

Exploring the Role of Community Participation in Sustainable Ecotourism: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Systematic reviews are crucial for comprehending conceptual development within academic disciplines. This study analyses the role of community participation in ecotourism by reviewing publications from 2009 to 2024, adhering to the PRISMA protocol. The objectives include evaluating previous advancements, assessing current knowledge, and identifying future directions in the field. Seventy-one journal articles were reviewed through predefined selection criteria, systematic database searches, and content analysis. The findings indicate a geographically diverse literature base, predominantly centred on Southeast and South Asia. The analysis shows that active community participation is essential for sustainable ecotourism, leading to better conservation outcomes, greater economic benefits, and stronger social cohesion. Persistent challenges impede meaningful engagement, including power imbalances, economic disparities, and inadequate equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. Resolving these issues necessitates clear communication and the development of capabilities and frameworks for inclusive governance. The review highlights the complexities involved in evaluating the broader impact of ecotourism on sustainable development despite notable successes.

Keywords: Community Participation; Ecotourism; Sustainable Development; Systematic Review

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Introduction

Tourism plays a vital role in modern societies and is increasingly recognised as the most extensive and rapidly expanding industry worldwide (Marahatta & Kshetri, 2012; Khatri et al., 2024). Among tourism forms, ecotourism emerged in the late 1980s as an environmentally sustainable form (Tiwari et al., 2024). Ecotourism allows one to experience and appreciate natural environments while delivering cultural services in natural settings (Liu et al., 2012).

Ecotourism denotes responsible travel in natural areas, which has emerged as a global concern due to the rise in tourist numbers and unsustainable development practices (Sobhani et al., 2022). Ecotourism is treated as responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well-being of local people. Research shows that ecotourism initiatives reduce environmental impacts, promote conservation, and benefit local communities (Fennel, 2015; Wearing et al., 2018). Moreover, it minimises local peoples' dependency on the over-exploitation of natural assets in vulnerable communities (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011). It encompasses a range of nature-based activities which foster visitor appreciation for natural and cultural heritage, ensuring ecological, economic, and social sustainability (Cobbinah et al., 2017; Snyman, 2014). Study also shows that ecotourism strategies preserve natural ecosystems and enhance local residents' quality of life (Phelan et al., 2020).

Community participation, encompassing people's involvement in the planning, decision-making, and execution of ecotourism initiatives (Afua, 2012), is crucial for ensuring these initiatives correspond with local needs, cultures, and ambitions. In the ecotourism domain, community participation promotes local ownership and long-term environmental stewardship, which are pivotal for the success and sustainability of ecotourism (Rustini et al., 2022). Various forms of community participation, including decision-making and contributing physical energy, skills, and property, are identified as critical elements in

ecotourism. For example, active community participation is positively influenced by the ecotourism initiatives and enhances the sustainability performance of the tourism industry (Sobhani et al., 2022).

Ecotourism initiatives sometimes hinder community participation. Study shows that power dynamics, cultural differences, and economic disparities are some factors that can impact effective community participation in ecotourism (Mensah, 2017). However, these hindrances can be reduced through transparent communication, capacity building, and equitable benefit-sharing with the communities (Tölkes, 2018). While numerous studies highlight ecotourism's benefits and challenges (Beza & Berhan, 2017; Fernando & Shariff, 2013), there remains a gap in understanding the complex nature of community participation and its impact on sustainable tourism development. Existing literature often lacks a comprehensive analysis that integrates diverse perspectives on community involvement and evaluates their effectiveness in different contexts (Ardhita & Ferdiansyah, 2024; Tesfaye, 2017; Tiwari et al., 2024; Khatri, 2019). This gap calls for a more systematic approach to reviewing the available literature to identify patterns, contradictions, and opportunities for future research.

This study aims to bridge the current literature gap by systematically analysing ecotourism research articles published in leading tourism journals on community participation in sustainable ecotourism from 2009 to 2024. It assesses the current state of research on community participation in ecotourism. It seeks to identify key themes from past studies, evaluate the methodologies, contexts, and publication trends, and assess the global contributions to the field. This study compiles a summary of studies on community participation in ecotourism, including an overview of trends, shifts in focus, emerging themes, and the components of community participation in ecotourism. Additionally, it suggests future directions for research, which ultimately contribute to a deeper understanding of the

critical role of community members in fostering sustainable tourism practices.

Materials and Methods

The methodology for this study is based on a systematic review of ecotourism literature with a focus on community participation. Content analysis was employed to systematically analyse the extensive literature. Content analysis has been effectively applied in various studies in the ecotourism field to address different thematic concerns (Wondirad, 2019) and is therefore well-suited for a systematic review (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Lee & Jamal, 2008). Content analysis, as a systematic approach, involves the collection, categorisation, evaluation, and synthesis of predominantly qualitative data to ensure accurate and meaningful interpretations (Mohammed et al., 2015).

Literature Screening

This study follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which provide a well-organised framework for presenting findings in a clear and transparent manner (Brooks et al., 2013; Page et al., 2021). This framework is significant for ensuring that systematic reviews are consistent and trustworthy (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009). The literature review began in March 2024 with a thorough search for relevant literature examining the relationship between ecotourism and community engagement.

The data collection process for this study followed a meticulously planned systematic review procedure. The search focused on scholarly works published between 2009 and 2024, with a specific emphasis on sustainability

themes in ecotourism. A set of carefully selected keywords, including "sustainable ecotourism and community participation," "community participation in ecotourism sustainability," "community participation and ecotourism sustainability," "community involvement in sustainable tourism," and "community-based ecotourism," were used to navigate extensive databases, ensuring a comprehensive collection of relevant literature. This thorough search yielded 3035 publications.

An initial screening identified and removed 65 duplicate publications, yielding 2970 unique items. Following the PRISMA procedure, an additional 2868 papers were removed due to preset inclusion criteria (articles related to the study objectives, in English, and with full text available) and exclusion criteria (reports, commentaries, book chapters, and projection studies published after 2009). The databases include Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and Science Direct. The criteria centred on selecting papers that thoroughly investigated the relationship between ecotourism and community engagement while eliminating those irrelevant to the research aims. Following this stringent screening process, 102 full-text publications were chosen for further analysis. Following a thorough evaluation of the entire texts, 34 publications were found to be irrelevant or non-responsive to the research objectives and were therefore eliminated from further analysis. Consequently, the researchers retained 71 relevant publications for the systematic review and included three additional articles from the snowballing technique. The conceptual framework of the study is shown in Figure 1, and the PRISMA Modelling is shown in Figure 2.

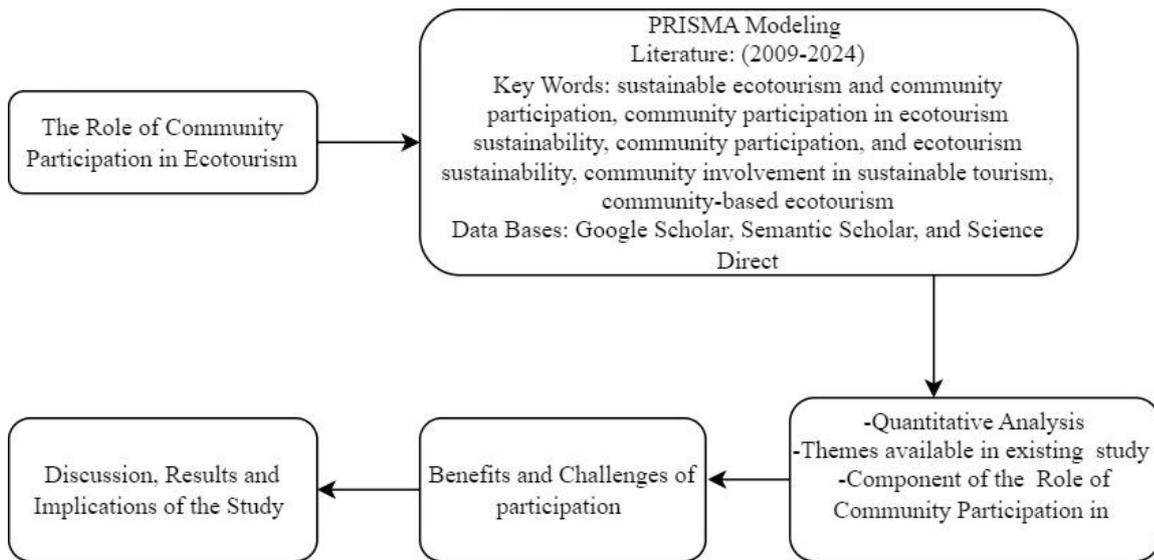


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study
 Source: Compiled by the Authors

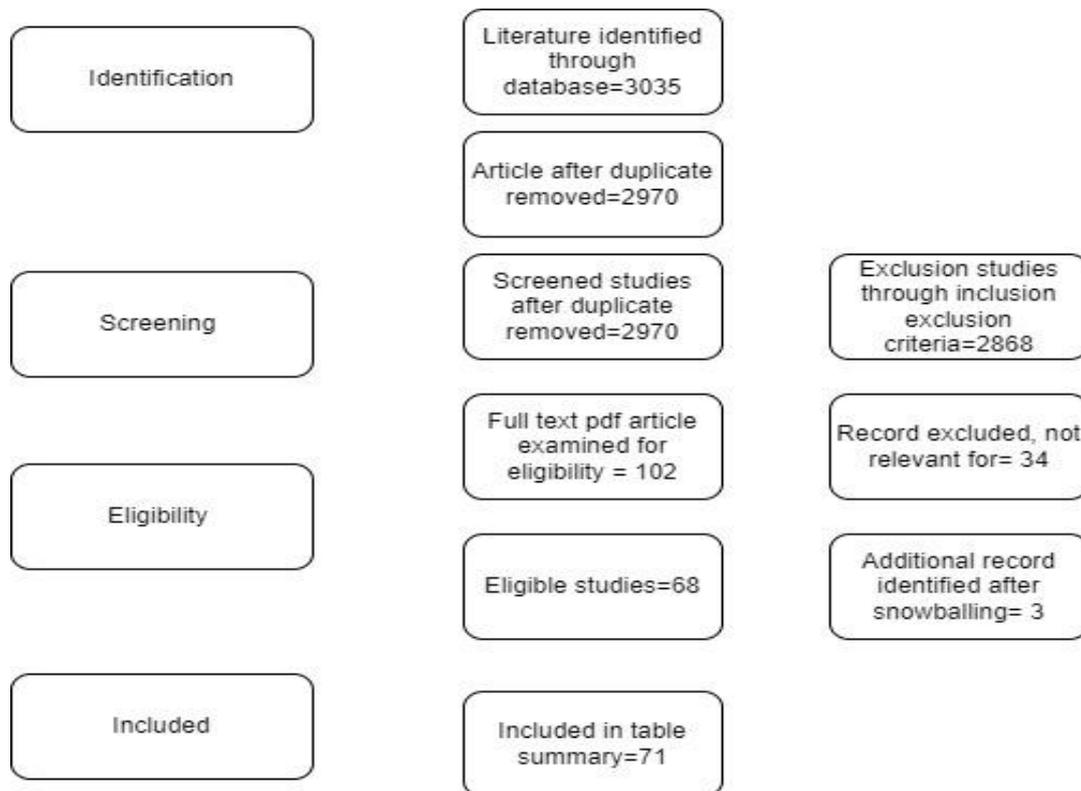


Figure 2: PRISMA Diagram of the Study
 Source: Page et al. (2021)

Results

This section provides an overview of the chosen papers in tables and figures, including information on the topic matter, authors, year of

publication, target population, research design, study location, methods used, theoretical frameworks applied, and significant discoveries.

Quantitative Analysis

Year-wise Distribution of Articles

Figure 3 presents a time-series overview of publishing output from 2009 to 2024 with notable productivity fluctuations. Starting with an article in 2009 and progressively increasing to a peak of ten publications in 2019, the

chronology shows a growing interest and a maturing of research in this issue during that timeframe. Only one article for 2024 at the time of this study indicates a significant drop from 2019. This decline indicates saturation of the study theme or a shift in academic focus to more recent, less well-known aspects of sustainable tourism.

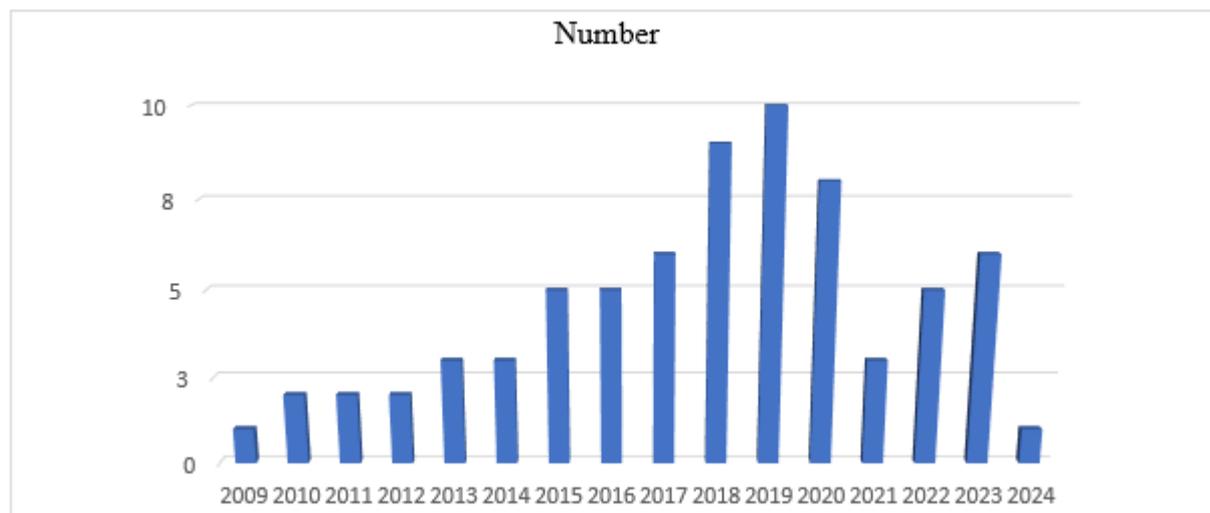


Figure 3: Year-wise Distribution of the Articles
 Source: Compiled by the Authors

Distribution of Articles in Journals

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of articles among various journals. The *Journal of Ecotourism* is the leading journal, featuring five publications on community involvement and sustainable tourism. Four publications are featured in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism* and the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, while the other articles are published in various additional journals. The *Journal of Ecotourism* is recognised for its significance in discussions surrounding sustainability and community engagement within the ecotourism sector. *Tourism Planning and Development* and *Tourism Recreation Research* each contributed three articles, while *Tourism Management*, *World Ecology*, *Geo Journal of Tourism* and *Geosites*, and *Heliyon* each published two articles.

Geographic Distribution

The literature on sustainable ecotourism and community involvement is diverse, including

research in various regions. Figure 4 shows that Asia is the region where the subject has received the most excellent attention (76%). Most of the articles have focused on Southeast Asia (49%), followed by South Asia (20%). Other parts of Asia have accounted for only 7% of the published literature. Africa represented 10% of the total articles, while Australia and Europe together have accounted for 4%, and North and South America have accounted for 3%. In 7% of the articles, the specific country was not identified.

The geographical distribution reflects the varied contexts in which ecotourism operates, each with unique challenges and opportunities. In Southeast Asia, initiatives in Indonesia demonstrate the economic empowerment potential of community-based tourism via homestays and skill-enhancing workshops focused on hospitality and waste management (Phelan et al., 2020). Limited representation in decision-making processes constrains the inclusiveness of these efforts, resulting in the underrepresentation of marginalised groups

(Anggraheni et al., 2018). In Cambodia, Thailand, established social hierarchies and community-based ecotourism (CBET) has governance frameworks hinder meaningful facilitated transformative learning in participation, often reducing community environmental conservation and cultural engagement to superficial levels rather than preservation, with women assuming crucial roles fostering true empowerment in these initiatives (Sen & Walter, 2020). In (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014).

Table 1: Distribution of Articles across Multiple Journals

Name of the Journal	No. of Articles
African Journal of Ecology	1
Anatolia	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	4
Current Issues in Tourism	1
Development Southern Africa	1
Enlighten	1
Environment Behaviour Proceedings Journal	1
Geo Journal	1
Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites	1
Heliyon	2
International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality	1
International Journal of Hospitality Management	1
International Journal of Professional Business	1
International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology	2
JIPA	1
Journal of China Tourism Research	1
Journal of Economics, Finance, and Management Study	1
Journal of Ecotourism	5
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	4
Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	1

Source: Compiled by the Authors

The dynamics of community participation in South Asia present both opportunities and challenges. In India, responsible tourism initiatives have promoted local empowerment and collaboration with non-governmental organisations and government agencies (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012). Community-based ecotourism in Nepal has facilitated women's empowerment by improving financial decision-making and fostering entrepreneurship, particularly in homestay management (Panta & Thapa, 2018). Weak participation in decision-making meetings highlights a notable disparity between grassroots involvement and institutional frameworks (Jitpakdee & Thapa, 2012).

In the broader Asian context, participation is significantly shaped by governmental support and institutional collaboration. Local communities in China participate in tourism as entrepreneurs and service providers, supported by government interventions that enhance their confidence and self-efficacy (Xu et al., 2018). In Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, public participation frequently stems from the economic advantages of high tourist satisfaction. This situation may lead to an emphasis on transactional relationships rather than fostering meaningful community engagement (Habibulloev et al., 2024).

The emphasis on inclusive decision-making in Africa indicates notable advancements while underscoring ongoing challenges. In South

Africa, community participation occurs at various levels, including government, community structures, and local entities; however, miscommunication and power imbalances frequently impede its effectiveness (Forje et al., 2022). Collaborations between local communities and conservation organisations in Kenya have enhanced livelihoods, primarily through initiatives focused on women (Pellis et al., 2015). Despite the prevalence of male-dominated participation in Ethiopia, women's roles as hotel owners and employees in tourism authorities underscore the gendered dynamics of community involvement (Alamineh et al., 2023).

In the Americas, community involvement is significantly linked to conservation results. In Costa Rica, increased local engagement has positively affected conservation attitudes and practices, with indirect benefits that enhance environmental stewardship. In Europe, especially Italy, participation involves decision-making and heritage preservation, promoting genuine tourism experiences and fostering positive relationships between residents and tourists (Basile et al., 2021).

Classification of Articles based on Themes

The systematic review of the 71 articles reveals several recurring themes, with the most prominent being community-based ecotourism (CBET). A total of 18 articles focus on CBET, emphasising that ecotourism initiatives that actively involve local communities contribute to project sustainability and empower communities. For instance, Sobhani et al. (2022) in Iran and Basile et al. (2021) in Italy demonstrated that local community participation enhances sustainable ecotourism development by fostering authenticity and attachment to the place, thereby enriching the tourist experience.

Other articles explore diverse dimensions of CBET, such as local communities' perceptions of the social impacts of tourism and their implications for sustainable development (Alamineh et al., 2023), community resilience in rural tourism (Amir et al., 2015), host–guest orientations in CBET (Ernawati et al., 2017), and

visitor behaviour in community-based tourism settings (Han et al., 2019). Additionally, studies have examined ecological resource management for sustainable tourism (Hasana et al., 2022) and the integration of CBET into sustainable transformative economies (Kim et al., 2019; Lapeyre, 2010; Rampheri & Dube, 2021; Sakata & Prideaux, 2013; Teshome et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2018). Collectively, these studies underscore CBET's multifaceted role in fostering economic, social, and environmental sustainability, yet they often highlight challenges such as inequitable benefit distribution and the need for more inclusive governance mechanisms.

Community participation and sustainable tourism management emerged as another significant theme, with articles such as those by Mohd Noh et al. (2020) in Malaysia and by Putra et al. (2022) in Indonesia emphasising the critical importance of integrating sustainable practices into tourism management to ensure ecotourism's long-term viability. These studies illustrate that while sustainable practices support local livelihoods, they often require stronger policy frameworks and stakeholder collaboration to overcome governance barriers. Similarly, studies by Basile et al. (2021), Anggraheni et al. (2018), Kunjuraman (2020), Palmer and Chuamuangphan (2018), and Razzaq et al. (2011) highlight the need to balance environmental conservation with community empowerment.

The theme of conservation tourism and environmental sustainability is extensively discussed, with articles such as by Chettiparamb & Kokranikal (2012), Dey et al. (2020), Jitpakdee & Thapa (2012), K.C. et al. (2015), Pellis et al. (2015), and Phelan et al. (2020) exploring the role of ecotourism in promoting environmental conservation. These studies emphasise that effective governance and active community participation are crucial for achieving ecological outcomes.

Another prevalent theme is community participation and socio-economic development. Anggraheni et al. (2018) in Indonesia highlighted how ecotourism catalyses socio-economic

development by empowering communities through income generation, skill development, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Several articles also delve into the challenges of ecotourism, focusing on barriers to effective community participation. For example, Towner (2016) in Indonesia and Kunjuraman (2022) in Malaysia identified governance issues, power imbalances, and challenges in stakeholder coordination as critical obstacles.

Beyond these central themes, the review also explores niche aspects of ecotourism. For

instance, Xu et al. (2018) discuss the role of ecotourism in poverty alleviation and rural development in China, while Pellis et al. (2015) focus on the impact of ecotourism on biodiversity conservation in Kenya. Innovative approaches to ecotourism, such as the use of green marketing tools in rural tourism (Tiberghien et al., 2018) and the promotion of homestay programs as sustainable practices (Sood et al., 2017), also emerge as important sub-themes.

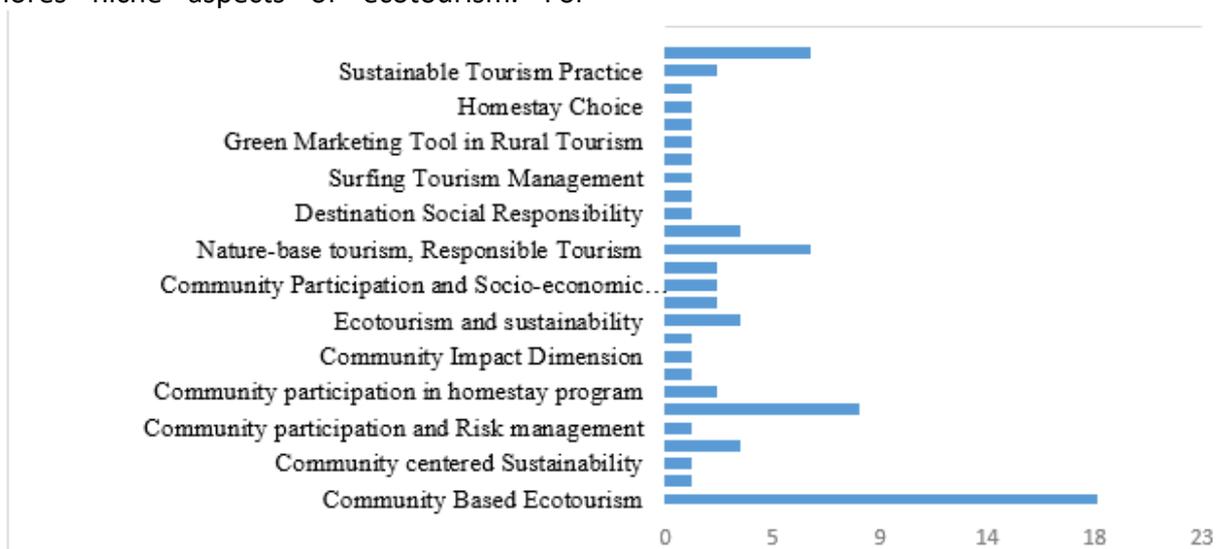


Figure 5: Articles based on Themes
 Source: Compiled by the Authors

Target Groups that Articles Cover

Examining the targeted groups in this review reveals a wide range of stakeholders, each playing a unique role in the dynamics of ecotourism. With 22 instances, the evaluation shows that local communities are the most frequently examined groups, highlighting the vital role that local people play in creating and administering ecotourism initiatives, both as beneficiaries and active participants. The terms ‘tourists’ and ‘stakeholders’, with eight and five occurrences, respectively, are especially noteworthy, as they emphasise the diverse range of players involved in ecotourism, from travellers to business owners.

It is noteworthy that certain groups are modestly represented, with five instances referring to ‘Homestay communities’ and four to ‘Indigenous

communities’. This pattern suggests an emerging recognition of the distinct contexts of these groups and their potential influence on ecotourism activities. Additionally, the term ‘Women’s entrepreneurs’, which appears three times, indicates a growing awareness of the importance of gender inclusivity in sustainable practices and a rising scholarly interest in gender roles within ecotourism. However, the comparatively low prevalence of ‘Religious communities’, ‘NGOs’, ‘Fishermen’, and ‘Travellers’, each with only one incidence, may indicate underexplored regions within the literature.

Figure 7 shows the range of research designs used in the papers examined. Almost half of the research (49%) employed qualitative approaches, followed by quantitative methods (29%) and mixed methods approaches (15%).

The predominance of qualitative research between community participation and underscores the need for an in-depth sustainable ecotourism. understanding of the intricate relationships

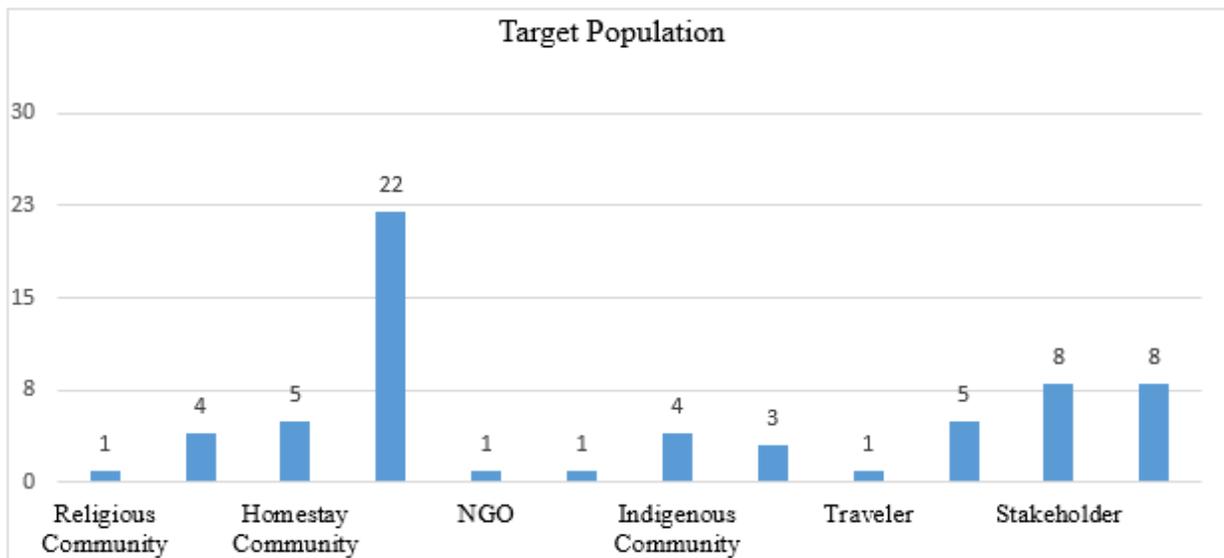


Figure 6: Target Population of the Study
 Source: Compiled by the Authors

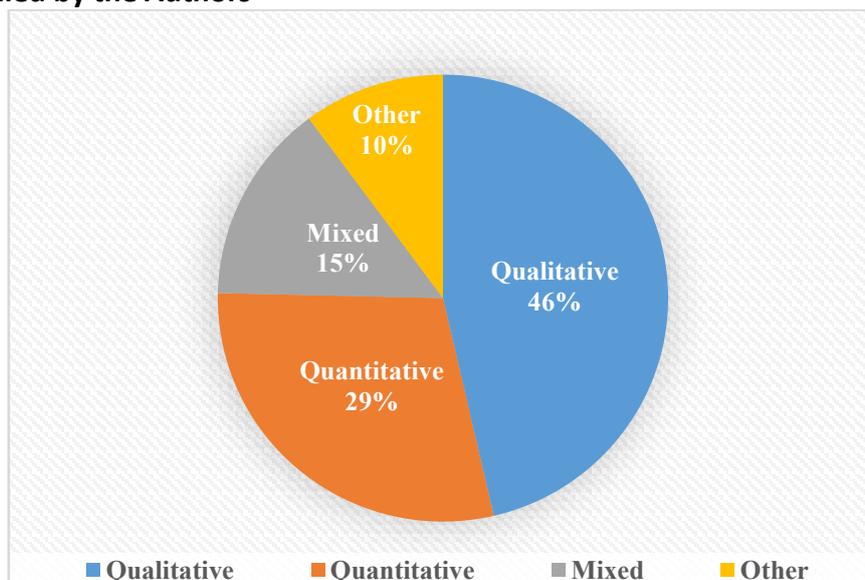


Figure 7: Types of Research Design
 Source: Compiled by the Authors

Components of the Role of Community Participation

Local community participation is essential for the sustainable development of ecotourism. It significantly influences the success of ecotourism projects and the socioeconomic and environmental outcomes in surrounding areas. An examination of 71 studies shows that community involvement encompasses a range

of aspects, including capacity building, decision-making, cultural preservation, and financial benefits.

Planning and Making Decisions

The review shows that ensuring local ownership and sustainable outcomes depend primarily on active community involvement in planning and decision-making (Putra & Ariana, 2023). Studies

highlight the need to include diverse voices, especially those of underprivileged groups such as women and young people, and to employ participatory methods, such as Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS). These approaches increase representation and promote inclusiveness in ecotourism development. Local institutions play a role in encouraging community involvement in programs and decision-making processes (Jitpakdee & Thapa, 2012).

Learning and Capacity Development

Improving community involvement depends mostly on capacity building. Programs for education and training provide community members with the tools required for several positions in ecotourism, including entrepreneurs, guides, and hosts (Kim et al., 2019; Mohd Noh et al., 2020). Through encouraging ownership of ecotourism enterprises and human resource development, these groups help empower nearby communities. Furthermore, initiatives meant for women, such as homestay management training, have significantly improved their positions in financial decision-making (Panta & Thapa, 2018).

Social and Economic Advantages

Maintaining community involvement depends much on the fair distribution of earnings from tourism products. Local control over resource allocation guarantees social and financial gains, encouraging trust and dedication among the community members (Akbar et al., 2021; Putra & Ariana, 2023). Projects offering goods, services, and infrastructure upgrades demonstrate that community-based tourism has boosted local empowerment and socioeconomic development (Basile et al., 2021). However, the literature also indicates differences in benefit-sharing that may lead to disputes and reduced involvement (Mensah, 2017). Effective means of profit-sharing and guaranteeing fair economic advantages have been found to include community businesses such as cooperatives and locally held companies (Pellis et al., 2015).

Environmental and Cultural Preservation

Studies show that participating actively in resource mapping and conservation plans guarantees sustainable tourist practices and promotes environmental responsibility (Akbar et al., 2021; Sobhani et al., 2022). Moreover, involvement in cultural preservation activities supports real tourism experiences and helps protect local legacy and identity, improving place attachment (Basile et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019). Projects that emphasise women's responsibilities in conservation, such as those in Maasai communities in Kenya, showcase the combined benefits of ecological preservation and livelihood development (Pellis et al., 2015).

Community Empowerment and Ownership

The review shows that using participative strategies and empowering communities fosters local ownership and attachment to tourism operations. Programmes that vary roles from operational to decision-making can improve involvement and ensure broader participation (Kim et al., 2019; Sobhani et al., 2022). The degree of empowerment differs, though; some groups, such as women and Indigenous people, often face systematic obstacles to active involvement. Particularly in rural settings, women's active participation in homestays and tourism businesses has been associated with higher socio-economic status and greater empowerment (Phelan et al., 2020).

Discussion

The content analysis of the selected studies reveals several key findings related to community participation and sustainable ecotourism.

Community Involvement as a Fundamental Element of Sustainable Ecotourism

Community involvement is essential for the success and sustainability of ecotourism projects. Research indicates that active participation of local communities in ecotourism initiatives leads to improved conservation, economic development, and social cohesion outcomes (Anggraheni et al., 2018). Community-based ecotourism initiatives in Nepal have facilitated the preservation of endangered species and vital habitats, simultaneously

providing alternative livelihoods for local communities (Panta & Thapa, 2018; Regmi & Walter, 2016). The dual benefits of ecological and socio-economic gains highlight the essential role of community engagement in ecotourism initiatives.

Obstacles to Successful Community Engagement

Various challenges, such as power imbalances, cultural differences, and economic disparities, hinder effective community participation. Addressing these barriers necessitates clear communication, capacity development, and frameworks for fair benefit-sharing (Palmer & Chaumuangphan, 2018). Research conducted in Kenya demonstrates that including marginalised groups, including women and youth, in ecotourism initiatives promotes social equity and results in more sustainable outcomes (Alamineh et al., 2023). Inclusive approaches effectively address systemic disparities and encourage broader community engagement in ecotourism.

Examining Power Imbalances and Disparities

Power dynamics in communities can restrict the participation of specific groups, necessitating the development of inclusive frameworks that prioritise marginalised voices. Studies show that equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms and participatory governance models ensure that all members contribute to and benefit from ecotourism projects, irrespective of socio-economic status (Alamineh et al., 2023). In the same vein, research from Nepal underscores the need for local ownership and inclusive frameworks to ensure that all members contribute to and benefit from ecotourism initiatives, thereby demonstrating that genuine empowerment is essential (Walter et al., 2018).

Determinants of Participation Success

Community participation is influenced by local ownership, financial and technical support, and supportive policies. Research in Malaysia and Indonesia demonstrates that community-led ecotourism initiatives characterised by robust local ownership and external assistance succeed in conservation and community development

(Putra & Ariana, 2023; Mohd Noh et al., 2020). Research from Peru highlights the critical role of government policies in promoting community engagement, indicating that strong regulatory frameworks can substantially improve the sustainability of ecotourism initiatives (Lapeyre, 2010).

The Wider Socio-Economic Effects of Community Engagement

Community involvement in ecotourism encompasses conservation efforts and the generation of broader socio-economic advantages. Locally inclusive projects enhance equitable economic opportunities, mitigate poverty, and bolster local livelihoods (Xu et al., 2018). These initiatives enhance social capital by promoting stronger networks, trust, and cooperation among community members. Improved social cohesion fosters the sustainability of ecotourism by encouraging a collective sense of ownership and accountability for conservation initiatives.

Strategies Tailored to Context for Improving Participation

The interaction between community involvement and sustainable ecotourism underscores the need for tailored strategies. Utilising local knowledge, tackling systemic inequities, and promoting collaborative governance models can enhance the beneficial effects of participation (Chettiparamb & Kokkranical, 2012). Context-specific approaches enable ecotourism projects to simultaneously achieve ecological conservation, socio-economic development, and cultural preservation (Kim et al., 2019; Phelan et al., 2020).

While this systematic review offers valuable insights into the pivotal role of community participation in sustainable ecotourism, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The analysis relies solely on published journal articles from 2009 to 2024, which may exclude significant unpublished reports, grey literature, and perspectives from earlier or alternative sources. Furthermore, using content analysis as the primary method may limit the depth and breadth of the findings, as alternative

methodologies such as meta-analysis or mixed-methods approaches could reveal additional dimensions of community participation's impact.

Future research could address these gaps by incorporating diverse data sources, including policy documents, case studies, and stakeholder interviews. Moreover, examining the long-term impacts of community participation on conservation outcomes, socio-economic benefits, and cultural preservation can provide a more nuanced understanding of its effectiveness. Further research could adopt interdisciplinary, context-specific approaches that consider cultural, social, and economic diversity across regions. Mixed-methods research combining qualitative and quantitative insights can uncover both measurable outcomes and contextual nuances. Collaborative efforts with local communities, practitioners, and policymakers will enhance the relevance and applicability of future findings.

Conclusion

This systematic review underscores that meaningful community participation is a cornerstone of sustainable ecotourism. Local communities' active engagement enhances ecological conservation, promotes equitable economic benefits, and fosters social cohesion. However, challenges such as power imbalances, tokenistic involvement, and inequitable benefit-sharing limit the transformative potential of community-based initiatives. Adopting collaborative governance models, fostering inclusive decision-making, and implementing capacity-building programmes are essential to overcome these barriers. Efforts must prioritise equity and authenticity, ensuring marginalised groups have a voice in planning and benefit-sharing processes. Standardising participation metrics and developing innovative models for integrating community insights into ecotourism planning is critical to achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

The implications of this study highlight the need for interdisciplinary research that bridges environmental sciences, social sciences, and economics to develop holistic strategies.

Monitoring and evaluating ecotourism projects longitudinally can provide insights into their long-term sustainability and resilience, guiding evidence-based policy and practice. Ultimately, sustainable ecotourism thrives when local communities are empowered as active stakeholders. By fostering a sense of ownership and aligning ecotourism goals with community aspirations, a development model that preserves natural and cultural heritage while improving livelihoods and social well-being can be created.

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Ethical Approval

This research does not require ethical approval as it involves publicly accessible data and does not involve human or animal subjects.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contribution Statement

Conceptualisation: **ST, BBK**; Methodology: **BBK, DM**; Literature search: **ST, DM**; Formal analysis and writing-original draft: **BBK, ST, DM**; Final review and editing: **BBK**. All authors have read and agreed to publish the manuscript.

Informed Consent

Not applicable

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