
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Approaches to the Development of Ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau: The Aim Being Sustainable Growth

Qiyong Xiao

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

Corresponding Author: Qiyong Xiao, **E-mail:** Xiaoqiyongwin911@163.com

| ABSTRACT

The study features the necessity and feasibility of developing ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and approaches to the region's sustainable growth. The biodiversity, rich natural resources, and distinctive cultural and religious assets that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau boasts have made tourism greatly beneficial to the local economy, but the growth of tourism in the region has also caused damage to the local environment. The study hence provides solutions to the issue, putting forward plans for the sustainable growth of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

| KEYWORDS

Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 An Overview of the Sustainable Development of Ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

1.1.1 Introduction of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is the largest plateau in China as well as the highest one in the world as it boasts an average altitude of over 4,000 meters, spans about 2,800 kilometers from east to west and 300 to 1,500 kilometers from north to south, and covers an area of about 2.5 million square kilometers. The plateau is hence dubbed the "Roof of the World" and "the Third Pole," which is to be distinguished from the North and South Poles. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau abounds with natural resources and has unique natural scenery. As the birthplace of the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is also the origin of the Chinese nation as well as the cradle of Chinese civilization and is hence endowed with unique cultural charm. The rich natural resources, as well as the distinctive customs and religions that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is known for, are all important factors that make the plateau suitable for the development of ecotourism.

1.2 Definition of Ecotourism

Scholars' views on the definition of ecotourism vary, and relevant associations have also proposed multiple definitions of the term. First coined in 1983 by Ceballos-Laskurain, special counsel of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the term "ecotourism" was defined in 1990 by the International Ecotourism Society as "tourism within a natural area which benefits the environment as well as the welfare of local residents (The International Ecotourism Society, 1990)." In 2015, the International Ecotourism Society redefined the term by stating that "ecotourism is now defined as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education' (TIES, 2015). Education is meant to include staff and guests" (The International Ecotourism Society, 1990). Though there isn't an official definition of ecotourism, the author believes that the term is meant to represent a type of tourism that features nature conservation and facilitates education, especially education about environmental protection.

1.3 Definition of Sustainable Tourism

The generally accepted definition of sustainable tourism can be found in *The Charter for Sustainable Tourism*, which was developed at the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in 1995. The charter states 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. Tourism should ensure an acceptable solution as regards the influence of tourism activity on natural resources, biodiversity and the capability for assimilation of any impacts and residues produced” (World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, 1995). The statement implies that when tourism is to be developed in a certain region, its relationship with natural resources and human existence should be considered, and a balance should be struck between tourism and the sustainability of natural resources.

2. The Importance of Developing Ecotourism in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

In addition to the great benefits tourism brings to the regional economy, the rich natural and cultural resources that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau boasts are also an important reason why ecotourism should be developed there. As the distinctive natural and human landscapes attract a large number of tourists, the local government works vigorously to develop tourism as it boosts the local economy. The negative impact that traditional tourism has on society and the environment, however, is largely neglected as attention is paid mostly to the economic benefits. The lack of proper planning and management makes tourism harmful to the plateau (Huang et al., 2005). The lesson that can be drawn here is that as tourism grows, its impact on the local environment shouldn't be neglected as the environment is not only the source of tourist attractions but the place where the local people live. The negative impact that traditional tourism has on the environment, moreover, makes it necessary to introduce sustainable ecotourism to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

2.1 Tourist Resources on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

2.1.1 Mountains on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is the largest plateau in China as well as the highest one in the world. Known as the “Roof of the World,” it has the Himalayas on its south, the Kunlun Mountains, the Altun Mountains, and the Qilian Mountains on its north, the Qinling Mountains on its east, and the Loess Plateau on its north. As the landscape varies in different parts of the plateau, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau can be further divided into the Qiangtang Plateau, the South-Tibet River Basin, the Tsaidam Basin, the Qilian Mountains, the Sichuan-Tibet Alpine Canyon, etc. The mountains on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau offer a fascinating sight, attracting a large number of mountaineers.

2.1.2 Rivers and Lakes on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is the birthplace of plenty of rivers, including the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, and the Lancang River – the most renowned ones in China. Apart from this, there is a dense river network in the south and southeast of the plateau. In addition to the rivers, lakes abound on the plateau, and the 1,500 lakes cover 42816.10 square kilometers, making up 49.5% of the total area covered by lakes in China. The Namtso and the Qinghai Lake are among the renowned lakes on the plateau. The number of rivers and lakes makes the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau a perfect place for tourists to explore the beauty of water on plateaus.

2.1.3 Grassland and Wildlife on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

The grassland in Tibet constitutes a spectacular landscape, and the yearning for the vast expanse of grassland has sent innumerable tourists to Tibet. In addition to the grassland, tourists are also attracted by the local yurts and Tibetans. As one of the regions in China with the highest biodiversity, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is known as “a natural refuge for rare wild animals and plants as well as a bank of the genes of plateau species.” The national protected animals on the plateau include Tibetan antelopes, snow leopards, Tibetan foxes, and wild yaks, and there are rarely wild animals, including white-lipped deer and black-necked cranes. In addition to the animals, Cordyceps Sinensis, Rhodiola Rosea, rhubarb, and snow lotus are representatives of the rare plants unique to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is listed among the 25 Key Biodiversity Areas with rare wild animals and plants.

2.1.4 The Historical and Cultural Resources

Over thousands of years, the unique natural environment and geographical features of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau have bred cultures characteristic of the region, among which Tibetan culture is one of the most representative. As one of the ancient ethnic groups in China, Tibetans boast a long history as well as a culture that has exerted a far-reaching influence on the region. The festivals, costumes, food, and architecture unique to Tibetans are all cultural characteristics attracting tourists to the plateau. In addition to the ethnic culture, the influence of the religious culture on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has also been profound. Religious sites, including the Dazhao Temple, the Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, and the Ta'er Monastery in Qinghai, are all important cultural resources attracting tourists to the plateau.

2.2 Tourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has been Greatly Beneficial to the Local Economy

As a part of the tertiary industry, tourism plays a huge role in the economy of Tibet. The economic benefits generated by tourism and the influence tourism has exerted on other industries can't be ignored. The development of tourism has brought attention to livestock breeding and handicrafts on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and an increasing number of people started to get interested in Tibetan culture. Hence, as tourism grows non-stop, it keeps boosting industries, including handicrafts, livestock breeding, and the culture industry. The development of these industries has also generated considerable economic benefits.

Statistics released in 2021 by the Bureau of Statistics of Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet Autonomous Region Statistics Bureau, 2022) reveal that Tibet saw a total of 41.5344 million domestic and inbound tourists in 2021, marking an increase of 18.5% over the previous year. The region accommodated 9,200 inbound tourists and 41.5252 million domestic ones, representing an increase of 171.6% and 18.5%, respectively. The total revenue generated from tourism reached 44.190 billion yuan, marking an increase of 20.6%. Foreign exchange earnings brought by inbound tourists added up to 5.45 million US dollars, representing an increase of 80.5%. The income brought by domestic tourists added up to 44.153 billion yuan, representing an increase of 20.6%. With the continuous development of tourism in Tibet, tourism as a part of the tertiary industry is changing from a strategic pillar of the national economy to an industry serving specific purposes. The increase in the number of tourists, however, has caused damage to the environment, which makes the switch from traditional tourism to sustainable tourism a necessity for the region. With the publicity the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has gained on social media, the plateau has become a popular destination for domestic tourists, and the income brought by the tourists, the number of which has constantly been increasing, has become an important contributor to the local economy. The development of tourism, moreover, has changed the agriculture-based economic growth model that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has relied on, providing a new way for the local residents to generate income and helping a lot to improve their living conditions.

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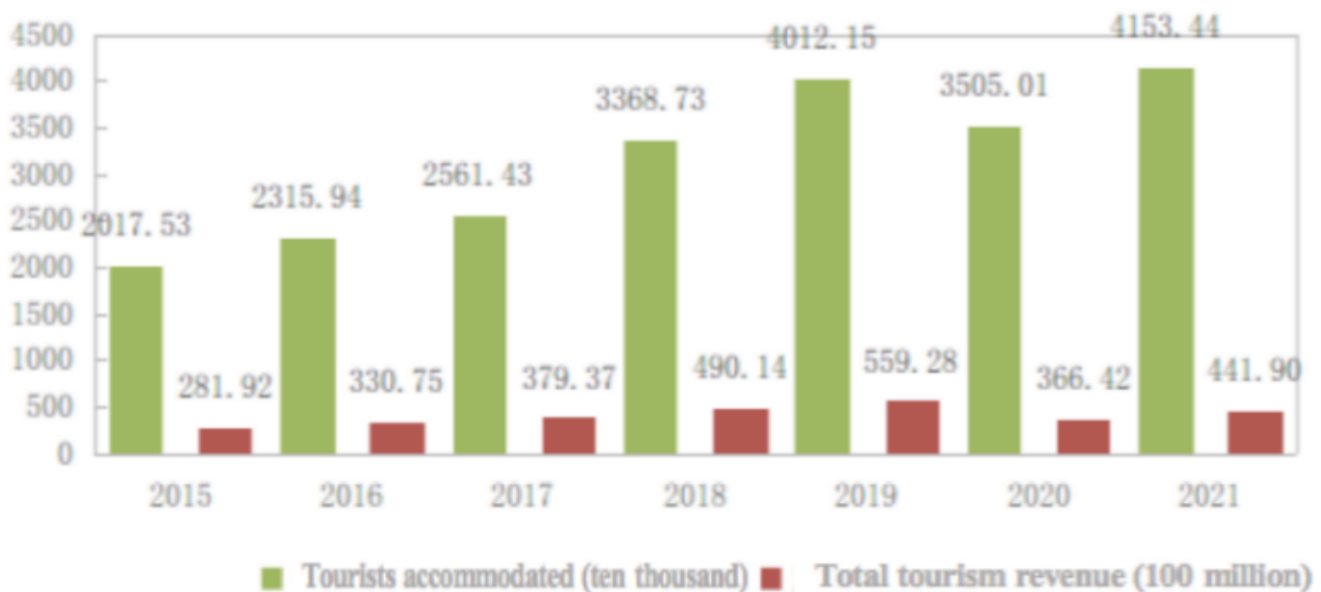


Figure 1: The number of tourists accommodated and the total tourism revenue during the years from 2015 to 2021

3. The Possible Hazards of Developing Tourism and Suggested Preventive Measures

Traditional tourism is generally harmful to the long-term development of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Though the regional economy has grown and the people have received economic benefits, conservation of the ecosystem is neglected, and the environment is damaged by the intrusion of tourists. This is detrimental to the long-term development of tourism in the region. As the development of tourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is reliant largely on its natural resources, failure to conserve the resources will lead to difficulties in the sustainable development of tourism. The negative impacts that tourism has on the local environment can be distinctly felt. First, natural resources are damaged as the local government works to develop tourism. Deforestation and

the non-stop building of roads are major representatives of such destructive human activities. Second, the massive inflow of tourists has nearly crushed the ecosystem, leading to the degradation of grasslands, glaciers, and forests. Third, the trash left by tourists on the plateau is hard to collect and can hence pollute the environment (Huang et al., 2005). The development of sustainable tourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, therefore, requires efforts not only from the government but from the local residents and tourists. Eco-friendly tourism should be promoted, and to reduce the impact human beings have on the environment, tourists should leave as little as possible trace of human activities such as trash and car exhausts. This way, the environment can be protected, and harmony between humans and nature can be achieved.

4. Ways to Develop Sustainable Ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

4.1 Exploring A New Approach to Sustainable Tourism – An Ecosystem-based Economy

The rapid growth of tourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has caused damage to the environment, which indicates that the traditional way of developing tourism has become outdated and that a new approach should be adopted. Scholars hold different views on how to ensure the sustainable development of ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Some scholars believe that an ecosystem-based economy, which combines environmental conservation with economic growth, should be introduced. Supported by ecotourism, such an economic model ensures sustainable growth and requires efforts from multiple parties, with each taking on specific responsibilities (Chou et al., 2020). The most important party in an ecosystem-based economy is the local residents, who are the main beneficiaries of the development of the local economy and should be the main protectors of the local environment. Shouldering responsibility for both environmental protection and economic growth, the government should set up mechanisms for environmental conservation and enact legislation and build nature parks to protect natural resources. The government, moreover, should give financial support to environmentally friendly industries. The local people try to develop and implement preferential policies to boost the industries. The social organizations, in the meantime, should support the local economy by offering technical support, playing the role of a supervisor and coordinator, and expanding the market for the local industries.

4.2 Attention should be paid to the Sustainable Development of the Ecosystem of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

The sustainable development of ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau relies on the well-protected forest ecosystem, which enables animals and plants to thrive. As tourists can get different experiences of ecotourism only in places where the environment is well-protected, the basis of ecotourism should be the conservation of nature (Yang et al., 2012). Attention, therefore, should be paid to the environmental effects of human activities meant for tourism, which include deforestation and the building of roads. The damage deforestation causes to the forests should be healed, and the effects the development of tourism has on the environment should be reduced. A monitoring system, moreover, should be established to contribute to the sustainability of the ecosystem.

4.3 Attention should be paid to the Capacity of Nature and the Pollution Caused by Trash

The massive inflow of tourists to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau has crushed the ecosystem and led to the degradation of the grassland, glaciers, and forests. The natural environment of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is susceptible to external influences. The trash left by tourists, for example, can easily pollute the environment. Such external influences are major challenges to the sustainability of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. To tackle the issue, ecotourism should be promoted, littering and other acts harmful to natural resources should be strictly prohibited within nature reserves, and tourists should be acquainted with the spirit of sustainable tourism and encouraged to contribute to the protection of the environment. The government, in the meantime, should serve as a good overseer and punish acts detrimental to the environment and natural resources.

5. Measures to Develop Ecotourism Adopted by Other Countries

The policies and measures implemented by other countries can bring insights into the development of ecotourism in China. The main approach to ecotourism adopted by other countries is to build forest parks and nature reserves within designated areas. The income generated from such small-scale ecotourism projects is reallocated to the conservation and monitoring of the forest parks and reserves so that the damage tourism causes to the environment can be reduced (Niu, 1999). Allowing tourism in designated areas that are closely monitored and properly managed by professionals is indeed an effective way to reduce the damage tourism causes to the environment and natural resources. In addition, as tourism is developed, cultural activities are encouraged which involve local residents in the management of tourism. Moreover, by adopting stringent policies for cultural protection and combining tourism with traditional industries, the government guides local residents in the development of tourism featuring the local culture. Local residents can hence not only reap the benefits of ecotourism but play a huge role in the conservation of nature.

6. Conclusion

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau boasts rich natural and cultural resources, and its unique landscape has attracted a lot of tourists. The rich resources play a huge role in the development of tourism which has boosted the regional economy and increased the incomes of the local residents. The rapid growth of tourism, however, has damaged the environment on the plateau, and the damage

caused by tourism activities has made ecotourism a necessity for the region. Nowadays, the multi-dimensional and multi-party ecosystem-based economy is facilitating the development of ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, offering a new approach to the region's sustainable growth. In addition to the new economic model, eco-friendly travel should be promoted among tourists. The sustainable development of ecotourism on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau requires efforts not only from the government, the local residents, and the social organizations but from all the people involved in tourism. The environment on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau can be protected only when all the parties work together towards the same goal.

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