

CREATING A MODEL OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR ECOTOURISM BASED ON PLS-SEM: A CASE STUDY FROM A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN INDIA

Mrigakshi BORTHAKUR ^{1*}, Anna ŠENKOVÁ ²,
Rama Koteswara Rao KONDASANI ¹, Kristína ŠAMBRONSKÁ ²

¹ Department of Management Studies, National Institute of Technology, Silchar, India; mrigakshi21_rs@mba.nits.ac.in (M.B.); ramkondasani@mba.nits.ac.in (R.K.R.K.)

² The University of Prešov, Faculty of Management and Business, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Prešov, Slovakia; anna.senkova@unipo.sk (A.S.); kristina.sambronska@unipo.sk (K.S.)

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Abstract: This study aims to develop and test a theoretical model to examine local communities' perceptions and support for ecotourism development in Kaziranga National Park, a renowned UNESCO World Heritage Site in India. Based on Social Exchange Theory, the model investigates the mediating role of residents perceived benefits between community support and three key predictive variables: community involvement, community attachment, and ecocentric attitude. Data was collected from residents living in and around the park's adjacent areas using a questionnaire. The analysis was done using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The results show that community attachment and ecocentricity does not directly impact community support, but with the mediation of perceived benefit, there is indirect effect between these variables. However, there is a direct impact of community involvement on community support which highlights the key role of inclusive participation in decision-making processes in strengthening local support for ecotourism initiatives. The study offer valuable insights into community behavior around protected areas and contribute significantly to the limited empirical literature on ecotourism and community attitudes in the Southeast Asian context. The results also reflect the theoretical underpinnings of the tourism areas under study, taking into account current trends such as sustainable development and innovative management approaches in the provision of comprehensive tourism services, which are key to the effective and inclusive development of ecotourism initiatives.

Keywords: ecotourism, community involvement, community attachment, community support, ecocentric attitude, Social Exchange Theory

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely embraced definitions of ecotourism is the one developed by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES; 2015) which defines it as, 'Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education' (para. 2). Often seen as a subgenre of nature-based tourism, ecotourism is known for its close link to wildlife tourism (Räikkönen et al., 2021). However, Bhatta (2023), argued that ecotourism should also ensure that indigenous people and local communities are actively involved and benefit economically from its activities. Ecotourism has brought about a revolution that goes beyond the economics to include environmental and socio-cultural aspects of society. Local communities are greatly impacted by ecotourism in both positive and negative social, cultural, and economic aspects (Halim et al., 2022). Therefore, without the support and cooperation of the locals, the development of ecotourism is challenging (Khalid et al., 2019). Therefore, community support is essential to the current and future growth of ecotourism. Tourism researchers have done extensive research on the variables that influence the support of the local community for the development of ecotourism. These variables, such as perceived effects (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011), attitudes (Lai & Nepal, 2006), community involvement in ecotourism activities (Lee, 2013), community attachment of the locals (Nicholas et al., 2009) environmental concern of the residents (Suess & Mody, 2016) among others can influence the level of support that residents have for the development of ecotourism.

The developed nations, such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA have been the focus of most previous studies involving local communities and their support for further development of tourism (Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023). Within the European context, several studies have examined the impact of tourism development in national parks on local communities, offering relevant parallels to the present research. For instance, Obradović & Tešin (2023), in their study of Tara National Park in Serbia, investigated residents' perceptions and support for tourism development. Their findings reveal a predominantly positive community attitude toward tourism, with residents viewing it as a means of

* Corresponding author

safeguarding both natural and cultural resources. Interestingly, concerns such as pollution or increased traffic were not perceived as major threats, suggesting a strong sense of trust and optimism toward tourism growth. Similarly, Zoltán et al. (2022), in their study of the Apuseni Natural Park in Romania, highlight the central role of community engagement in ecotourism development. Their research underscores that active participation of local residents, along with the integration of their knowledge, is vital for ensuring both sustainability and the effective protection of natural resources.

However, there is a dearth of such studies in the developing underdeveloped nations. Our present research proposes a comprehensive model that explores the various aspects that impact residents' support and perception of ecotourism development. The framework is based on Social Exchange Theory and is specifically applied to a UNESCO world heritage site of India. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive research into the perspectives and support of locals regarding the prospective growth in ecotourism (Ramaano, 2023). Even though academics have examined how local residents perceive the growth of ecotourism and their support for such development (Halim et al., 2022; Angessa et al., 2022), it's crucial to recognize the shifting perception for further growth of ecotourism. There are two possible ways that communities view ecotourism: positively and/or negatively. Locals will support the growth of tourism if they think the benefits will exceed the costs (Wani et al., 2022). Consequently, the residents' positive opinions will encourage more support for future improvements (Lee & Jan, 2019). When it comes to ecotourism, this support is even stronger because locals believe the industry boosts the local economy and conserves natural resources (Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2022).

Our study tries to fill these research gaps by creating a framework for investigating the link between locals' support for the growth of ecotourism and preceding variables of community involvement, community attachment, ecocentric attitude and perceived benefits. The proposed model shows how locals' perception of the effects of ecotourism and their willingness to support it relies on what they value. Within the framework of innovative management approaches in the provision of complex tourism services, it is important to develop new models of tourism support. New models can be based on older, but high-quality studies, while combining and applying the knowledge resulting from them creates a new model that can be applied in practice. Our research aims to develop a framework using structural equation modeling that looks at the factors that are likely to affect benefit perception combined with support and the indirect and/or direct impacts of perceived benefits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Support (CS)

A community is a collective of individuals who reside in a certain geographic area, sharing common interests while possessing diverse experiences and opinions (Pezeshki et al., 2023). In tourism studies, community support is defined as the behavioral intentions of locals to promote the growth of tourism in their region and originate from their psychological beliefs (Wang & Qu, 2014). According to earlier studies, ecotourism efforts wouldn't be successful without the participation, support and cooperation of the host community (Sobhani et al., 2022; Upadhaya et al., 2022). Tourism can have an impact on the standards of living of the residents, either positively or negatively. The locals will support the growth of tourism if they benefit from such activities (González-García et al., 2022). What locals think about the significance and potential future success of tourism in a location is positively influenced by economic benefits and their awareness of these benefits. If the residents are well informed about the positive social effects and benefits of tourism, they will actively support the development of tourism (Halim et al., 2022). Researchers have investigated many factors that act as antecedents to community support. Several tourism academics have used perceived benefit as a mediating variable and as a way to evaluate their theoretical models (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Lee, 2013). There have also been some studies that explored the correlation between the involvement of the community and their support for ecotourism (López et al., 2020; Pazhuhan et al., 2023). Attachment of the residents within a community also act as an important factor for their support towards future tourism development (Eluwole et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). Some studies have also considered ecocentric attitude of the residents as a precedent for locals' support, however, the results have been inconclusive (Munanura & Kline, 2022; Suss & Mody, 2016).

Community involvement (CI)

Community involvement can be defined as the degree to which locals share concerns pertaining to their lives with their community members (Lee, 2013). Community involvement is critical to the sustainable expansion of ecotourism because it maximizes tourism's benefits while minimizing its drawbacks, increasing a community's value (Alam & Nayak, 2024). Huo et al. (2023) established that community involvement in tourism-related activities raises the likelihood that the residents will profit from the expansion of the industry. A study by Harilal et al. (2021) shows that getting the locals involved in decision-making and management helps the locals to realize how crucial it is to incorporate tourism within the regional economy. While the degree of residents' involvement in ecotourism is often employed in evaluating support for the growth of the tourism industry, in the context of ecotourism very little study has looked at the direct correlation between community involvement and community (Lee, 2013). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Community Involvement positively and significantly affects Community Support

Community Attachment (CA)

The act of integrating and participating in community life, which fosters an emotional and affective bond between the person and their community, is known as community attachment (Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2022). Several research have been conducted on the correlation between the level of community attachment among local residents and their inclination to support tourism (Olya et al., 2018; Šagovnović et al., 2022). Nevertheless, previous research has yielded conflicting findings about this correlation, as many authors have failed to validate the substantial impact of community attachment on citizens' support for tourism growth (Gursoy et al., 2002). However, other research has demonstrated a

statistically significant and favorable relationship between locals' attachment to community and their willingness to support tourism (Olya et al., 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize

H2: Community Attachment positively and significantly affects Community Support

Perceived benefit (PB)

Perceived benefit in tourism studies encompasses both economic and non-economic value that has the potential to impact the community. According to Li et al. (2021), ecotourism has a positive influence on local cultural events, entertainment venues, and the development of public and recreational facilities. Due to the employment opportunities and increased personal income generated by tourism growth, persons who benefit financially from the industry will strongly endorse it. Conversely, individuals who do not experience any financial consequences will not be interested in the expansion of tourism. Different studies established the connection of community involvement and community attachment with perceived benefit (Gursoy et al., 2010; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Wang & Luan, 2021). It has been demonstrated by a number of studies that locals who are more attached to their communities perceive the benefits from ecotourism more favorably than others (Alam & Nayak, 2024; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Lee, 2013). Others, however, discovered that there was no discernible connection between locals' feeling of attachment to their community attachment and their perceived benefit/cost of ecotourism (Kim et al., 2021). As a result, there is ongoing discussion over how perceived benefits are impacted by community attachment. Previous studies have similarly connected residents perceived benefits with community involvement. Recent research has demonstrated that perceived benefits are positively and significantly impacted by local involvement (Lee, 2013; Wang & Luan, 2021), despite the results of Nicholas et al. (2009) suggesting the level of involvement does not influence perceived benefits. Thus, the next hypotheses are established:

H3: Community Involvement positively and significantly affects Perceived Benefit

H4: Community Attachment positively and significantly affects Perceived Benefit

Residents' support for the growth of ecotourism and their perception of it are strongly correlated, as evidenced by recent studies (Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Alam & Nayak, 2024). Many research have indicated that the perceived benefits have a significant and beneficial impact on residents' support for tourism development (Gursoy et al., 2018; Kodaş et al., 2022; Nicholas et al., 2009). Evidently, perceived benefits can be viewed as a predicate variable of locals' support for the development of tourism. Therefore, we hypothesize,

H5: Perceived Benefit positively and significantly affects Community Support

Ecocentric Attitude (EA)

According to the study of Gursoy et al. (2002), an individual's orientation towards environmentally friendly practices is known as their ecocentric attitude. Research suggests that the degree of ecocentric attitudes has a major impact on how the host community responds and perceives the impacts of tourism (Munanura & Kline, 2022). According to Munanura & Kline (2022), there is a significant positive correlation between support and ecocentric ideals, and there is a positive association between ecocentric attitudes and perceived impact factors. They believed that the positive association between locals' support and their ecocentric principles was due to the development employed to assess support. These findings imply that different points of view can exist within the community and that opinions about the environment might influence how locals interpret the effects of tourism (Jones & Sobel, 2000). Their support or resistance to tourism development is therefore influenced by these perceptions. Consequently, two hypotheses may be proposed:

H6: Ecocentric Attitude positively and significantly affects Perceived Benefit

H7: Ecocentric Attitude positively and significantly affects Community Support

The Proposed Model

The tested model is shown in Figure 1, indicating that locals' perceptions of the prospective benefits have an impact on community support. The model also shows that residents' involvement in the community, sense of attachment and their ecocentric attitude—an especially important factor from the standpoint of ecotourism—all have an impact on future ecotourism development. The model draws upon earlier research and has its theoretical foundation in social exchange theory (SET). SET is a well-known theory that has been applied by earlier studies to examine how the local community views the tourism development framework and its attitudes toward it (Wang & Luan, 2021; Rua, 2020).

Ap (1992) defines SET as “a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation”. SET was extensively used in many tourism-related research in order to ascertain how the local community will react to the social, economic and environmental effects of tourism (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Wang et al., 2023). SET thus assisted these researchers in comprehending how the local people felt about the significance of future tourism and societal growth.

Nunkoo et al. (2013) applied SET in the context of tourism and stated, “SET posits that residents' support is determined by their perceptions of the benefits and costs of tourism development”. SET proposes that demonstrating endorsement for the growth of tourism is interpreted as a readiness to engage in a reciprocal transaction (Gursoy et al., 2002; Jurowski et al., 1997). Residents are likely to be in favor of future developments of tourism if they think the advantages of social exchanges outweigh the costs; on the other hand, if they think there are more disadvantages than advantages, they will not support such development (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006).

Therefore, we have also used SET as the theoretical base to examine the perception of the local community and their support towards the development of ecotourism in Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site of India.

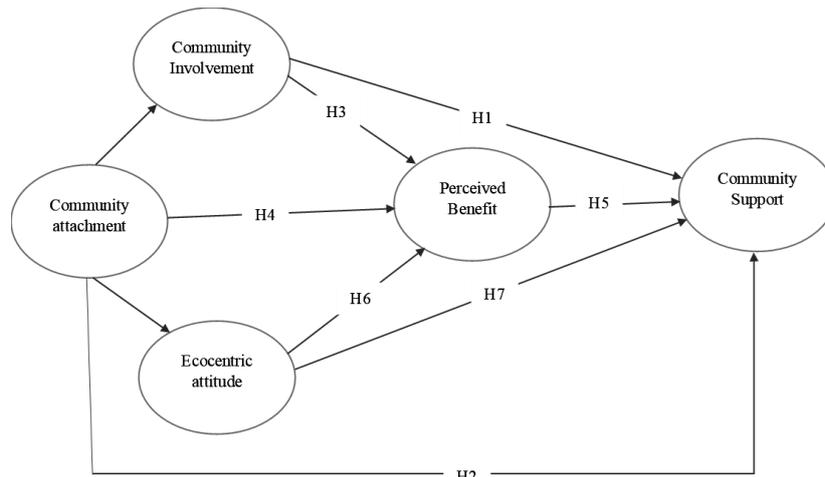


Figure 1. Theoretical model (Source: Authors' elaboration)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to look into the relationship between the variables listed above, this study uses a quantitative research design. Data were collected from the local community members using a survey questionnaire. Figure 2 shows the adopted research design.

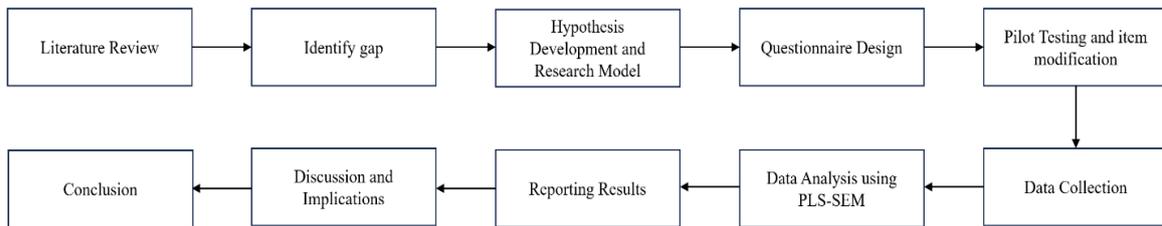


Figure 2. Research Design (Authors' own elaboration)

Study site

The location for our study is Kaziranga National Park (KNP) which is situated in Assam, a northeastern state of India. Covering an area of 430 square kilometres, KNP represents one of the last unmodified natural areas in the north-eastern region of India (Kaziranga National Park, n.d.). The map of KNP is shown in Figure 3.

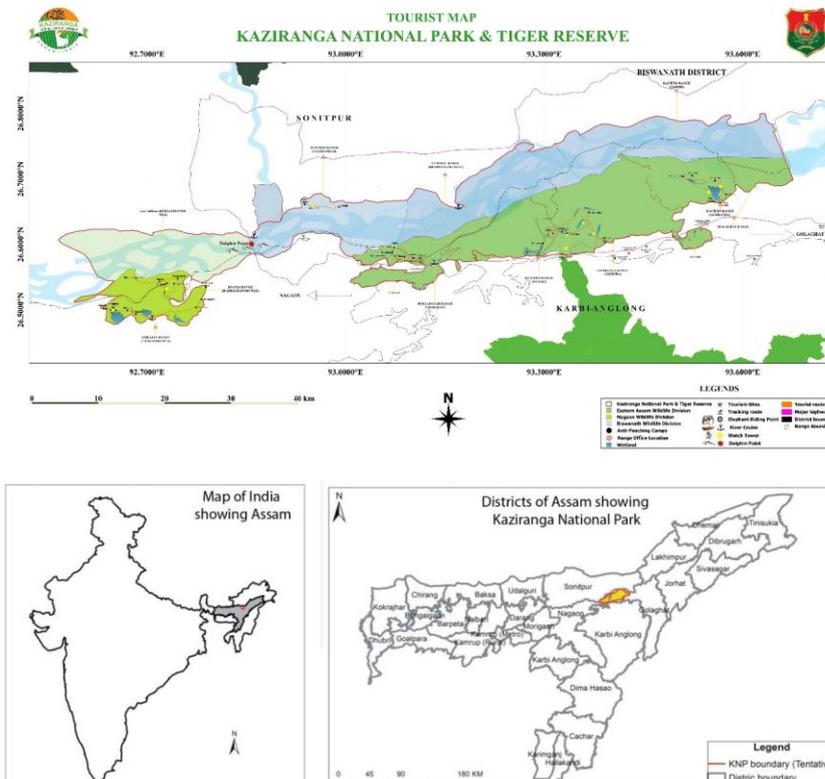


Figure 3. Map of Kaziranga National Park (Source: Kaziranga National Park & Tiger Reserve Assam, India, 2024)

With its diverse range of flora and fauna, the stunning scenery of KNP offers immense potential for the growth of ecotourism. With two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhinoceroses found there, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is home to other animals like wild buffalo, Indian elephant, royal Bengal tiger, Indian wild boar, various species of deer, white browed gibbon, capped langur or leaf monkey, leopard, sloth bear, Indian porcupine, Bengal fox and golden jackal. In 2006, KNP was designated as a "Tiger Reserve" since it now boasts the world's greatest ecological density of tigers among all protected places. There are around 478 species of avifauna known, of which 25 are globally threatened and 21 are near threatened (Das & Hussain, 2016). In KNP, a variety of ecotourism activities are carried out as the Ministry of Tourism, India is constantly trying to improve the tourist experience in the region.

Such activities include elephant and jeep safari, jungle walks, hiking, birdwatching, interacting with the local communities and tasting the local cuisines. Many of the residents of Kaziranga are either directly or indirectly earning their income from different tourism activities starting from being mahouts of elephant safari and driving jeeps for jeep safari to providing service in the resorts, offering homestays and tent services.

Many eco-stays and eco-lodges have come up in the nearby regions of the park which lets tourists enjoy traditional Assamese-style stays like bamboo huts and get a taste of local cuisines along with a calm and non-disturbed stay. With an increased tourist footfall over the years, the locals are inclined more towards tourism-related activities and for many in nearby communities, it now provides an alternate means of livelihood (Borthakur & Kondasani, 2024).

Data collection and Analysis

The target population of our study consisted of locals living close to KNP's protected areas. A multistage sampling method was used to collect data. The authors obtained a list of 37 villages which fall under the protected area of KNP from the forest department, Govt. of Assam. In the next stage, following the study of Shrivastava & Heinen (2007), villages situated within 2 km range of KNP were identified which led to a final sample comprising 15 villages. In the next stage, the sampling was done on a household level. Here, a stratified random sampling technique was used following a similar study by Wang & Luan (2021). We aimed to sample at least 10% of households in each village. Interviews typically lasted between 30 to 40 minutes, preferably with the head of each household. The respondents were selected based on a simple screening question, "Are you related to ecotourism activities of Kaziranga National Park". If the answer was "yes", the person was selected as a respondent. The authors collected 280 responses of which eight were excluded due to lack of complete information. A final sample of 272 valid responses was retained for analysis. A pilot study involving thirty respondents was conducted before the data collection. All indicators demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70, while standard factor loadings were above 0.50, indicating satisfactory reliability and validity. The suggestions and the information gathered from the pilot test were used to further modify the questionnaire.

For the data analysis of our study, we used SmartPLS 4 software to perform structural equation modeling. The partial least squares approach was used to estimate the parameters. One of the greatest methods for assessing potential relationships in a complicated project is structural equation modeling, or SEM (Hair et al., 2021). This method can be used even when the data is not large or normally distributed (Hair et al., 2012).

Questionnaire development

A 24-item questionnaire was developed based on previous literature. Five items used to measure *community attachment* of the host residents was adopted from Lee (2013). The 4-item scale for *community involvement* was adapted from Tosun (2006) and Nicholas et al. (2009). The four items for *ecocentric attitude* were adapted from Gursoy et al. (2010). Six items measured *perceived benefits* of the host residents. The scale proposed by Gursoy et al. (2002) was adopted to measure the economic benefits (measured by two items), whereas scale for social and cultural benefits (measured by two items) was adapted from Gursoy & Rutherford (2004) and environmental benefits of tourism (two items) were adapted from Látková & Vogt (2012). A 5-item scale for future *support for ecotourism* development was taken from Halim et al. (2022). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure these variables ranging from "strongly agree" (coded as 1) to "strongly disagree" (coded as 5). The questionnaire was sent to four academics specializing in ecotourism, and based on their comments, it was adjusted according to the target population and location. A total 272 data was collected. The sociodemographic data of the respondents were obtained with the first part of the questionnaire which is shown in Figure 4.

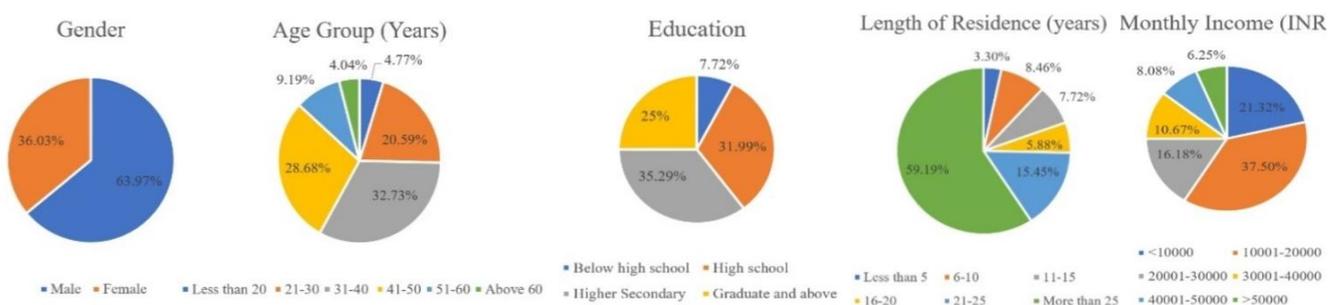


Figure 4. Sociodemographic profile of respondents (Source: Authors' elaboration using collected data)

The demographic profile shows that males (63.97%) are more represented than females (36.03%). Most respondents belong to the middle-aged categories, particularly 31–40 years (32.73%) and 41–50 years (28.68%), while younger (<20

years) and older (>60 years) groups are fewer. In terms of education, the majority have completed higher secondary (35.29%) or high school (31.99%), with one-quarter holding graduate-level qualifications, indicating a moderately educated community.

Monthly income levels suggest modest economic conditions, as over half earn less than INR 20,000 per month, while only 6.25% report incomes above INR 50,000. Residency patterns further highlight strong local attachment: nearly 60% have lived in the region for more than 25 years, and another 15.45% for 21–25 years, with very few being recent settlers. This long-term settlement underlines deep community roots, which are likely to influence their perspectives on tourism development.

RESULTS

Measurement model assessment

Two processes accompany the evaluation and computation of the model using smart PLS: the analysis of the measurement (outer) model and the structural (inner) model (Hair et al., 2019). For testing the measurement model, first, indicator loadings are calculated followed by assessing the reliability of the constructs by calculating the internal consistency (Mandić & Vuković, 2022). The consistency of the constructs was assessed using composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha.

According to Abbasi et al. (2019), outer loadings should have values more than 0.5 and Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s alpha should have a cut-off value of 0.7. In the third step, convergent validity is assessed with the average variance extracted (AVE), whose value must be at least 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). In the next step, we used the Heterotrait and Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) to measure discriminant validity. The values of HTMT must be less than 0.9 (Hair et al., 2019).

We computed the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) to assess the fit of the suggested model, whose value should be less than 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2016). Our study has the SRMR value of 0.074, which indicates that the model is well fit. The following tables (Table 1-2) show the results of the study.

All the values fall within the required range. Therefore, the model fulfills the criterion of validity and reliability.

Table 1. Item loadings, construct reliability and convergent validity (Source: Results from the SmartPLS analysis by the authors)

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Community attachment	CA1	0.914	0.948	0.942	0.812
	CA2	0.928			
	CA3	0.883			
	CA4	0.855			
	CA5	0.924			
Community involvement	CI1	0.893	0.919	0.902	0.772
	CI2	0.807			
	CI3	0.921			
	CI4	0.889			
Community Support	CS1	0.896	0.932	0.917	0.753
	CS2	0.895			
	CS3	0.759			
	CS4	0.889			
	CS5	0.892			
Ecocentric attitude	EA1	0.874	0.880	0.872	0.726
	EA2	0.893			
	EA3	0.890			
	EA4	0.743			
Perceived Benefit	PB1	0.784	0.859	0.856	0.580
	PB2	0.812			
	PB3	0.768			
	PB4	0.668			
	PB5	0.758			
	PB6	0.772			

Table 2. HTMT (Source: Results from the SmartPLS analysis by the authors)

Constructs	CA	CI	CS	EA	PB
CA					
CI	0.184				
CS	0.246	0.393			
EA	0.251	0.174	0.227		
PB	0.290	0.183	0.432	0.540	

Assessment of structural model

To assess the structural model, the beta, the R² and the p-values of the hypothesis’s paths were assessed (Sarstedt et al., 2022). The research model’s PLS estimates and the R² values are displayed in Figure 5. Ribeiro et al. (2014) and Hair et al. (2019) suggest that R² values for behavioral and social sciences are 0.02, 0.13 and 0.26 (weak, moderate and substantial explanatory power). With an R² value of 0.260, the main dependent variable on this model is CS, indicating that the theoretical model has substantial explanation power and can account for 26% of the variance in CS.

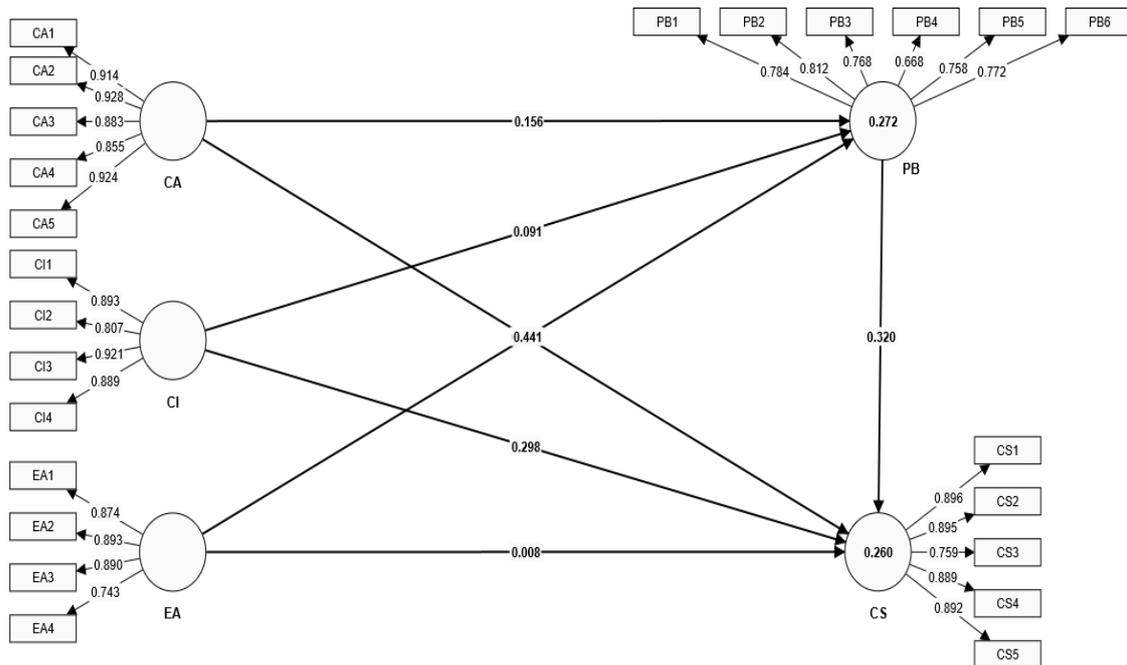


Figure 5. Structural model (source: author’s own elaboration with smartPLS 4)

Table 3 illustrates the direct effects of the constructs with path coefficients, t statistics and p-value. From the results, it is established that CI ($p=0.00$, $\beta = 0.297$) has a significant direct effect on CS. However, CI ($p=0.146$, $\beta = 0.090$) does not have a direct effect on PB. CS is also directly affected by PB ($p=0.00$, $\beta = 0.320$). CA ($p=0.109$, $\beta = 0.092$) and EA ($p=0.947$, $\beta = 0.004$), however, does not directly impact CS. On the other hand, PB is directly and significantly affected by both CA ($p=0.007$, $\beta = 0.155$) and EA ($p=0.00$, $\beta = 0.441$).

Table 3. Direct effects (Source: Results from the SmartPLS analysis by the authors)

Hypothesis path	Coefficient	P values	T statistics	Result
H1: CI -> CS	0.297	0.000	4.798	Accepted
H2: CA -> CS	0.092	0.109	1.602	Rejected
H3: CI -> PB	0.090	0.146	1.455	Rejected
H4: CA -> PB	0.155	0.007	2.715	Accepted
H5: PB -> CS	0.320	0.000	4.672	Accepted
H6: EA -> PB	0.441	0.000	8.293	Accepted
H7: EA -> CS	0.004	0.947	0.066	Rejected

Table 4 shows the results of mediating effect. The results show that there is a significant positive mediation of PB between CA and CS ($p=0.027$, $\beta = 0.050$). PB also mediates the relationship between EA and CS ($p=0.00$, $\beta = 0.141$). However, there is no mediation of PB between CI and CS ($p=0.184$, $\beta = 0.029$).

Table 4. Specific indirect effect (Source: Results from the SmartPLS analysis by the authors)

Mediating path	Coefficient	P values	T statistics	Result
CA -> PB -> CS	0.050	0.027	2.206	Accepted
CI -> PB -> CS	0.029	0.184	1.328	Rejected
EA -> PB -> CS	0.141	0.000	4.076	Accepted

Based on the findings of our analysis, perceived benefits of ecotourism have a full mediation between community attachment and locals’ support for the future growth of ecotourism and between ecocentric attitude of the residents and support for ecotourism development. On the other hand, community involvement positively and significantly affects support for future ecotourism development, but the indirect effect via the perceived benefit of ecotourism is not significant; thus, perceived benefits does not mediate the relationship between community involvement and community support for the development of ecotourism.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to develop a theoretical model of resident support for ecotourism development, based on existing studies, and to identify variables that are likely to influence the perception of the benefits of ecotourism by residents and their direct and/or indirect support for ecotourism. The developed model with the proposed variables explains the exchanges residents are willing to make based on what they value. Supporting Social Exchange Theory, the results show that communities support ecotourism activities if and when they seem to benefit from it.

The results of our research show that CI has a significant direct effect on CS. Previous literature show that CI is one of the key drivers for CS for ecotourism development (Lee, 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2014). However, as opposed to the findings of López et al. (2018) CI does not have a direct impact on PB and PB does not play a mediating role between CI and CS. This indicates that residents will support future ecotourism development irrespective of whether they seek benefit out of it or not. This is because when residents are involved in decision making and management of ecotourism, they feel a sense of ownership and being included. Ownership of the decision-making process, however little, is regarded as a "tokenism" in any community development project (Lachapelle, 2008). This is a brand-new finding in the context of ecotourism as this finding contradicts the findings of all the existing previous literature (Lee, 2013; Lee & Jan, 2019; López et al., 2018).

The findings of our study show that community attachment and community support for tourism do not have a significant relationship. This finding is similar to that of Gursoy et al. (2002). However, the mediation analysis of PB between CA and CS is positive. That means CA does not necessarily ensure CS. However, if the community members see ecotourism activities as beneficial, they seem to support it. This supports the findings by Gursoy & Rutherford (2004), which established that residents with a high level of attachment to their communities are more likely to view tourism as being both socially and economically beneficial which in turn leads to support for future development of ecotourism in their region. According to the model's interpretation, these people are engaged and committed to their communities, and they may be personally approached or recruited as advocates for the kinds of developments that would benefit them.

A significant direct relationship between EA and CS was also not found. However, when a mediation of PB is added, the relationship is significant. This finding is similar to that of Suess & Mody (2016). These results align with findings of Munanura & Kline (2022) that established the host community's level of ecocentric attitudes affects their perceptions of ecotourism and are strongly correlated with positive tourism attitudes. The results indicate that people with EA do not support ecotourism development in their region as they have a notion that tourism can be harmful to the nature. However, if their perception of benefits (both socio-economic and environmental) from tourism activities are positive, they typically support future growth of tourism. In line with Styliadis' (2016) findings, residents of KNP, with strong ecocentric attitude, expressed support for the growth of ecotourism in the future as long as it is thought to have favorable effects on the economy and environment. Such disposition is indicative of "an evolutionary context of pragmatic environmentalism that reflects growth-friendly paradigm nudge rather than growth hostile paradigm shift". It supports the claim that a broader interpretation of the concept of sustainability is necessary based on "analyzing the underlying mechanisms that dictate whether a particular trajectory and timeline is likely for a given destination", which involves the attendant social representation of tourism by local communities (Suess & Mody, 2016).

In comparison with the aforementioned studies that focused on research in Europe (Obradović & Tešin, 2023; Zoltán et al., 2022), it is evident that, despite geographical differences and variations in methodology, their conclusions converge on a common point: ecotourism development in protected areas is not possible without the active support and involvement of local communities. While research from Asia suggests that perceptions of tourism in developing countries may differ from those in more developed regions, the European cases reinforce that residents' positive attitudes and active participation remain equally essential within the European context, which aligns with the findings of our study.

Implications

Since it has been recognized that locals' opinions have an impact on the sustainability of tourism, policymakers of tourism are actively trying to attain support from the locals for their cause (López et al., 2018). Thus, tourism policymakers and site service providers can be benefitted from our findings. The inner model of the study suggest that perceived benefit has the strongest effect on community support (0.320), followed by community involvement (0.297), which means both these factors (PB and CI) are moderately strong predictors of community support.

The study's most important finding is how crucial it is to involve the community in the decision-making process when developing ecotourism. According to our findings, residents will support such development when they have the power and authority to make decisions. This implies that being able to take charge and make decisions for their own place of residence makes them feel seen and therefore they would like to support further activities. Managers should keep this in mind and include more local people in their board of members.

Community development association managers or marketers can also create initiatives to help host people feel connected to their community. Higher community attachment leads to greater support for the development of ecotourism among local citizens (Filo et al., 2008). Secondly, community trust in ecotourism will rise as a result of initiatives aimed at preserving the tourist site's natural ecosystem. Residents of the host community who are highly dependent on natural resources will also be highly appreciative of these efforts and will support the growth of ecotourism. Third, community managers should concentrate on initiatives that can raise host residents' perceptions of the benefits of ecotourism, as perceived benefits mediate the relationship between community attachment and support for ecotourism as well as between community involvement and support for ecotourism. Additionally, in order to create local job opportunities and achieve the benefits of tourism growth, local tourism enterprises should prioritize hiring residents (Lepp, 2007). Managers can enhance the perceived benefits to guarantee that local citizens are more inclined to support the development of ecotourism.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to develop a theoretical model for the residents' support for ecotourism development and the variables that are likely to affect the benefit perception of the locals along with support directly and/or indirectly. Based on recent research and theoretical frameworks, a support model with seven hypotheses was put forth. With the data collected from

the nearby regions of the protected area of KNP, the proposed model and the hypothesized paths were examined. The model was tested with structural equation modeling, using SmartPLS software.

The results reveal that locals' support for the future development of ecotourism depends on the above discussed four factors (CI, CA, EA and PB). CI has a significant direct impact on CS irrespective of the sense of benefit from ecotourism. This implies active participation and involvement of the locals would ensure the success of ecotourism activities at the respective location. However, both CA and EA do not directly influence CS. Only with the mediating role of PB, CA and EA have an impact on CS. This means people who have a more attached to their community and the ones with high ecocentric attitudes will support ecotourism activities only if they perceive such activities as beneficial towards their community and the natural environment. Overall, the authorities and policymakers should ensure that the locals are actively involved in planning and decision-making for ecotourism's growth as well as the local communities are benefitted from the tourism activities not just economically, but also socially and culturally.

Limitations and Future Scope

Though this study has many advantages, some drawbacks need to be noted, which also point to directions for further research. Firstly, our study used convenience sampling method where the selection of respondents was based on their proximity to the protected area of KNP. This may not be a representative sampling of the general population impacted by KNP's ecotourism development. Therefore, similar surveys should be conducted in the future on a wider range of residents throughout a larger geographical region. Secondly, only residents who are associated directly with the ecotourism activities of KNP were chosen as participants. This leaves scope for future studies to include the residents who are not directly associated with such activities yet facing the consequences (positive or negative) from ecotourism activities in their place of residence. Exploring other variables in the model would be another intriguing addition. Such variables can include perceived costs, visitor satisfaction, locals' dependency on tourism and their quality of life. Our study has added new findings to the body of current literature by examining the proposed model with the data collected from the locals of a national park in the context of ecotourism. This leaves scope for future studies to test the model in other ethnographic communities such as communities from historical places, coastal areas, heritage sites and wetland areas.

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