COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN MOUNTAINOUS REGIONS: A REVIEW OF PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

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Abstract: The Eastern Himalayas area is a socio-culturally heterogeneous area with an ecological pressure due to a poorly controlled unified tourism. The project suggests to learn the contemporary trends, problems, and prospects of CBET along the Eastern Himalayan arc and under this approach, cultivate the sustainable models, which will balance the quality of the ecological situation and the empowerment of socio-economic environment. The reviewed articles, case studies and guidelines were thematically analyzed with emphasis on community involvement, perceptions of the success of the conservation and the effects it has on the livelihoods in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The findings reveal the possibility of CBET being a source of renewal as far as sustainable mountain travel is concerned.
Keywords: Community-based ecotourism, Eastern Himalayas, Sustainable tourism, Local participation, Biodiversity conservation

INTRODUCTION

It is an ecosystem that is rich in terms of biodiversity, climatic conditions diversification, and has a rich history in which the cultures have not been disrupted in several centuries, which has been bestowed on the Eastern Himalayas that constitute part of one of the regions in the world that are highly ecologically sensitive (Aayog, 2018). This subsequently proceeded to be more commercialised, with regards to greater volume at the cost of sustainability, without the knowledge that the region is an ecologically sensitive one (Badola et al., 2018). Mass tourism has also caused evident pressure on natural resources, erosion of the community structure, and cultural degradation with an unregulated development of the industry (Ashok et al., 2019). One of such cases is regarding the Himalayan context since community-based tourism projects are becoming visible on the local level in response to the overall tourism pressures (Bhalla et al., 2016). Such actions are particularly applicable to deal with a set of ecological vulnerability and socio-economic vulnerability. A special complex has been created by Eastern Himalayas and their man-nature interaction to investigate in what way the community-based ecotourism (CBET) could enhance the sustainable nature of the region and the principle of adaptive resilience (Chakraborty and Ghosal, 2024).

Ecotourism is another strategy, which may be selected instead of mass tourism especially in a delicate, environmentally sensitive human environment such as the Himalayas. Although it is easily confused with the other frameworks of niche tourism, such as the definition of adventure or nature tourism, ecotourism can be distinguished since it is an integrative framework that addresses the concerns of conservation and the role of local people. To this effect, Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) has been offered as a mode of operation, which decentralises the whole tourism decision-making structure by involving indigenous people in decision-making, dividing up the gains, and environmental management (Banik and Mukhopadhyay, 2020). The CBET projects under the context of the Himalayas tend to connect tourism to local culture, handicrafts, organic agriculture and spirituality and therefore can have an integrative model of development. It is not only an economic option, but this also permits cultural preservation and environmental morals within host societies (Anup and Fernandez, 2022). CBET programs go hand in hand with bottom up and inclusive development policies, and offer the possibility of co-producing sustainable and authentic tourism experiences. Eastern Himalayas is one of the mountain ecosystems that remain highly vulnerable to ecological degradation since the topography is rugged, soil profile is poor, and climatic conditions remain unpredictable. It incorporates the tourism industry into the local livelihood systems, including agriculture, weaving, and forest-based craft, consequently decreasing overdependence on extraction industries (Vongvisitsin and Wong, 2024). The cultural diversity of the Himalayas, i.e. tribal languages, folklores, rituals e.g. play also play a significant role in the experiences in ecotourism. At the village level, such as homestays, communities and particularly women have been empowered, as they have availed livelihoods opportunities, which remain founded on cultural exchange (Bhutia et al., 2022). CBET is participatory and thus guarantees a fair redistribution of tourism income to community development and environmental restoration (Basnet et al., 2017). The paper is an examination of the Eastern Himalaya community-based ecotourism with an evaluation of the practices, governance, impacts, and marketing issues as a way of enhancing the participation and sustainability.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF STUDIES

Studies in the Eastern Himalayas: The Eastern Himalayas has been studied on the community-based ecotourism in Nepal, Sikkim and the northeastern states of India. The regions have positive interconnections between ecotourism and biodiversity conservation and livelihood production by homestays (Kc, 2021). Sikkim is a biodiversity hotspot that presents people-based sustainable tourism. Homestays and eco-guiding have increased household income and also helped protect the habitat which is in what way participatory models that combine traditional knowledge and local governance can help tourism and conservation coexist despite infrastructural and institutional constraints.

Research in Western and Central Himalayas: Unique information on value chain and policy-based strategies of ecotourism development is available in Western and Central Himalayan destinations such as Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (Gupta and Rout, 2016). Ecotourism based on Jaunsar-Bawar area demonstrates in what way the connection between the local producers, transport services, and eco-accommodation constitutes a sustainable tourism network. In addition, they remain popular with adventure tourism and countryside tourism, which tends to be incorporated in ecotourism models although it may be very damaging to the environment without proper control (Huddart et al., 2020). The literature also highlights that to expand tourism in such mountain regions, capacity building and ecosystem sensitivity remain very crucial (Kala and Bagri, 2020).

Transboundary Contexts

Based on the research on the cross-border Bhutan, eastern Nepal and Northeast India transboundaries, it can be seen that there is an implication of comparable tendencies in the rise of ecotourism due to similar ecological regimes and cultural landscape. In practices like governance, conservation tourism and homestay management practices, cross-border learning has been established as essential (Khanal and Gosai, 2024). Community led ecotourism in Nepal balances between livelihoods and conservation even with inequalities whereas the high value, low impact model in Bhutan demonstrates that shared ecological and cultural systems need cross-border, coordinated sustainable planning.

Table 1. Geographical Distribution of CBET Studies in the Himalayas

Region	Focus Area	Key Features	Challenges	Opportunities	Study References	Geographic Type
Eastern Himalayas	Community-Based Ecotourism	Livelihood & biodiversity integration	Infrastructure, institutional gaps	Participatory governance models	(Kc, 2021)	Domestic
Sikkim	Homestays & Biodiversity	Biodiversity hotspots, local participation	Limited capacity, access	Knowledge preservation	Khanal & Gosai (2024)	Domestic
Northeast India	Eco-Guiding & Livelihoods	Homestays & eco-guides	Governance support	Revenue generation	Kc (2021)	Domestic
Western Himalayas	Value Chain in Ecotourism	Producer-transport-hospitality linkage	Ecosystem strain from tourism	Sustainable network creation	Gupta & Rout (2016)	Domestic
Central Himalayas	Adventure/Countryside Tourism	Adventure blend needs management	Tourist management issues	Training & ecosystem awareness	Huddart *et al.* (2020), Kala & Bagri (2020)	Domestic
Transboundary (Nepal)	Wildlife Conservation & Livelihoods	Community-led conservation tourism	Inequality, local disparities	Replicable CBET models	Kc (2021), Khanal & Gosai (2024)	Transboundary
Transboundary (Bhutan)	Low-Impact High-Value Tourism	High policy alignment with sustainability	Balancing tourism & conservation	Integrated planning success	Kala & Bagri (2020)	Transboundary

THEMES AND TRENDS IN ECOTOURISM RESEARCH

Community Participation: The involvement of the community has remained the most important to successful ecotourism programs in the Himalayas. The benefits of tourism do not leave the community as the local management of homestay schemes and eco-trails make sure that the benefits remain within the community (Khatiwada, 2022). The followers in the Nepal Gandaki Province have become an active participant in governing the tourism infrastructure, becoming trek guiding professionals and conservation conscious programs. The involvement of the local people in decision-making in Himachal Pradesh has been transformed into fairer and more sustainable outcomes (Kumar et al., 2024). Through these approaches, there is an increase in local pride, local responsibility and local culture. Institutionalisation of participatory decision-making is the key factor that makes ecotourism scalable since it avoids displacing local people in the area, but instead, serves to preserve their social image there (Lama, 2021).

Conservation and Biodiversity: Tourism is increasingly being regarded as a means of sustaining bio-diversity in the Himalayas. The models which favour the community maintain the forests clear, the wildlife corridors, and water bodies conditioned through association of tourism revenues with the well-being of the environment (Kumar, 2023). The concept of tourism has evolved in many Indian Himalayan villages where a nature reserve has become part of the definition of tourism. These activities will most probably be adopted into the local conservation cultures, where new ecological objectives remain undertaken in a local practice. In addition, as a result of the possibility to teach tourists and local communities, ecotourism enhances the level of environmental awareness and enables the establishment of the fundament of long-term conservation of habitats (Mandal et al., 2023).

Sustainable Livelihoods: Ecotourism has evolved to be a viable alternative source of livelihood among rural dwellers of Himalaya. It also diversifies other sources of livelihood other than agriculture and seasonal employment, which help provide employment in areas such as guiding, hospitality and handicrafts. Such models have highly empowered women and the youth in Sikkim and Himachal as they create skills and provide safe income (Kumar et al., 2024). The incorporation of local food, traditions, and crafts promotes authentic tourism and micro-entrepreneurship which is maintained by institutional support, market access, economic literacy, and being benefit-sharing as a community property.

Tourism Management Practices: The management of tourism in the Himalayan ecotourism is moving towards community based and decentralised trends. The rotational homestay hosting, eco-guide certification, and seasonal visitor management remain the best practices that minimally impact the environment. Such systems have been proactively promoted by government policy in Sikkim which catalyses low-impact tourism and community co-management of resources (Lama, 2021). Meanwhile, adaptive strategies, including visitor quotas and domestic by-laws remain increasingly frequent in order to prevent over-tourism and resource exploitation as presented in Figure 1. The literature points out that local institutions remain very important in coming up with regulations, conflict resolutions and enforcement of the thresholds of ecological sustainability in such a way that tourism becomes sustainable and culturally accountable (Mandal et al., 2023).
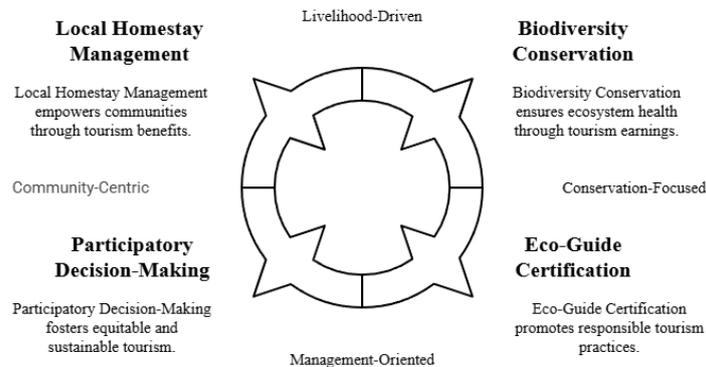

Figure 1. Ecotourism Themes and Trends in the Himalayas

BENEFITS OF ECOTOURISM IN THE HIMALAYAS

Economic Upliftment: Community-based ecotourism has become a reliable rural source of income in Himalayan regions, supplying similar activities as homestay, guiding, and nature-related jobs. In areas like the Annapurna Conservation Area, the earnings of the tourists have contributed to improvement of the household earnings and reduced dependence on subsistence farming (Pasa and Shrestha, 2024). The implementation of economic diversification, which is currently to be ecotourism, has proved to be highly successful in subsidizing the village

economies and in ensuring infrastructure investments like trails and sanitation (Poudel and Joshi, 2020). With these developments, communities have been in a position to invest in education and healthcare. The value of ecosystem services can be used to complement income and resource conservation in the combination with tourism (Meena et al., 2024).

Social Empowerment: Himalayan ecotourism is able to empower women and Indigenous people by giving them a chance to become homestay managers, cooperatives, and eco-guides. Community forestry and tourism have been synergetic in Nepal and have empowered marginalised groups to gain access to resources and a presence in local governments (Ojha et al., 2022). Besides, the model encourages participatory decision-making and community trust and social bonding. Ecotourism also enhances the traditional knowledge and identity of indigenous populations since it is a cultural platform of expression and exchange (Pandiya, 2024).

Environmental Awareness: The ecotourism in the Himalayas enhances the environmental awareness of both the locals and the tourists by interpreting nature, teaching conservation, and allowing the management of the forests and wildlife by the community. Sustainable resource use is informed by training programs and local bylaws and tourists who experience clean environments tend to take up conservation values, which reinforce existing community-based conservations.

Table 2. Benefits of Community-Based Ecotourism in the Himalayas

Benefit Type	Region/Example	Key Contribution	Community Involvement	Challenge Addressed	Impact Area	Reference(s)
Economic Upliftment	Annapurna Conservation Area	Boost in household income	Homestays, guiding, and local tourism services	Rural income dependency	Economic	Pasa & Shrestha (2024)
Economic Upliftment	Himalayan Villages (General)	Improved infrastructure & local investment	Use of tourism revenue for trails, health, etc.	Infrastructure and service gaps	Economic	Meena et al. (2024)
Social Empowerment	Nepal & Indigenous Communities	Women's leadership in tourism	Managing homestays, cooperatives, and eco-guides	Gender exclusion	Social	Poudel & Joshi (2020)
Social Empowerment	Himalayan Community Governance	Inclusive participation in decisions	Engagement in local tourism planning	Political marginalization	Social	Ojha et al. (2022)
Environmental Awareness	Kaski District, Nepal	Nature education through tourism	Guided walks, eco-learning programs	Low environmental literacy	Environmental	Pasa & Shrestha (2024)
Environmental Awareness	Forest Areas in the Himalayan Belt	Community-based forest management	Monitoring habitats, enforcing eco-rules	Deforestation and overuse	Environmental	Ojha et al. (2022)
Environmental Awareness	Tourist Destinations in the Himalayas	Tourists become conservation advocates	Immersive exposure to pristine landscapes	Tourist detachment from conservation	Environmental	Poudel & Joshi (2020)

CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM

Infrastructure and Accessibility: The infrastructure is the greatest challenge toward successful ecotourism in the Himalayas. The majority of the off-the-beaten-path ecotourism locations lack sufficient road connection, lack of public transportation, and unstable infrastructure, such as electricity and the internet (Pujar and Mishra, 2021). This restricts the access of tourists and affects the service delivery in the facilities and guided experiences. The development of environmental-friendly facilities is also slowed down by limited investments in environmentally friendly facilities. Finally, within certain societies of the Indian mountains, the lack of infrastructure that is stable has hindered the growth of tourism even in ecologically and culturally rich destinations (Semwal et al., 2025). CBET initiatives remain still not adequately physically accessible to scale up.

Policy and Institutional Gaps: Community ecotourism is faced with lack of policies and institutional poor coordination. Policies of state and national tourism policies commonly lack a clear set of guidelines about the participation of the local community in planning and benefit-sharing (Rana and Bisht, 2023). Also, there is the aspect of joint jurisdiction between tourism, forestry and the local government which causes bureaucratic ambiguity and delays in project execution. The Indian Himalayan state ecotourism policies remain more promotion-oriented than regulation-oriented and ineffective in institutionalising ecologically responsible leadership and participation of communities (Pujar and Mishra, 2021). To ensure long-term and community-based tourism development in these sensitive mountain regions, institutional capacity improvement, establishment of stakeholder roles and harmonisation of development structures remain required.

Cultural Sensitivities and Over-Tourism: Despite the fact that ecotourism promotes cross-cultural exchange the failure to manage tourism can disrupt the values and traditions of the people. Excessive tourist traffic in religious or cultural sites is a threat to the commercialisation of indigenous activities and loss of community identity (Simane and Aseres, 2016). Conflict may arise in terms of the homestay systems since tourists remain not used to the local traditions, dress or religious practices (Regmi and Walter, 2016). Overtourism in the high season also strains the resources available to the locals and causes social depletion, especially in small settlements that have limited carrying capacity (Semwal et al., 2025). Tourism needs to be done in a sensitive and well organized manner to preserve the cultural integrity and the local culture custodians remain involved.

Limited Local Capacity and Training: CBET has a tendency to fail despite the dedication of the community on its part since of lack of technical expertise, poor hospitality or interpretation education and language barriers. The migration of the youth undermines tourism as a source of labour and the available training is unevenly spread and misdirected. Skills based and localised programmes are critical to enhance the capacity of the community and create resilient tourism systems.
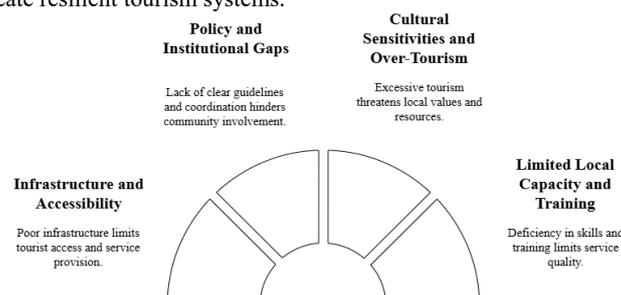
Figure 2. Challenges of Community–Based Ecotourism

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Community Homestay Models: Homestay in the communities across the Himalayas have been able to combine tourism, conservation and cultural heritage. Homestays in other destinations like Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh offer place-based tourism, where financial benefits remain directly sent to host families (Singh et al., 2021). The characteristics of such models include local building, local food, and eco-guiding, having little environmental effects. Such programs create community and local values in Nepal and promote the conservation of biodiversity (Wani et al., 2025). The projects diversify rural livelihoods, give a sense of local pride and create self-reinforcing systems, which remain built on environmental and socio cultural stewardship (Teshome et al., 2023).

NGO and Government-Led Initiatives: The non-governmental and governmental agencies have played a role in facilitating the ecotourism community-based. They play a part in capacity building, provision of infrastructure, policy advocacy and ensuring equal distribution of benefits (Yuan, 2020). India and Nepal NGOs have created eco-clubs, sensitised local guides and supported cultural interpretation projects that enhance tourism and give ecological sensitivity. Tourism is also being controlled by the government through the establishment of protected tourism areas, especially in high biodiversity areas (Wengel et al., 2021). Alliances increase the sense of local engagement and improve coordinated tourism-preservation policy.

The Role of Cooperatives and Self-Help Groups: The cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) remain quite effective in the allocation of the ecotourism benefits and they remain also involved in the grassroot organisation. SHGs in the majority of Himalayan villages take care of booking, visitor rotation stays, trail or community centre maintenance, and offer transparency and equal participation (Wani et al., 2025). SHGs have training in hospitality, financial management, and eco-product development as well, which contributes to social relations and empowering local entrepreneurship according to Table 3. In Arunachal and Ladakh, cultural norms remain maintained in the cooperatives and SHGs but they incorporate ecotourism as a way of community resilience.

Table 3. Case Studies and Best Practices in Himalayan CBET

Model Type	Region	Key Features	Economic Role	Community Role	Conservation Link	Reference(s)
Community Homestays	Sikkim & Arunachal Pradesh	Local food, architecture, and eco-guiding	Income for host families	Homestay management	Low environmental impact	Singh *et al.* (2021)
Community Homestays	Nepal	Biodiversity support, community identity	Livelihood diversification	Cultural participation	Supports conservation areas	Wani *et al.* (2025)
NGO-Led Initiatives	India & Nepal	Eco-clubs, guide training, cultural projects	Infrastructure development	Local guide involvement	Eco-awareness	Yuan (2020)
Government Initiatives	India (Biodiversity Zones)	Protected tourism zones, policy support	Long-term tourism support	Stakeholder collaboration	Tourist regulation in sensitive areas	Wengel *et al.* (2021)
Cooperatives	Arunachal & Ladakh	Cultural protection, tourism management	Micro-entrepreneurship	Local norms enforcement	Heritage and landscape preservation	Singh *et al.* (2021)
Self-Help Groups (SHGs)	Himalayan Villages	Visitor rotation, trail maintenance, and training	Fair revenue sharing	Community organisation and training	Resource conservation	Wani *et al.* (2025)
Integrated Models	Various Himalayan States	Combined cultural and ecological stewardship	Sustainable income generation	Cross-sector coordination	Tourism is aligned with sustainability	Teshome *et al.* (2023)

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Government Policy Initiatives: The Eastern Himalayas have initiated state-based ecotourism policies which have begun to embrace sustainability goals alongside empowerment of the local people, application is still notably diverse in different regions. As an example, localised stewardship policies in the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area in Nepal remain encouraged, but due to the logistical challenges in implementation and resource allocation, they remain not successful (Byers et al., 2024). The policies of low-impact tourism that remain developed in Bhutan and the Indian northeastern states remain aligned to conservation values and cultural protection (Borah, 2024). There remain promising frameworks but there is the need to have stronger governance and decentralisation of decision making in order to open ecotourism to remote places.

Legal and Regulatory Support: An effective legal framework should be in place to control the growth of ecotourism in addition to mitigate the ecological and social risks. The practice in most Himalayan settings is behind regulations, but there is few legal safeguards on ecotourism areas managed by communities (Dorji et al., 2019). There is often a lack of regulatory clarity on issues of land use, sharing of benefits and conservation limitations, which leads to overlapping claims and bureaucratic stalemate. Besides, support of the rights of indigenous people and community-based forms of governance within tourist destinations is sparsely supported in the law. It is highly desirable to strengthen legal frameworks to enable decentralised and community-based tourism planning to enable the consistency of local interest with the long-term ecological stability (Utama et al., 2021).

Stakeholder Collaboration Models: Effective ecotourism governance hinges on partnership among local communities, NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector. Interconnected frameworks that allow co-management of the resources and shared decision-making have demonstrated potential for enhancing local success (Kunjuraman, 2024). In Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas, coordinated forest, tourism, and community governance manages visitors, shares benefits, resolves conflicts, and upholds cultural and environmental priorities, strengthening long-term sustainability.
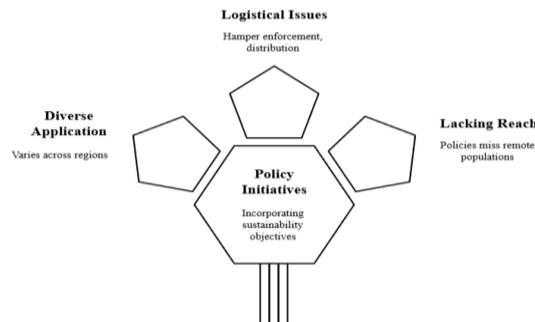

Figure 3. Policy Initiatives Impact Ecotourism Sustainability

PROSPECTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Recommendations for Sustainable Practice: Sustainability in the ecotourism development of Himalayas ought to center around the community-managed ecosystem services, inclusive policy, and low-impact tourism (Phelan et al., 2020). Such strategies as limiting the number of visitors, environmental policies, and investments earnings into the conservation will encourage the resilience in the long term. The balance between the ecological health and social-economic needs will be the entire provision of the tourism enterprises functioning on the basis of the small scale and the locally character. The inequalities in livelihoods should be resolved through conducting gender-sensitive planning, especially in the areas that remain prone to climate hazards (Bhadwal et al., 2019). Whether having sustainability orientation or not, indigenous knowledge is bound to fail to sustain the future of Himalayan ecotourism (Regmi and Walter, 2017).

Increasing Community Participation: Community participation is the primary aspect of sustainable ecotourism. Initiatives that facilitate trust and stewardship include encouraging local people training, collective decision making and revenue sharing. Levels of community involvement in the planning and monitoring of tourism projects in Nepal have been demonstrated to boost the environmental outcomes and livelihood security (Khadka, 2025). Empowering and strengthening community institutions and participatory governance leads to greater inclusion of women, Indigenous people and the poor and greater regional vulnerability to climate or economic shocks and greater community stewardship.

Technology and Innovation: Innovation and technology may be of great help to sustainability and magnitude in ecotourism. GIS mapping, mobile applications to follow the trail and online booking systems remain transforming the distance between Himalayan destinations and the tourists (Yin and Zachary, 2018). Technology assists in conservation, visitor management and education; though, digital tools should be aligned with local knowledge, capacity in addition to infrastructure in order to utilize the mountain effectively.

Cross-Border Ecotourism Integration: Eastern Himalayas spans across a variety of nations and offer transboundary ecotourism. The natural synergies in the development of tourism cooperation remain due to common ecosystems and cultural affinities among states in Nepal, Bhutan, and Northeast India (Regmi, and Walter, 2017).

Table 4. Prospects and Future Directions in Himalayan Ecotourism

Focus Area	Key Actions Proposed	Expected Impact	Implementation Needs	Challenges Addressed	Reference(s)	Theme
Sustainable Practice	Visitor caps, eco-regulations, reinvestment	Ecological resilience	Policy enforcement and monitoring	Over-tourism, poor planning	Phelan *et al.* (2020)	Environmental
Sustainable Practice	Support for local, small-scale tourism	Balanced local economy	Financial and training support	Income inequality, urban dominance	Bhadwal *et al.* (2019)	Economic
Community Participation	Training, governance, equity	Empowered communities	Community mobilization	Exclusion of women and minorities	Regmi & Walter (2017)	Social
Community Participation	Strengthen institutions and inclusivity	Broader benefit-sharing	Capacity building, legal backing	Marginalised local voices	Khadka (2025)	Governance
Technology & Innovation	GIS, mobile apps, digital booking	Smarter tourism and conservation	Adaptation to rural technology gaps	Lack of data and tech access	Yin & Zachary (2018)	Technology
Cross-Border Integration	Harmonise policies, share models	Shared governance, efficient coordination	Bilateral coordination	Fragmented regional efforts	Regmi & Walter (2017)	Policy
Cross-Border Integration	Regional plans for climate and migration	Cultural & ecological connectivity	Cross-border platforms	Climate, biodiversity, and migration conflict	Yin & Zachary (2018); Khadka (2025)	Transboundary Cooperation

CONCLUSION

In the Eastern Himalayas, the ecotourism is community-based and merges environmental, cultural conservation, and livelihood. Experiences in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Nepal have demonstrated that in case of genuine involvement of the communities, homestays, eco-guides and cooperatives can generate economic gains and enhances indigenous knowledge and conservation of biodiversity. Still, structural limitations such as poor infrastructure, disjointed policies, cultural sensitivities and local skills remain limiting. The solutions to these involve enhancing capacity building at the community level, better systems of governance, and stakeholder mobilization. The region has a high potential of regenerative tourism in terms of climate adaptation, suitable technologies and cross border collaboration. Finally, the effectiveness of CBET would hinge on its capacity to respond to the ecological and socio-economic transformation and focus its attention on the rights of the community so that with ecotourism acting as an entry-level to resiliency and long-term stewardship.

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