

Chapter 26

Mountain Tourism and Preservation of Cultural Heritage: A Study on Indigenous Tourism Resources in Munnar

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous populations live in Munnar, a well-known hill station in Kerala, and their cultural legacy is intricately entwined with the surrounding landscape. This study offers a guide for striking a balance between economic expansion and cultural conservation by examining the ways in which tourism may support and maintain certain traditional practices. By emphasizing how indigenous populations might influence tourism products in the mountain destinations, this research adds to the larger conversation on responsible tourism. It discusses the advantages and disadvantages that result from transforming indigenous customs and ways of life into tourist attractions. The study highlights the significance of community engagement in the development and execution of tourist plans by examining the possibilities of culturally based mountain tourism products in Munnar.

INTRODUCTION

Mountain tourism, which is linked to natural scenery, cultural legacy and environmental stability of mountainous regions, is gaining popularity. Mountain destinations are typically enticing because of their distinct geography, abundant wildlife, and rich cultural traditions of the local indigenous inhabitants. Travelers looking for adventure, peace, and cultural immersion in the outdoors have been driving the exponential expansion of mountain tourism in recent years. Nonetheless, the delicate ecosystems and cultural identities of these areas are under tremendous strain due to the increase of tourists. As a result, the connection among mountain tourism, cultural heritage, and environmental stability has become important for sustainable development, legislation, and academic research.

As more tourists started seeking experiences that provide a break from urban life and a chance to reconnect with nature, mountain tourism has drawn attention from all around the world. Mountain tourism is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as all forms of tourism that occur in mountainous regions, such as adventure sports, outdoor recreation, and cultural events (UNWTO, 2021). Locations like the Alps, Andes, Himalayas, and Rockies have grown to be important tourist destinations due to their attraction of snow-capped peaks, rich biodiversity, and different indigenous cultures.

A combination of adventure tourism—which includes mountaineering, hiking, and skiing—and cultural tourism—which involves interacting with the customs, rituals, and way of life of the mountain communities—often characterizes mountain tourism (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). One of the main attractions of mountain resorts is the combination of

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-8764-1.ch026

culture and nature. But as the amount of tourism increases, questions about these areas' sustainability surface. For mountain regions to continue to be viable for future generations, a careful balance between environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and tourism development is essential.

Many indigenous communities live in mountainous areas, and their identities, customs, and means of subsistence are strongly entwined with the terrain. These people have developed distinctive cultural traditions, dialects, and sustainable practices over generations as a result of their adaptation to the severe weather patterns and topographical difficulties presented by mountainous terrain (Stevens, 1993). The mountains are deeply significant to many of these communities on a spiritual and cultural level, in addition to being a beautiful physical setting. This is demonstrated by the customs, myths, and belief systems that are entwined with the environment; these are frequently reflected in the observance of seasonal festivals and the veneration of holy mountain peaks.

In the context of mountain tourism, the preservation of this cultural legacy is essential. There is an increasing demand to experience the “authentic” traditional activities of indigenous people as more and more tourists visit these areas. Mountain communities can promote their heritage through cultural tourism, but there are drawbacks as well. The authenticity and spiritual value of cultural customs run the risk of being undermined by the monetization of such acts, where rituals and traditions are carried out purely for the benefit of tourists (Greenwood, 1977). Additionally, the flood of visitors may cause cultural dilution, in which outside influences eclipse regional customs and result in changes to one's sense of cultural identity (Smith, 2009).

Therefore, the foundation of sustainable mountain tourism needs to be the respectful promotion and preservation of indigenous traditions. To guarantee that cultural heritage is preserved and enjoyed in a way that benefits both the hosts and the guests, cooperation between local communities, governments, and tourism stakeholders is necessary. Moreover, economic prospects for indigenous people must be balanced with cultural sustainability to enable them to take part in and profit from tourism while retaining control over the representation of their traditional traditions.

Another critical issue in the context of tourism development is the environmental stability of mountain regions, which are highly vulnerable to external pressures because of their distinctive biodiversity and geographical features. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), mountains make up about 22% of the Earth's land surface and are a source of vital resources for populations both upstream and downstream, including food, energy, and water (UNEP, 2011). Additionally, these ecosystems are at risk from pollution, deforestation, climate change, and unsustainable tourism practices.

The destruction of landscapes as a result of overtourism is one of the main environmental issues facing mountain tourism. Well-known tourist locations like the Colorado Rockies, the Swiss Alps, and Mount Everest have seen severe environmental stress, with problems ranging from waste management and littering to habitat destruction and soil erosion (Nepal, 2002). The loss of biodiversity and disturbance of wildlife habitats can result from high visitor traffic in environmentally sensitive places. Deforestation and the depletion of natural resources also result from the construction of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, resorts, and ski areas, which frequently intrude on natural landscapes.

The environmental problems mountain regions face are further complicated by climate change. The melting of glaciers, altered precipitation patterns, and rising temperatures are threatening the stability of these ecosystems, which has an immediate effect on tourism. For example, the decrease in snow cover in alpine regions has affected ski tourism, and the retreat of glaciers has changed trekking routes in the Himalayas (Beniston, 2003). These changes not only disrupt tourism but also endanger the livelihoods of mountain communities that rely on natural resources for energy, livestock, and agriculture.

In mountainous areas, sustainable tourism measures need to be put in place to guarantee environmental stability. This involves adopting eco-friendly infrastructure, enforcing environmental laws, and promoting low-impact tourism activities. Moreover, maintaining the ecological integrity of mountain ecosystems depends on actions taken to prevent climate change, such as cutting carbon emissions and safeguarding forests. Particularly pertinent in mountainous areas is the idea of responsible tourism, which focuses on reducing the detrimental effects of tourism on the environment and nearby populations (Goodwin, 2011).

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