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Assessing Awareness of Sustainable Tourism among Stakeholders in Kashmir: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract:

Kashmir, renowned for its pristine landscapes, favorable climate, and rich cultural heritage, has emerged as a major tourist destination in India. With the rapid expansion of the tourism industry in the region, there arises a critical need to shift towards sustainable tourism practices to safeguard its fragile ecology, preserve cultural identity, and support local communities. This study investigates the awareness and understanding of sustainable tourism among three key groups: students, local residents, and hoteliers in the Srinagar region of Kashmir Division. A structured survey was conducted among 900 participants—300 from each group—to assess their familiarity with the concept of sustainable tourism. The findings reveal a significant disparity in awareness levels. Among students, 170 (56.64%) reported familiarity with the term, indicating moderate awareness. However, only 40 local residents (13.34%) had any understanding of sustainable tourism, highlighting a major knowledge gap within the local community. In contrast, 410 hoteliers (45.54%) were aware of the concept, suggesting that industry professionals are relatively more informed, likely due to their direct involvement in tourism operations. These results underscore the urgent need for educational and awareness campaigns tailored for local communities and stakeholders. Promoting sustainable tourism practices is essential to ensuring the long-term viability of Kashmir's tourism industry without compromising its natural and cultural assets. The study emphasizes that a collective effort involving government, educational institutions, and industry is vital to foster a more sustainable and responsible tourism future in the region.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Stakeholders, Kashmir

Introduction:

Kashmir, often referred to as “Paradise on Earth,” has captivated the imagination of travelers,

poets, and historians for centuries. Its breathtaking landscapes, snow-capped mountains, vibrant gardens, and tranquil lakes have made it a cherished destination since ancient times. In recent decades, advancements in transport, technology, and digital promotion have significantly improved accessibility, resulting in a dramatic rise in tourist inflow to the Kashmir Valley—particularly to Srinagar and surrounding areas. While this surge in tourism has stimulated economic growth, generating employment and boosting local industries such as handicrafts, hospitality, and transport, it has also led to increased pressure on the region's delicate environment and cultural fabric.

Unregulated tourism contributes to environmental degradation, including water pollution, waste accumulation, traffic congestion, and damage to heritage sites. It also threatens local traditions, displaces indigenous livelihoods, and alters the cultural landscape. As such, the concept of sustainable tourism—tourism that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to enjoy the same experience—has become critically important for regions like Kashmir. This study recognizes that sustainable tourism can be a key strategy in balancing ecological protection, cultural preservation, and economic development. However, for such a model to succeed, it is essential that all stakeholders—particularly students, local residents, and those involved in the tourism industry—are aware of and understand its principles. By surveying these three groups in Srinagar, this research aims to evaluate the current level of awareness and advocate for greater education and engagement to secure a more resilient and responsible future for tourism in Kashmir.

Review of Literature:

The concept of sustainable tourism has gained global attention as a vital approach to mitigate the adverse effects of mass tourism, particularly in environmentally sensitive and culturally rich regions. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018), sustainable tourism aims to meet the needs of tourists and host communities while protecting and enhancing future opportunities. This involves managing resources in a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled without causing ecological or cultural harm.

Weaver (2011) emphasizes that sustainable tourism must integrate long-term planning, community participation, and environmental responsibility. In the context of developing nations, sustainable tourism not only helps protect natural resources but also serves as a tool for poverty reduction and community development (Scheyvens, 1999). In tourist-heavy regions like Kashmir, where natural beauty is the primary attraction, failure to implement sustainable practices can result in the degradation of the very resources that attract visitors. Gössling and Hall (2006) argue that tourism growth, when left unmanaged, leads to environmental stress including water shortages, habitat disruption, and increased carbon footprints. These impacts are especially visible in destinations with limited infrastructure and fragile ecosystems, such as the Himalayan belt. Cultural impacts of tourism have also been widely studied. Greenwood (1989) introduced the concept of “cultural

commodification,” where local traditions and practices are commercialized to meet tourist expectations, often at the cost of authenticity. This is particularly relevant to Kashmir, where Sufi traditions, handicrafts, and indigenous lifestyles are central to regional identity.

Studies focused on community involvement, such as those by Goodwin and Santilli (2009), highlight that when locals are included in tourism planning, the benefits are more evenly distributed and community pride is strengthened. In regions like Kashmir, involving local youth and hoteliers in sustainable tourism practices can foster a sense of responsibility and enhance local engagement.

Recent regional studies, such as Makhdoomi and Khaki (2023), highlight the growing awareness of sustainable tourism among tourism professionals in Jammu & Kashmir, though they also note significant gaps in awareness among the general population. This aligns with the present study's findings, underscoring the urgent need for widespread education and sensitization efforts.

Methodology:

This section outlines the research methodology used to assess the awareness of sustainable tourism among different community groups in the Srinagar region of Kashmir. The study followed a structured approach to collect and analyze data, ensuring representation across age, gender, and profession.

Research Design:

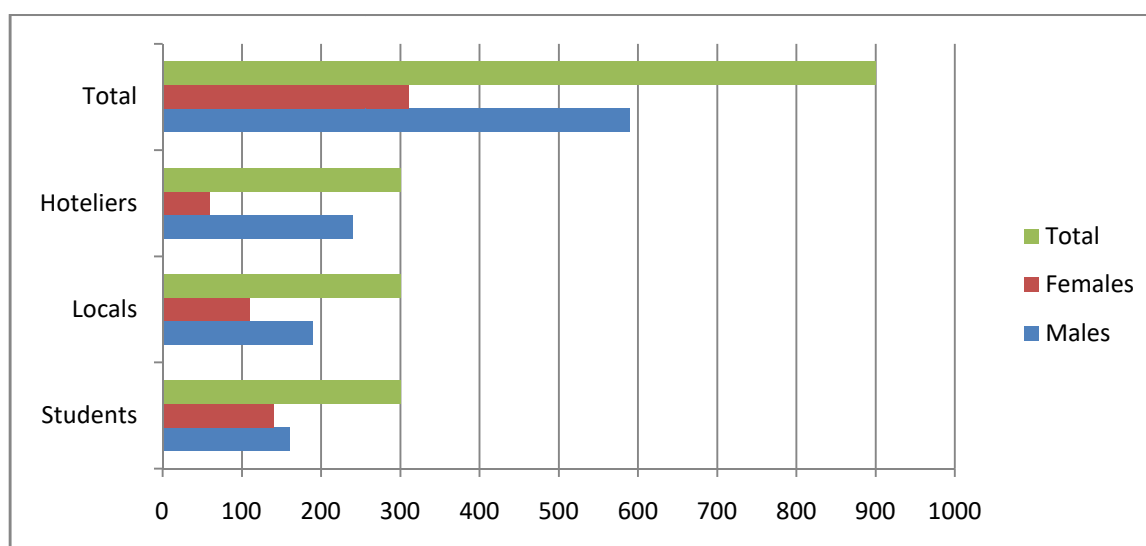
This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design aimed at exploring the level of awareness regarding sustainable tourism among students, local residents, and hoteliers in Srinagar, Kashmir. The approach was chosen for its effectiveness in measuring responses from a large sample at a single point in time, using structured data collection tools.

Population and Sample:

The target population comprised three key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by tourism in the region: college students, local residents, and hoteliers. A total sample of 900 participants was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation from each group.

Table 1: Participant distribution by role in the sustainable tourism survey

S. no.	Participants	Males	Females	Total
1	Students	160	140	300
2	Locals	190	110	300
3.	Hoteliers	240	60	300
4.	Total	590	310	900



Graph 1: Graphical representation of participant distribution by role in the sustainable tourism survey

Participant-Wise Distribution:

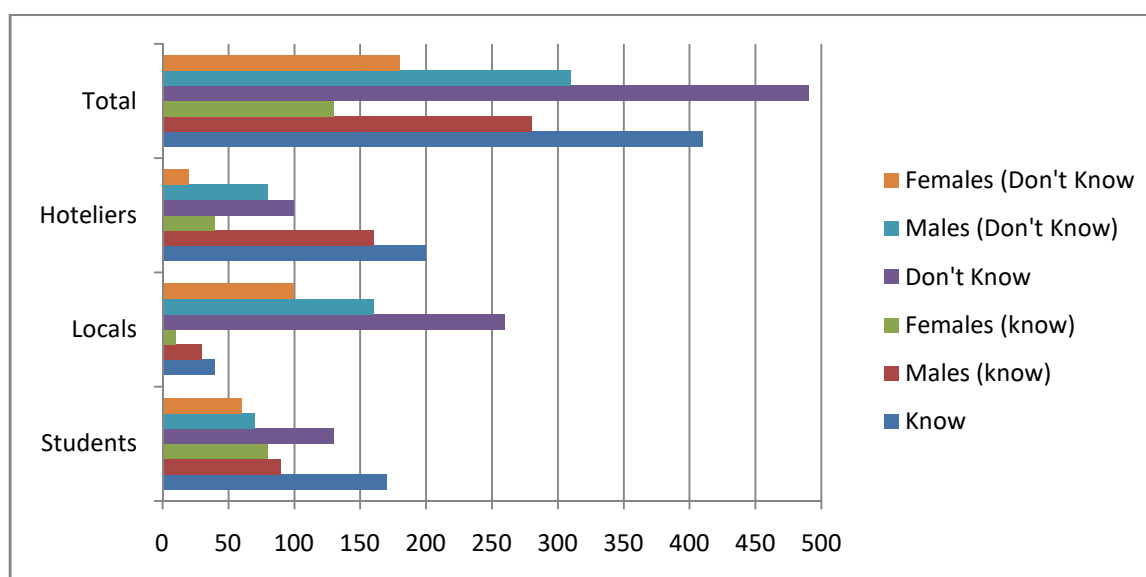
Participants were divided equally into three categories, with 300 individuals in each group:

- Students: 160 males and 140 females from various local colleges and universities.
- Local Residents: 190 males and 110 females from neighborhoods within the vicinity of Srinagar.
- Hoteliers: 240 males and 60 females, including hotel owners, managers, and frontline staff.

This gender-balanced distribution was designed to offer insights into how demographic variables influence awareness levels of sustainable tourism.

Table 2: Table depicting idea of sustainable tourism among survey participants

S. No.	Participant group	Know		Don't Know		Total (Percentage) Who Know	Total (Percentage) Who don't know
		Male	Female	Male	Female		
1.	Students	90	80	70	60	170 (56.64%)	130 (43.34%)
2.	Locals	30	10	160	100	40 (13.34%)	260 (86.64%)
3.	Hoteliers	160	40	80	20	200 (66.64%)	100 (33.34%)
4.	Total	280	130	310	180	410(45.54%)	490 (54.45%)



Graph 2: Graphical representation depicting idea of sustainable tourism among survey participants.

Data Collection Methods:

Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire, which included both closed-ended and yes/no questions. The questionnaire focused on the awareness of sustainable tourism, its perceived importance, and general attitudes toward eco-friendly practices in the tourism sector. The tool was pre-tested for clarity and reliability before full-scale administration.

Participants completed the questionnaire through in-person interviews conducted over a two-week period at colleges, local communities, and registered hotel establishments in Srinagar.

Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistical tools. Percentages and frequency distributions were calculated to determine awareness levels and trends across the different participant groups. Comparative analysis between groups and gender-based differences were also examined to identify notable patterns. The results were presented in tabular and graphical formats for clarity. This method allowed for a clear and comprehensive understanding of how sustainable tourism is perceived across different social segments in Srinagar, offering valuable insights for targeted awareness programs and policy interventions.

This structured and inclusive methodology ensures the reliability and relevance of the findings, making them applicable for future planning in sustainable tourism development within the Kashmir region.

Results and Discussion:

The study aimed to assess the level of awareness regarding sustainable tourism among three distinct groups in Srinagar, Kashmir: students, local residents, and hoteliers. A total of 900 participants were surveyed, comprising 300 individuals from each group.

The data revealed varying levels of awareness across the participant categories. Among

hoteliers, 200 individuals (66.64%) were aware of the term "sustainable tourism," making them the most informed group. Students followed with 170 individuals (56.64%) demonstrating familiarity with the concept. In stark contrast, only 40 local residents (13.34%) had any awareness of sustainable tourism, while a significant majority—260 (86.64%)—were unfamiliar with the term.

Overall, out of the total 900 participants, 410 (45.54%) reported knowledge of sustainable tourism, while 490 (54.45%) had no awareness of the concept. These findings highlight a significant awareness gap, particularly among the local population, which is concerning given their central role in the sustainability of tourism practices in the region.

This trend is consistent with previous studies. For instance, Makhdoomi and Khaki (2023) observed that while tourism professionals in Jammu and Kashmir were increasingly aware of sustainable tourism, awareness among local communities remained limited. Similarly, Goodwin and Santilli (2009) emphasized the importance of community engagement in sustainable tourism initiatives, noting that tourism strategies often fail when local populations are not actively informed or involved. The relatively high awareness among hoteliers is likely due to their exposure to the tourism industry, environmental regulations, and sustainability-related training or campaigns. However, the low awareness among locals suggests a critical gap in community outreach, environmental education, and participatory tourism planning. The moderate awareness among students is promising and indicates potential for educational institutions to serve as key platforms for disseminating knowledge and fostering eco-conscious mindsets. Incorporating sustainable tourism concepts into academic curricula, workshops, and community outreach initiatives could significantly improve awareness and encourage responsible behavior among the younger generation.

Given Kashmir's increasing tourist footfall due to improved connectivity and promotion, the pressure on its fragile ecosystem, cultural heritage, and resources has intensified. Without proper education and awareness, tourism growth could become detrimental to the region's long-term ecological and social stability. The findings from this study reinforce the urgent need for integrated awareness campaigns, policy interventions, and participatory approaches that empower all stakeholders, especially local communities, to adopt and promote sustainable tourism practices.

Conclusion:

This study underscores a critical gap in awareness of sustainable tourism in Srinagar, Kashmir, particularly among local residents. While hoteliers and students show relatively better understanding, more than half of the overall participants were unfamiliar with the concept. In a region as environmentally and culturally sensitive as Kashmir, sustainable tourism is not a luxury but a necessity. The results highlight the pressing need for collaborative efforts involving government bodies, educational institutions, tourism stakeholders, and civil society to promote sustainability-focused education and engagement. Only through widespread awareness and responsible action can

the region balance its booming tourism industry with long-term ecological and cultural preservation.

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