

Sustainable Ecotourism Practices: Influence on Destination Choice among Tourists visiting India

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Abstract

The research explores the influence of sustainable ecotourism practices, for instance: environmental conservation, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation, on tourists' destination choice when visiting ecotourism destinations in India. Data collected through a standardized questionnaire were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Results show that environmental conservation has a substantial positive influence on visitor's location choice, succeeded by cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation. Community engagement failed to influence tourists' destination selection. These results highlight the need for tourism industry stakeholders to prioritize environmental and cultural heritage preservation, as well as sustainability, to attract more ecotourists.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Destination choice, Tourist, India

Introduction

Travel to destinations beyond one's usual environment reflects social, cultural, and economic progress. Individuals from both developed and developing nations participate in tourism. Tourism is defined as travel undertaken for leisure or to experience the unique attributes of a place. While travel can be complex and demanding, it also offers enjoyment and serves as a means to alleviate fatigue. Exposure to diverse cultures and lifestyles through travel enriches personal experience and provides valuable opportunities to learn about local customs and traditions.

India, with its 86 national parks, 448 wildlife reserves, over 2.4 million temples, mosques, as well as churches, stunning forts and palaces, the gigantic Himalayas, a vast shoreline, and countless added charms, boasts millions of years of natural and cultural treasures. India is one of the leading destinations for individual travel. India's abundance of well-preserved ecosystems contributes to its geographical variety. These ecosystems are the primary sources of ecotourism in India.

Ecotourism is recognized as a sustainable form of travel, involving environmentally responsible visits to

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natural areas that support environmental preservation and local community well-being. This tourism model has attracted diverse interest as a tool for development, conservation, and economic growth. Ecotourism contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural resources (Hameed & Khalid, 2018). It supports indigenous cultures by promoting practices that minimize environmental impact while providing meaningful experiences for visitors. The concept has gained prominence, especially in developing countries. Ecotourism seeks to balance ecological preservation with tourism demands and the socioeconomic needs of local residents, including employment, skill development, income generation, and social advancement.

Ecotourism is relatively new travel trend and differs from other forms of tourism (Indwar & Muthukumar, 2023). It is among the tourism industry's most rapidly expanding subsectors. Any form of tourism centered on nature, with little adverse environmental impact, that involves locals in its design and execution, and that emphasizes the value of teaching tourists, is referred to as ecotourism. It depends on the preservation of ecological habitats that tourists can experience and enjoy. It is fascinating to understand how ecotourism may promote environmental conservation and economic development in developing countries. It is now a significant source of income for many countries.

The goals of ecotourism and sustainable tourism are often similar; for example, they aim to promote rural revitalization, economic growth, and environmental preservation (Jaini et al., 2012). In addition to providing tourists with fresh and instructive experiences, ecotourism is developed and managed in ways that protect biodiversity. The number of travel businesses eager to offer ecotourism services skyrocketed following the surge in ecotourists visiting India (Jaini et al., 2012). Additionally, the inconsistencies and ambiguity present in the ecotourism conceptualization are linked to the fragmented character of ecotourism regulations and practices. It demonstrates that changes to guidelines will not adequately address all the flaws involved without a comprehensive assessment of their fundamental conceptual biases (Das, 2011). When choosing a place, ecotourists are expected to go through every step of their decision-making process and conduct a thorough information search.

Though studies by Cabral et al. (2019) consider ecotourism as solution to poverty and biodiversity degradation, the ecotourism industry in India, might become unsustainable in the long run (Pujar & Mishra, 2020) with its deceptive conservation as well as commercial prejudice. Especially, ecotourism is recognized as a means to augment sustainability internationally; studies on the decision-making aspects of ecotourism destinations remains scarce. Hence, this study aims to analyse ecotourists' decisions when choosing an ecotourism destination, with a focus on sustainable ecotourism practices.

Literature review

Gössling and Higham (2020) derive that sustainable ecotourism is an ethical travel strategy that blends cultural consciousness with ecological preservation. The goal is to reduce adverse environmental impacts while optimizing beneficial contributions to nearby communities and ecosystems (Gössling & Higham, 2020). Understanding and appreciation of biodiversity, along with regional customs, are prioritised, with a focus on preserving natural and cultural assets. Traditional tourism frequently ranks financial advantage over environmental concerns, whereas the purpose of sustainable ecotourism is to balance the desires of visitors, environment, and resident communities (Li et al., 2022). The goal is to develop awareness of the negative consequences of tourism, including habitat damage, pollution, and the deterioration of traditional cultural values. Tourism began adopting eco-friendly practices in the late 20th century due to increased worldwide cognizance of environmental destruction as well as growth of sustainability actions at global level (Hassan et al., 2022; Tangban et al., 2025). Studies also confirm that attitude towards environment and desire, in addition to prevalent discussion significantly influence

visitor's intent to choose a sustainable tourism attraction, along with knowledge (Mohaidin et al., 2017). Various institutions worldwide, such as the International Ecotourism Society and the United Nations, were instrumental in formalizing and advancing sustainable ecotourism policies as a morally and financially sound alternative. According to Ateljevic (2020), enlarged environmental consciousness amongst tourists, government and non-government support for sustainable growth, and monetary benefits of environmentally friendly tourism are among the primary drivers of the expansion of sustainable ecotourism. There also exists a significant and strong correlation between three factors, namely: environmental concern, forthcoming period perspective, and destinations image, that determines the visitors' intent to select ecotourism locations (Pham & Khanh, 2020). Sustainable ecotourism has appeared as significant part in the leisure industry in recent years, emphasising on complimenting environmental conservation, involvement of community, and tourist experiences. A significant tendency is the upsurge of community-based tourism, that lists local community contribution in ecotourism inventiveness. The growth of sustainable lodging choices is additional noteworthy trend. These includes Eco-lodges, ecologies, and eco-resorts, that strive to lessen the ecological footmark and deliver visitors with immersive nature experiences (El M & Badr, 2022).

Tourist Destination Choice

The process that determines where travellers want to visit (Chen & Rahman, 2018). This choice is steered network of family members, friends, preferences, societal values, safety, and promotional activities connected to place of visit (Eugene, 2013). Additionally, it includes an assessment of indicators like influence of culture, safety, affordability, accessibility, as well as the distinctiveness of the experience. Such a decision affects the socioeconomic environments of the destinations and international tourism (Li et al., 2022). Decisions made by tourists frequently reflect bigger forms in visitor behaviour, prejudiced by social media platforms, internet reviews, marketing campaigns, and word-of-mouth endorsements. Travel places those meet tourists' needs and expectations are likely to attract more visitors, leading to both international recognition and regional development (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Satisfied visitors are likely to revisit and vice versa (Eugene, 2013). Travellers' decisions have a significant impact on a destination's economic performance too (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018; Ndlovu et al., 2026). It is because tourism brings in substantial financial resources through direct spending on lodging, food, travel, and leisure activities, as well as indirect benefits to subsidiary service providers. Destinations generate jobs, encourage investment, and promote economic diversity by drawing tourists (Hsu et al., 2016). However, several important factors, such as the quality of services as perceived by visitors, the influence of natural or cultural appeal, as well as successful destination marketing, influence destination choice (Zhang et al., 2016). To keep a place appealing to prospective tourists, environmental sustainability, political stability, and health and safety conditions are crucial (Su et al., 2018).

The economic sustainability of a tourist destination is influenced by visitor flow and revenue generation (Cabañero et al., 2023). When a destination successfully attracts a steady and diverse influx of tourists, it sustains continuous economic activity and enhances overall market visibility. This increased visibility stimulates demand for local goods and services, benefiting sectors such as handicrafts, hospitality, food and beverage, and transportation (Lee et al., 2021). Moreover, a popular destination often becomes a focal point for investment, encouraging infrastructure development and the introduction of innovative tourism products and experiences. Furthermore, when a destination is perceived as a leading choice, it can generate higher income and create greater reinvestment opportunities by charging the highest rates for accommodation, activities, and tourism packages (Cheng et al., 2024).

In contrast, contemporary travellers who are more aware of climate change and the pressing importance of environmental responsibility tend to favour destinations that demonstrate a firm commitment to sustainable, eco-friendly practices (Peng et al., 2025). This change is indicative of a broader trend toward responsible travel, in which eco-friendly tourists actively seek destinations that support sustainable development while reducing their ecological footprint. Because of this, travel destinations those seen as pioneers with green philosophy, such as protecting natural resources, reducing carbon discharges, promoting biodiversity, as well as committed to sustainable management of waste, tends to appeal higher to such changing population (Nguyen et al., 2024). Additionally, eco-friendly travellers frequently assess locations using their compliance with sustainable travel accreditations, the accessibility of eco-friendly accommodation, as well as the advancement of less impacted leisure pursuits like cycling, and hiking (Dangi, 2018). Considering this, travel destinations worldwide are incorporating ecotourism measures into their processes to demonstrate the obligation to ecological sustainability and to fascinate ecotourists (López-Sánchez et al., 2018). Accordingly, sustainable ecotourism players are implementing strategies that balance visitor satisfaction, community well-being, and environmental conservation (Al-Qudah & Malkawi, 2019). It entails actions intended to reduce the environmental effect of tourism though promoting a profound respect for natural and cultural legacy of all kind (Al-Khanbashi & Zubair, 2022). Several nations are now adopting sustainable tourism practices to preserve their distinctive natural and cultural treasures while generating alternative economic opportunities.

Similarly, governments and other interested parties are participating in environmentally friendly set-up, like resort with solar-powered, green transport, and waste treatment techniques, to attract ecotourists (Aideed, 2020). Additionally, efforts are underway to protect natural habitats, such as the Red Sea's coral reefs and the Arabian Desert, through programs that promote ethical travel and environmental education. Similarly, community-based ecotourism initiatives are undertaken, strengthening local communities, generating employment, and promoting cross-cultural interaction (Cabañero et al., 2023). It is essential to examine how these environmentally friendly tourism methods can improve travellers' destination choices, as they are gradually developing in this area. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of specific activities in improving tourists' location choice. These include environmental protection, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. Analysing these aspects of ecotourism destinations is essential, as several projects aimed at promoting the nation's natural and cultural resources and improving sustainability are implementing these practices in the Indian tourism industry.

While eco-friendly attitude in tourism has engrossed attention between practitioners and academics, little is acknowledged around the impact of this behaviour on the selection of eco-friendly place, particularly in emergent tourist marketplaces like India. A contentious debate in the tourism literature has been sparked by tourists' growing attention in nature-based as well as cultural leisure activities, particularly in ecotourism attractions. Some scholars believe that instead of using mass marketing, ecotourism should be tackled through a niche strategy. As a result, determining the primary traits of an ecotourism destination is crucial for developing management and marketing plans tailored to tourists' specific requirements. In light of India's potential for ecotourism and the dearth of empirical research on such destinations, the current study aims to examine the impact of environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, sustainability orientation and community engagement on travellers' destination choices for ecotourism in India.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

This research is based on the value-belief-norm (VBN) theory endorsed by Stern et al. (1999), a structure that describes environmental behaviour as a result of individual norms shaped by values, beliefs,

and perceptions of accountability. A core principle of VBN theory proposes a pro-environmental behaviour that are motivated by strong personal principles, advanced through convictions regarding environmental settings and its effect, which results in the initiation of individual standards directing one's behaviour (Chen, 2014). According to this theory's assumptions, people who acquire moral principles, internalize environmental values, and believe that their actions can affect environmental outcomes will force themselves to act in ways that promote ecological sustainability (Chunhua et al., 2023). The VBN theory is relevant to this study because it offers a context being considerate how people's values and beliefs affect choices of travel places and other decisions and behaviour. According to Stern et al. (1999), in VBN theory, environmental attitudes are shaped by values, that trigger personal values that direct environmentally conscious behaviour. This suggests that, in line with their broader sustainability-oriented values and beliefs, visitors' decisions about where to travel can be prejudiced by their intellect of ethical commitment to environmental preservation, involvement of community, as well as preservation of cultural heritage. Because it connects sustainable orientations with practical outcomes, including choosing locations that support ecological and cultural preservation, this theory is especially pertinent to the study's goals. Therefore, the VBN hypothesis clarifies why travellers might favour a location if they believe it embodies sustainable ecotourism principles, such as cultural heritage preservation, community involvement, and environmental conservation.

Environmental conservation and tourist destination choice

Puri et al. (2018) conducted an extensive review of ecotourism studies in India using thematic analysis. The study found that biodiversity conservation as well as local socioeconomic growth are the key inspirations towards ecotourism. Additionally, prevalent studies are neither inclusive nor securely addresses the ideologies of ecotourism. Overall, studies has uncovered the undesirable effects of mass tourism on protected areas, assessed success stories, and stressed the options for ecotourism.

Environmental preservation aims to preserve and restore biodiversity while reducing the ecological impact of tourism operations (Fathi & Khamis, 2019). Due to increased worldwide awareness of environmental degradation and a dire need to address climate change, preserving the environment has become inevitable (Agboola & Adedeji, 2020; Moyo & Tshandama, 2021). As nature preservation echoes popularity, tourist destinations are implementing it step by step by restricting tourist visits, implementing renewable energy measures, imposing waste discarding practices, and educating visitors towards eco-friendly strategies (Kante & Thiam, 2023). Additionally, preservation initiatives involve residents by utilizing their deep-rooted knowledge and promoting involvement in nature-friendly tourism businesses, thereby fostering socioeconomic growth. Ecotourists prefer destinations that demonstrate a commitment to protecting natural and cultural heritage, underscoring the importance of sustainability in destination selection (Abdullah et al., 2024). In addition to attracting ethical tourists, these locations position themselves as sustainable centres, safeguarding their continuing sustainability as well as affordability in the international tourism market (Zhang et al., 2016). The aforementioned perspective suggests that environmental preservation is a crucial aspect of sustainable ecotourism that affects travellers' destination choices. The study by Hamed and Al-Rashidi (2022), which found that ecological conservation significantly increases tourist loyalty, supports this point of view. The research carried out by Fathi and Khamis (2019), which found that environmental conservation significantly increased visitor loyalty, supports the position as well, even if tourist entry fees are charged as a source of funding preservation initiative and perhaps avoiding overcrowding (Kaffashi et al., 2015). Past research also finds substantial relations amongst attitudes towards the nature, attitudes towards nature-friendly places, social and personal norms, behavioural control, and intents to travel to nature based destinations (Nowacki et al., 2021). Considering the above studies, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Tourist destination choice is significantly influenced by environmental protection.

Community engagement and tourist destination choice

To ensure the long-term defence of biodiversity and cultural heritage, community engagement in sustainable ecotourism has become a crucial component, as it cultivates positive interactions between local communities and tourism operations (Nguyen et al., 2024). Tourism companies can support cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and the fair distribution of economic benefits by including locals in decision-making (Dangi, 2018). Additionally, government agencies, local companies, and indigenous groups have been working together to establish community engagement in tourist areas in recent years (López-Sánchez et al., 2018). Destinations can foster more genuine interactions appealing to ecotourists by enabling local communities to actively engage in the tourism industry as a whole (Al-Qudah & Malkawi, 2019). This strategy has a significant impact on tourists' destination choices, as more tourists are giving preference to places that validate a obligation to sustainability as well as local cultural compassion through community involvement (Al-Khanbashi & Zubair, 2022). According to aforementioned perspective, community involvement is a crucial aspect of sustainable ecotourism that shapes tourists' destination preferences. This perspective is supported by Lin and Lee's (2019) study, which found that visitor loyalty improved significantly through community interaction. Meylievich et al., (2024) highlight a strong correlation among consumer interest in eco-friendly accommodations, cultural authenticity, and support for local conservation efforts. The study identifies areas for improvement, such as improving communication with locals and aligning interpretive activities with eco-friendly offerings. The survey by Zaki and Ibrahim (2023) found that community involvement significantly increased visitor spending at eco-destinations. As a result, we hypothesize that:

H2: Travelers' destination choice is significantly influenced by community engagement.

Cultural heritage preservation and tourist destination choice

Rising awareness of the need to preserve traditional cultures alongside promoting tourism has made cultural heritage preservation a crucial component of sustainable ecotourism (Ren et al., 2021). Cultural tourism is becoming increasingly popular because it promotes community development and environmental conservation, especially for indigenous and local cultures (Sinh-Duc-Hoang et al., 2023). A range of tactics, including the creation of heritage spots, the promotion of regional arts and crafts, and the incorporation of artistic initiatives which involve visitors and resident communities, are used to implement cultural heritage preservation in tourist destinations (Swangjang & Kornpiphat, 2021). Findings by Wardana et al., (2019) establish that cultural tourism and nature-tourism have a significant positive effect on sustainable tourism growth. Further, cultural and sustainable tourism growth has a constructive, considerable effect on destination attractiveness. The protection of cultural heritage could significantly impact tourism destination choices, as modern tourists seek places that offer rich, genuine cultural experiences alongside natural beauty (Wang, 2015). According to Zaki and Ibrahim (2023), visitors are attracted to sites that combine nature-friendly approaches with cultural sustainability, as this improves the general travel understanding and helps visitors to understand how to support the preservation of local culture. Research also reveals that tourists are strongly willing to pay fees for practices that augment environmental superiority and cultural involvements, shimmering rising assistance for sustainability-centered ecotourism (Haron et al., 2025). Maximum visitors are nature enthusiasts, followed by culture (Constantin et al., 2021). A study by Meylievich et al. (2024) highlights a strong correlation between consumer interest in eco-friendly accommodations, cultural authenticity, and support

for local conservation efforts. According to this perspective, cultural heritage preservation is a crucial aspect of sustainable ecotourism and influences travellers' destination preferences. Ren et al., (2021) research found that cultural heritage conservation significantly increased tourism. The study by Naima (2021) found that cultural heritage preservation had a significant beneficial impact on visitor loyalty. As a result, this study proposed the following alternate hypothesis:

H3: Travelers' choice of place is influenced by cultural heritage preservation.

Sustainability orientation and tourist destination choice

Sustainability orientation is crucial aspect related to ecotourism, as it involves informing visitors about a destination's sustainability objectives and practices (Chiu et al., 2014). This approach directs tourists toward more sustainable behaviour, including reducing waste, conserving energy, and honouring local communities and wildlife by fostering awareness of the delicate balance between tourism and environmental conservation. Given the growing concern of environmental degradation and desire for environmentally conscious travel experiences, the travel industry is adopting a sustainability-oriented approach (Díaz et al., 2024). Also, understanding as well as education showcase a critical part of sustainable ecotourism. Efforts are undertaken to promote tourist consciousness around natural and cultural importance of destination with explanatory activities, guided excursions, as well as collaborative displays. It helps to build a sense for environmental headship and inspires answerable behaviour. Tour operators are also accepting sustainable strategies, preferring ecological preservation, support to locals, and obeying code of conduct. Technology and digital inventions are being favoured to augment ecotourism involvements, by mobile applications, virtual reality, as well as augmented reality supplying educational and collaborating apparatuses for tourists. Overall, such current tendencies showcase the industry's rising gratitude for sustainability and conservation efforts in tourism. By encouraging such tendencies, the industry will help protect natural resources, preserve biodiversity, as well as promote the welfare of resident groups thereby delivering inspiring and educational understandings for travellers.

Adopting eco-friendly policies, disseminating knowledge about conservation initiatives, and interacting with visitors via a variety of channels, including guided tours, educational content, and digital media, are all part of putting sustainability orientation into practice (Peters & Peters, 2019). Destinations can influence travellers' decisions by highlighting the social and environmental benefits of their operations. Many tourists choose destinations with a strong commitment to sustainability (Liu et al., 2021). As a result, eco-tourism destinations become more appealing to tourists seeking places that share their values and benefit the environment (Tseng et al., 2019). According to this perspective, tourists' location choices may be influenced by their sustainability orientation, a crucial aspect of sustainable ecotourism. Sudhagar (2019) found that a sustainability orientation significantly increased loyalty among tourists in ecotourist locations in India, supporting this view. The investigation conducted by Nguyen et al. (2024) found that a sustainability attitude substantially anticipated visitor loyalty. The majority of visitors would be open to ecotourism, and different communication strategies are needed to promote ecotourism education for various segments of potential ecotourists (Cini et al., 2010). As a result, this study proposed the following alternate hypothesis:

H4: Travelers' choice of destination is significantly influenced by sustainability orientation.

Conceptual model

As a tactic for encouraging environmental preservation while ensuring long-term visitor engagement, sustainable ecotourism has attracted significant attention. Numerous studies have examined how tourist loyalty and patronage are affected by sustainable activities, such as environmental conservation, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. The current research established a theoretical model (see Fig. 1), that illustrate suggested association amongst independent (sustainable ecotourism) and dependent (destination choice) variables, based on a comprehensive analysis of empirical research. According to the model, the independent variable comprises four sub-variables: environmental conservation, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. Both dependent as well as independent variables include several parameters modified from existing related studies to ascertain the causal relationship between tourists' destination choice and sustainable ecotourism in the current study.

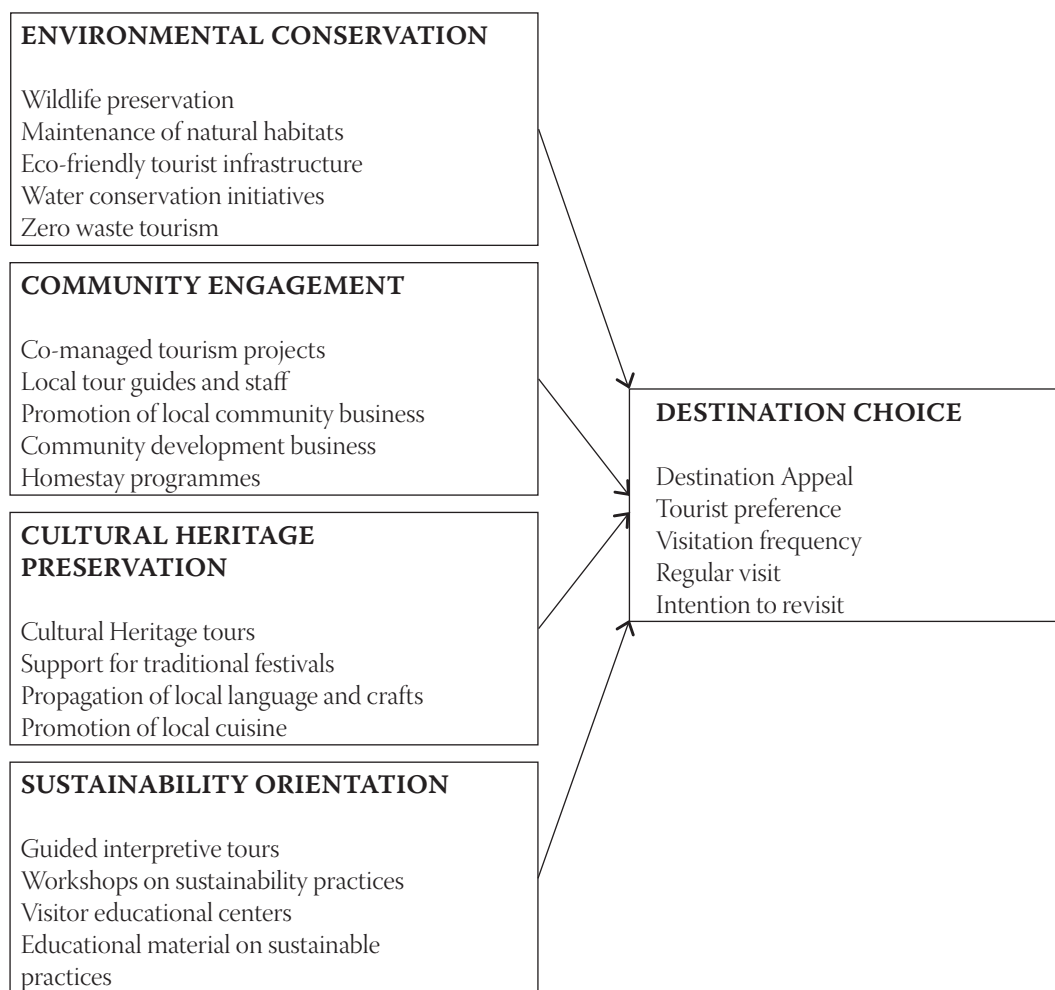


Figure 1. *Conceptual model of the study*

Source: Parameters of independent variable adapted from Ren et al. (2021); Sudhagar (2019); Nguyen et al. (2024); Yousef (2024). Parameters of the dependent variable adapted from Lin & Lee (2019)

Research Methodology

The research aims to understand factors considered in decision-making before visiting an ecotourism destination. A survey was conducted at nine ecotourism destinations in India (figure 2), to achieve this objective. These destinations were Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary, Dudhsagar Falls, Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary, Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary, Coorg, Koyana Wildlife Sanctuary, Thenmala Ecotourism Project, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Primary data was collected through a standardized questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Highly Agree (5) to Highly Disagree (1). The data was collected from December 2024 to August 2025, using a structured questionnaire via hard copies as well as by Google Forms with convenience sampling method. A total of 583 responses were received but only 541 responses qualified for next stage. A five-person research team was engaged to collect the data including authors. Measures for Environmental conservation were adapted from Ren et al. (2021), Community Engagement from Sudhagar (2019), Cultural Heritage preservation from Nguyen et al. (2024), Sustainability orientation from Yousef (2024), and Destination choice from Lin and Lee (2019). Descriptive statistics and Regression were used in SPSS to evaluate the data and test the hypotheses. Ethical considerations were adhered to, ensuring that participants were informed, that participation was voluntary, and that responses remained anonymous. To ensure validity, reliability, and alignment with research goals, questionnaire characteristics were modified to some extent. Figure 3 provides demographic profile of the respondents and figure 4 provides Cronbach's alpha score for all variables, which were above 0.70, confirming data reliability.



Figure 2. Ecotourism destinations included in the study, Source: Generated using ChatGPT

Data Analysis and Discussion

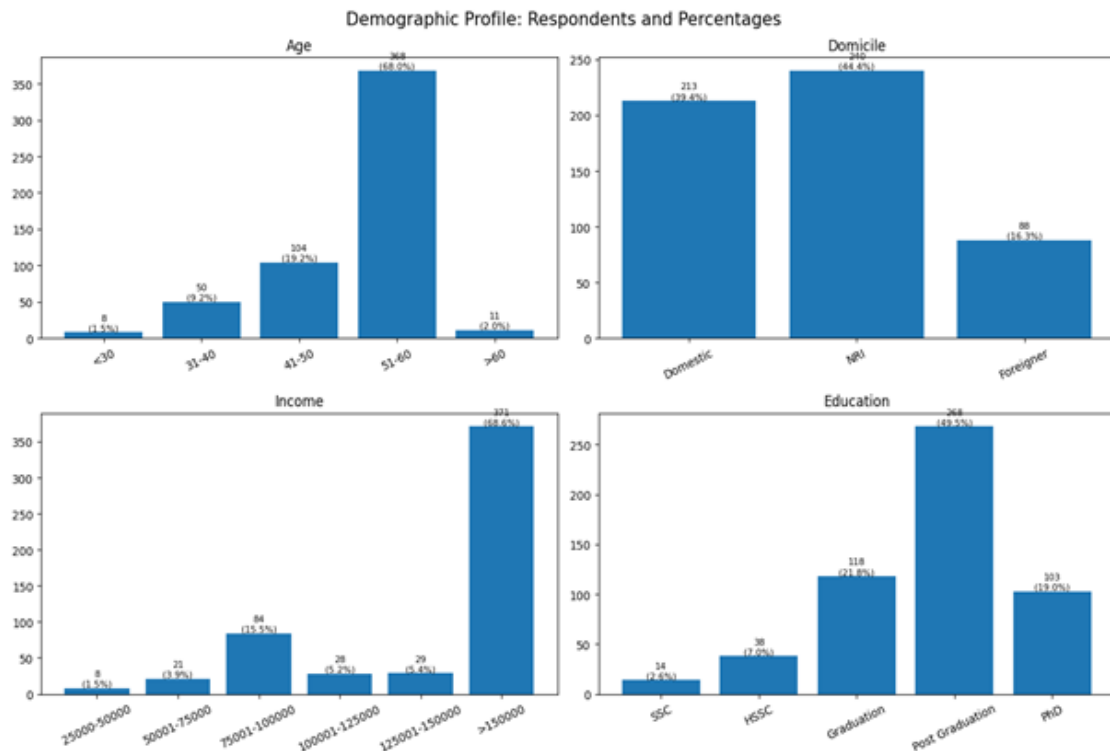


Figure 3. Demographic profile of the respondents; Source: Author compilation

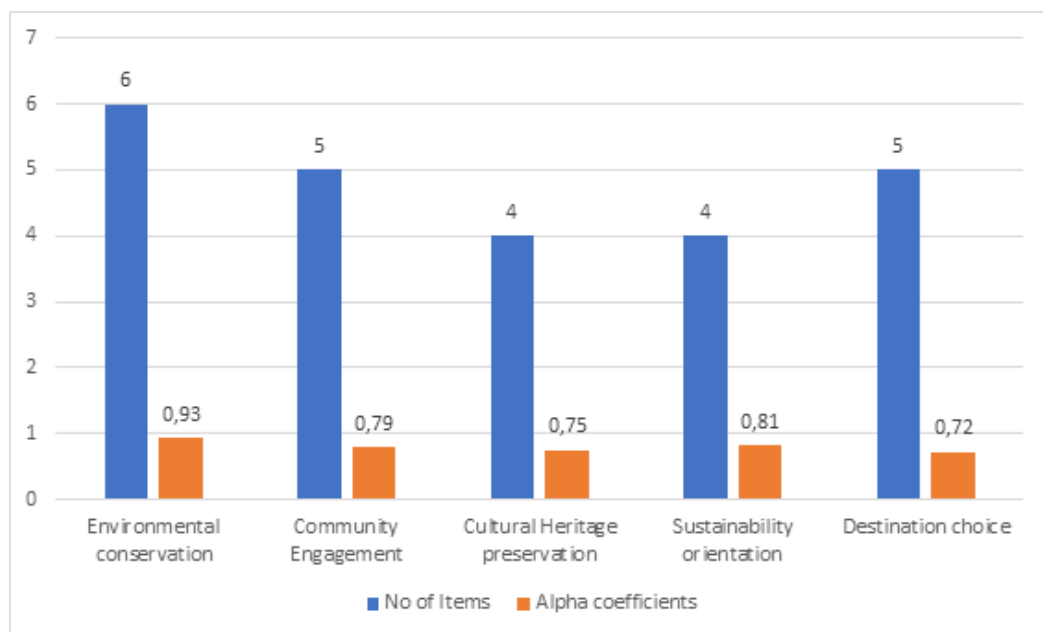


Figure 4. Reliability summary; Source: Author compilation

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics*

Variables	N	Range	Mean	SD	Variance
Environmental conservation	541	3.40	3.989	1.263	0.896
Community Engagement	541	2.20	4.106	0.658	0.634
Cultural Heritage preservation	541	3.25	2.805	1.106	0.807
Sustainability orientation	541	2.00	3.683	0.638	0.524
Destination choice	541	2.80	3.277	0.826	0.683
Valid N (listwise)	541				

Source: Author compilation

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics on the study variables. All mean values for the study variables show general agreement: environmental conservation (3.98), community engagement (4.10), cultural heritage preservation (2.80), sustainability orientation (3.68), and destination choice (3.27). Standard deviation ranges from 0.63818 (Sustainability orientation) to 1.26317 (Environmental conservation), along with variance supporting this pattern (0.524 and 0.896, respectively). Sustainability orientation had the lowest response range (2.00), whereas Environmental conservation had the greatest (3.40). Although respondents generally agreed with the variables, their perceptions varied, with environmental conservation exhibiting the most incredible diversity and community engagement receiving the highest rating, indicating that local community involvement in tourism-related events, cultural services, and hospitality can increase a destination's appeal to tourists.

Table 3. *Multicollinearity test*

Variables	Collinearity statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
Environmental conservation	0.416	2.831
Community Engagement	0.527	4.132
Cultural Heritage preservation	0.357	2.799
Sustainability orientation	0.326	3.071

Source: Author compilation

Strong correlations among predictor variables must be avoided in multiple Regression to improve the precision of interpretation (Osborne & Waters, 2002). Such problem weaken the statistical strength of the model and can lead to false outcomes. The variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance levels were used in this study to assess multicollinearity. According to Keith's (2019) criteria, tolerance levels greater than 0.1 and VIF values less than 5 indicate the absence of multicollinearity. The VIF values are all less than 5, and the tolerance levels are over 0.1, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue as noticed in Table 3.

Table 4. *Model Summary, sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.896*	0.803	0.800	0.369

a Predictors: (Constant), Sustainability orientation, Cultural Heritage preservation, Environmental conservation, Community Engagement

Source: Author compilation

Table 5. *ANOVA, sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	131.640	4	32.910	420.868	0.000
	Residual	32.245	236	.137		
	Total	163.884	240			

Dependent Variable: Destination Choice

Predictors: (Constant), Sustainability orientation, Cultural Heritage preservation, Environmental conservation, Community Engagement

Source: Author compilation

Table 6. *Coefficients, sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.009	0.247		4.088	0.000
	Environmental conservation	0.471	0.074	0.720	8.408	0.000
	Community Engagement	0.017	0.148	0.013	0.113	0.910
	Cultural Heritage preservation	0.172	0.036	0.631	7.778	0.000
	Sustainability orientation	0.026	0.066	0.421	3.397	0.002

Dependent Variable: Destination Choice

Source: Author compilation

Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the results of the Multiple regression analysis used to test the hypotheses de-

veloped in this study. Table 4 shows that the dependent variable (Destination choice) and the independent variables (Sustainable ecotourism practices) have a strong relationship ($R = 0.896$). Additionally, sustainable ecotourism practices account for 80% of the variance in tourists' destination choice, as indicated by the R^2 value of 0.803. This suggests that the model is highly predictive. The ANOVA findings are shown in Table 5, where the model's overall significance is confirmed by the F-statistic of 420.868 ($p < 0.001$). This high F-value indicates that the combined effects of the predictors strongly influence travellers' location choices. Standardized beta coefficients, which indicate the relative significance of each dimension, are shown in Table 6 to further analyze the contributions of the distinct predictors. Environmental conservation ($\beta = 0.720$, $p < 0.001$) and Cultural heritage preservation ($\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$) have the most significant impact. Sustainability orientation ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$) has a moderate effect, while community engagement ($\beta = 0.013$, $p > 0.001$) has an insignificant impact on tourist destination choice. Together, these results show that of the four indicators, three have a significant effect on tourist destination choice, with environmental conservation being the most important, followed by cultural heritage preservation. The result of the hypotheses is presented below.

H1: Tourist destination choice is significantly influenced by environmental protection: Accepted

H2: Travelers' choice of destination is significantly influenced by community engagement: Rejected

H3: Travelers' choice of place is greatly influenced by cultural heritage preservation: Accepted

H4: Travelers' choice of destination is significantly influenced by the sustainability approach: Accepted

Discussion

The first hypothesis test showed that visitors' preference for a place was significantly impacted by environmental conservation. This is consistent with the findings of Fathi and Khamis (2019) and Hamed and Al-Rashidi (2022). This emphasizes the importance of ecological preservation in determining a destination's appeal and competitiveness in the Indian tourism market.

The second hypothesis was rejected, indicating that community engagement is not a significant determinant in the selection of an ecotourism destination by tourists, even though it received the highest mean score among the evaluated factors. This finding is unexpected because it contradicts ecotourism literature that identifies community participation and local involvement as fundamental components of successful ecotourism development and requires further investigation. The present study indicates that although respondents acknowledge the importance of community engagement in principle, it does not significantly influence their actual destination selection decisions. This discrepancy may be attributed to changing tourist priorities, where factors such as natural attractions, accessibility, environmental quality, recreational opportunities, and safety outweigh considerations related to local community involvement. It is also possible that many tourists are unaware of the extent of community participation at a destination and therefore do not consciously incorporate this factor into their decision-making process. Another possible explanation is that community engagement functions as an indirect rather than a direct determinant of destination choice. Previous research has shown that community participation contributes to improved destination quality, environmental conservation, and overall visitor experiences, which may subsequently influence destination preferences without tourists explicitly recognizing the role of local communities. Community participation has also been linked to improved sustainability and quality of life within ecotourism destinations, suggesting that its effects may be mediated through other destination attributes rather than directly affecting tourist choice.

The third hypothesis, which posited that tourists' destination choice was significantly influenced by cultural heritage promotion, was accepted. Similar studies were conducted by Yousef (2024) and Zhang et al. (2016). This emphasizes the importance of preserving regional customs, historical sites, and cultural experiences, as cultural heritage is a significant draw for tourists. Finally, hypothesis four was accepted; the sustainability approach influenced tourists' preferences for a place. This is consistent with the outcomes reported by Nguyen et al. (2024), Lee et al. (2021), and Sudhagar (2019), highlighting the importance of sustainability education and awareness in drawing ecotourists to specific locations.

Conclusion and policy implications

The research tries to explore the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice when visiting ecotourism destinations in India. It was carried out in light of the growing popularity of ecotourism worldwide. The study primarily aimed to ascertain how tourists' choice of location is influenced by environmental conservation, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. Data were collected through a standardized questionnaire survey, which was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

According to the results, environmental conservation has a substantial positive influence on visitors' location preference, followed by protection of cultural heritage and sustainability orientation. Community engagement did not influence ecotourists' destination choice. These results highlight the need for tourism industry stakeholders to prioritize environmental and cultural heritage preservation, as well as sustainability, to attract more ecotourists. Implementing nature-friendly policies at travel destinations, like habitat protection, wildlife preservation, sustainable infrastructure, conservation of water, zero-waste tourism, and green transportation, could make this a reality. As a result, these locations can be positioned as premier eco-tourism hotspots, drawing more ecotourists.

Additionally, implementing cultural heritage preservation through guided heritage tours, supporting traditional festivals, promoting local crafts and languages, and presenting authentic local cuisine is also crucial for tourism practitioners. This will make a place more appealing as a distinctive cultural destination and attract travellers seeking real, immersive experiences. To engage tourists in their eco-friendly initiatives even before they arrive, tourism leaders and professionals will also need to adopt a sustainability perspective through guest education centers, sessions on environmentally friendly methods, guided interpretive tours, and educational materials. Encouraging a deeper understanding of existing sustainability commitments would improve visitors' choices and attract travellers who value eco-friendly travel experiences.

Further, the research results indicate that environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability are the most critical elements for visitors to India in ecotourism destinations. The above findings are valuable resources for officials, academics, and experts targeting to align ecotourism policies with tourist prospects and long-term preservation objectives. For long term sustenance of ecotourism destinations and revenue in the ecotourism industry, it is essential to meet ecotourists' expectations and make destination information more accessible.

The relationship between community engagement and ecotourism destination selection warrants further investigation. Future studies could explore whether tourists perceive community involvement differently across demographic groups, levels of environmental awareness, or types of ecotourism destinations. Qualitative research may also help to understand why tourists value community engagement conceptually but do not necessarily consider it a decisive factor when selecting an ecotourism desti-

nation. Such investigations would contribute to a deeper understanding of tourist behaviour and help destination managers design more effective community-based ecotourism strategies.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the influence of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choices in India, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study relied exclusively on data collected through a standardized questionnaire, making the results dependent on respondents' self-reported perceptions and attitudes. Such data may be subject to social desirability bias, whereby respondents provide answers they perceive as socially acceptable or environmentally responsible rather than accurately reflecting their actual travel behaviour. Second, the study collected the data at a single point in time thereby failing to capture changes in tourist preferences and attitudes toward sustainable ecotourism practices over time. As a result, the findings reveal associations between variables but do not establish definitive causal relationships. Third, the study focused specifically on four dimensions of sustainable ecotourism practices: environmental conservation, community participation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. Although these factors are central to ecotourism, destination choice is a complex decision-making process that may also be influenced by numerous other factors such as accessibility, travel costs, infrastructure quality, accommodation facilities, safety and security, destination image, marketing efforts, recreational opportunities, and personal travel motivations. The exclusion of these variables may have limited the explanatory power of the study. Fourth, the research was conducted within the context of ecotourism destinations in India, and therefore the findings may not be readily generalizable to other countries or regions with different environmental, cultural, economic, and tourism characteristics. Finally, the study focused solely on tourists' perspectives and did not incorporate the views of other important stakeholders such as local communities, tourism operators, destination managers, and policymakers. Including these perspectives could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainable ecotourism practices influence decision-making. Future research should therefore consider adopting mixed-method approaches, longitudinal designs, and broader stakeholder participation to overcome these limitations and provide a more holistic understanding of sustainable ecotourism destination choice.

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