
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable Development Strategies for Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Based on SWOT Analysis

Qiyun Xiao

Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau 999078, China

Corresponding Author: Qiyun Xiao, **E-mail:** evians8936@163.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of sustainable development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau based on the SWOT analysis and provides corresponding strategies for the future sustainable development model. The sustainable development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has both natural and cultural strengths. The unique natural and cultural landscape provide the foundation for it, and international and domestic policies, financial support, and professional theories ensure its development. It is supported by a feasibility study and conforms to the times. To spur the sustainable development of ecotourism and establish the status of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in ecotourism, we must 1) make rational use of ESG and green finance and adhere to the development route suitable for the local conditions; 2) pay attention to the feasibility of ecological service-based economy in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and rationally apply it to the development of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau; 3) improve the service level of the tourism industry in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, strengthen industry regulation and training, and improve tourists' experience in tourist destinations. To promote the development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, we must attach equal emphasis on the protection of the ecological environment and biodiversity and neglect neither economic development nor ecological protection in an attempt to create a better future for the Qinghai-Tibet region.

| KEYWORDS

Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, Ecotourism, Sustainable development

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1. Introduction

1.1 Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and Ecotourism

Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, located in southwest China, is the largest plateau in China and the highest in the world and is often referred to as the Roof of the World or the Third Pole. The term "ecotourism" was first put forward by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1983. In 1993, it was defined by the International Ecotourism Society as responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people. Its latest definition involves tourism with a distinctive ecological environment as its main landscape. It refers to a form of tourism with sustainable development as the concept, ecological environment protection as the premise, and harmonious development between man and nature as the criterion. It relies on a good natural ecological environment and a unique humanistic-ecological system, and carries out ecological experience, ecological education, ecological cognition, and obtains physical and mental pleasure in an environmental-friendly manner.

1.2 Tourism Resources and Development Status of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

Boasting the world's top natural and human resources, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau provides abundant resources for the development of ecotourism in this region. Moreover, its primitive state undoubtedly becomes another attraction for tourists and nature lovers. Unlike other natural scenic spots, the environmental fragility and ecological indestructibility of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau also pose a major challenge to the development of ecotourism in this area. The consequences brought by the

environmental destruction in the Qinghai-Tibet region are inconceivable. Therefore, whether it is appropriate to develop ecotourism in the Third Pole is an age-old question. Ecotourism is the best option for the development of tourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (Zhang, 2009), as the ecological protection of the Third Pole will take a large amount of money. Nonetheless, the traditional industry in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is mainly the primary industry, and the agricultural development is relatively backward. As a result, local community members, who depend on livestock for a living, generally have a low-income level. In the past, local environmental protection was mainly intervened by external protection organizations and foundations. Therefore, the reasonable and planned development of the tertiary industry is an important direction for the sustainable development of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which can provide financial support for the protection of the ecological environment, benefit local residents, and create opportunities for industrial transformation and upgrading. Furthermore, developing ecotourism can minimize the damaging effects of tourism on local ecological protection because it is highly dependent on natural resources and is a responsible tourism model in nature (Liu, 2007); tourists' awareness of protection is high, and their behaviors are controllable. In addition, ecotourism itself has education and science popularization significance. The impartment and explanation of professional knowledge can guide tourists' behaviors and awareness and improve their personal qualities.

With respect to the financial demands of ecological protection, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region lacks tourism infrastructure. Many protected zones and natural resources are of national priority protection, which means it is difficult to provide general financing (Huang, 2011). Furthermore, the non-mortgage of its assets and the ecological fragility make financial institutions reluctant to intervene excessively out of prudent consideration (Cheng & Li, 2022). In fact, ecotourism activities can improve the quality of life of local communities; they can also provide significant nature education for both local and international tourists. Science popularization is the top priority of ecotourism. Over the last decade, international and domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have signed community conservation concession agreement (CCCA) in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which has coordinated the relationship among local environmental resources, aborigines, and managers and boosted the confidence of aborigines and local communities in the future development of ecotourism. The development of traditional mass tourism is quite different from that of ecotourism. The participants of ecotourism have a high awareness of environmental protection and want to connect with nature, which provides a greater likelihood for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the plateau. But how to control the adverse effects brought by the surge in the number of tourists?

2. SWOT Analysis

2.1 Strengths of Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

2.1.1 Natural and Cultural Resources

Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has diverse natural resources for tourism, a unique natural landscape, and various biological species, which has a powerful appeal to tourists from all over the world. The affluent natural and cultural landscape of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau occupies a unique and unshakable position in the natural resources of tourism, which lays a solid foundation for the sustainable development of ecotourism. There are unique Tibetan Buddhism, local cultural customs, and cultural heritage projects. Moreover, the tourism resources in the area are poorly explored, and not a lot is known about the region, which draws a number of ecotourism enthusiasts and cultural tourism lovers to unravel the all-enwrapping shroud of mystery. The opening of the whole line of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway also makes a bonus point for the development of tourism in the region. First, the scenery along the railway itself is already a highlight for tourists; they can imagine the wonderful experience through the splendid scenery along the way. Furthermore, the two major nature reserves along the railway, KekeXili National Reserve of Qinghai and Sanjiangyuan National Reserve of Qinghai, undoubtedly add to its glory. As two national nature reserves, they have striking charisma for tourists.

2.1.2 Tourism Policies

Supportive tourism policies in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau provide another boost to the development of ecotourism. "The Action Plan for Building an International Ecotourism Destination," promulgated by Qinghai, points out that the national policy encourages Qinghai to establish sound environmental protection policies and management measures. This can help maintain the relationship among tourism development, local communities, and the ecological environment in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, rationally utilizing local ecological resources and cultural heritage, providing a far-reaching vision for ecotourism developing sustainable ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and planning tours. Tourism policies and abundant natural resources can provide a solid basis for the sustainable development of the region and inject confidence into local communities and aborigines.

2.2 Weaknesses of Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

2.2.1 Environmental restrictions

Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is located at an altitude of 4000-5000 meters, and the scenic spots of tourism natural resources are scattered, which complicates the construction of tourism infrastructure and prolongs the process of ecotourism development. Secondly, the visiting group of ecotourism is smaller than that of traditional mass tourism (Huang, 2005). Therefore, it may be difficult to promote the number of target tourists in the short term. Owing to the extremely high altitude, tourists tend to suffer from altitude sickness in an oxygen-poor environment. Therefore, the oxygen content is relatively low, resulting in altitude sickness. Therefore, it is difficult

for them to carry out tourism activities under anoxia conditions, which has become a stumbling stone for many of them to visit the region. Finally, tourism in the Qinghai-Tibet region is obviously affected by seasons and extreme weather, bringing challenges to ecotourism development. A study by Chang shows that severe winter cold and high-intensity ultraviolet rays in summer along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway hinder tourists from developing tourism activities (Chang et al., 2007).

2.2.2 Other Obstacles

Since the education level of local residents is low, they are short of professional knowledge and skills needed for the tertiary industry, which leads to a low occupation level of employees in ecotourism and a lack of threshold for employment, finally resulting in the backward development of the whole industry. Also, uniform standards are in need for the management policies of ecotourism destinations and the ability of management organizations. The uneven management measures cannot form an all-around industry regulation, which means tourists' experience cannot be guaranteed. These situations limit the promotion of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and beyond China.

2.3 Opportunities for Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

With the improvement of social education levels and people's awareness of natural resource protection, social media plays an increasingly important role in promoting tourism. This provides a good opportunity for the development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Precious plants and animal resources such as Tibetan antelope, snow leopard, and white-lipped deer, which have become a recent hit, can bring traffic to ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau on social media. From the aspect of marketing advantages, we can promote the education and science popularization functions of ecotourism projects to target groups. Besides, the required capital investment in tourism facilities of ecotourism is merely a quarter of that of traditional tourism (Rodenburg, 1980), which is in line with the underfunded situation in Tibet. Finally, the development of ecotourism wreaks little havoc on the ecological environment, which conforms to the protection of the ecological environment in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. In terms of ecotourism groups, the number of tourists who tend to choose ecotourism is growing. As a tourism destination with the top resources for ecotourism development projects, Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has plenty of potential.

2.4 Threats to Sustainable Development of Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

Global climate change is intensifying, which has many adverse effects on the sustainable development of the tourism industry. For example, the glacier melting in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is a major challenge that people need to face. It requires careful thought as to whether it is suitable and feasible to develop ecotourism in core areas that are in great need of protection. It also needs to be considered what adverse effects the sustainable development of ecotourism, including human activities, will cause to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Secondly, the human-wildlife conflict and the construction of tourism infrastructure will hinder the development of ecotourism. Furthermore, tourists' behaviors, regional management, and policies are also challenging components. Specifically, the increasing number of tourists may generate a large amount of waste and bad manners that destroy the local environment. In addition, tourists' behaviors may have a certain impact on the daily life of local community residents, so it is important to find a way to connect local residents and tourists. The ecosystem of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is fragile. When the number of tourists reaches or exceeds the affordability of the plateau, it will make the environment unable to maintain the existing ecological environment or even deteriorate. According to the current investigation, the leading environmental destroyer of ecotourism is garbage². To deal with the domestic garbage brought by tourists and local residents is an urgency that brooks no delay.

3. Sustainable Development Strategies for Ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

In 1955, *The Charter for Sustainable Tourism* formulated by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Tourism Organization mentioned that "tourism has to contribute to sustainable development and its integration with the natural, cultural and human environment; it must respect the fragile balances that characterize many tourist destinations." In fact, the tourism development in the Qinghai-Tibet region has its humanistic advantages. Due to the influence of traditional religion and culture, local communities and religious cultures advocate the protection of nature. Such a sense of protection has well preserved the ecological environment of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

The direction for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is to unite different stakeholders in terms of ESG, namely, environmental, social, and governance. With the vigorous implementation of ESG and green finance policies, the unique natural resources and cultural landscape of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau are fully utilized, and the local tourism infrastructure construction is further developed. In this way, the region has gained more financial support, promoted economic and social development, and improved the living standards of local communities without sacrificing the environment, thus achieving the mutual benefit and common development of the environment, local communities and residents, and ecotourism development. Financial support can accelerate the sustainable tourism development in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau by providing service industry training for local residents, improving the service awareness and service quality of aborigines, upgrading the environmental quality of destinations and other tourism infrastructure, etc. Environmental, social, and governance integration can be realized with the joint efforts of different stakeholders. However, tourist destinations are busy putting up installations such as traffic roads, water,

electricity, and gas networks and developing core tourist attractions, which aggravate the desertification of grassland, human-wildlife conflict in protected areas, and the disposal of garbage. So what can we do to solve these problems brought about by the development of ecotourism?

3.1 Improve the Tourism Industry

We must improve the training standards for the service industry in the Qinghai-Tibet region and strictly control the negative impact of garbage generated by local residents and tourists. We can promote the sustainable ecological development model of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau through the current marketing model of online social media, disseminate scientific knowledge and educate target visitors by making imperceptible professional explanations to increase popularity. Additionally, we can attract social attention to related problems and make tourists actually realize the problems so as to eliminate waste produced by tourists and local residents from the root causes. We can integrate the newest tourism crazes into the developing mode of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, such as camping. This activity serves two ends: for one thing, it can attract greater attraction to ecotourism development in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau; for another, it meets all the requirements for developing eco-tourism.

3.2 Build an Ecological Service-based Economy

We must strengthen the construction of ecotourism for the purpose of developing an ecological service-based economy (Chou et al., 2020). To fully exemplify the benefits of an ecological service-based economy, we should avert the current situation of government acting as the main body of payment and management, clarify the power and responsibility relationship among protected areas, communities, and commercial protected areas, and let the three parties perform their respective duties. In this way, we can give full play to the joint role and incentive benefits of different stakeholders and promote the sustainable development of ecotourism in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with the new economic model. Under the incentive benefits, different stakeholders are interrelated and contribute to the sustainable development of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau so that twice as much can be accomplished with half the effort.

3.3 Have a Global Vision

The development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau can attract global attention. As the Third Pole and the Roof of the World, it enjoys specific international status and attention from experts and scholars, ecotourism enthusiasts, and environment-friendly people worldwide. Therefore, strengthening the sustainable construction of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau can attract international ecotourism enthusiasts. Besides, having a global vision can bring professional protection to the Qinghai-Tibet region and attract international funding sources to support the sustainable cause. Therefore, taking the road of "internationalization" is another focus of developing the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study discusses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of sustainable development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau based on the SWOT analysis and provides corresponding strategies for the future sustainable development model. The sustainable development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has both natural and cultural strengths. The unique natural and cultural landscape provide the foundation for it, and international and domestic policies, financial support, and professional theories ensure its development. It is supported by a feasibility study and conforms to the times. To spur the sustainable development of ecotourism and establish the status of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in ecotourism, we must 1) make rational use of ESG and green finance and adhere to the development route suitable for the local conditions; 2) pay attention to the feasibility of ecological service-based economy in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and rationally apply it to the development of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau; 3) improve the service level of the tourism industry in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, strengthen industry regulation and training, and improve tourists' experience in tourist destinations. To promote the development of ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, we must attach equal emphasis on the protection of the ecological environment and biodiversity and neglect neither economic development nor ecological protection in an attempt to create a better future for the Qinghai-Tibet region.

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