operators and related stakeholders, and design targeted training interventions tailored to the KP context. Additionally, exploring the potential of advanced Information and Communication Technologies—such as block chain, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality—could provide innovative tools for improving sustainability performance, reducing negative impacts, and enhancing visitor experiences.

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