

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AT PUSHKAR VALLEY (INDIA): RESTRAIN TOURISM OR PROMOTE TOURISM?

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Received September 10, 1999; accepted October 22, 1999

Key words: Ecological degradation, Pushkar Valley (India), socio-cultural pollution, tourism

Abstract

Pushkar valley in Rajasthan, India, is a center of religious activity. Thus it is the focus of tourist activity in this part of the country. With little or no interest and intervention from state, tourists often tend to mishandle the resources. They consume resources at a much higher rate, leaving a lot of garbage behind. The ecological degradation is clearly visible. There are many hue and cries over the socio-cultural transmogrification of local demography. This paper attempts to raise certain issues that relate tourism in the valley to environmental concern here. It would be in place to introspect and analyze what is going wrong about environment at Pushkar and how to check it? Can limiting tourism in the valley help us in some way? How do we fix our priorities? Authors suggest a number of ways to check the environmental degradation and strike harmony between tourism and ecology in studied area.

Introduction

In the light of growing concern about environment and rising activism, questions are being raised about ecological degradation at Pushkar valley of Rajasthan. It has been pointed out that tourist activity is a major reason for this. With little or no interest and intervention from state, tourists often tend to mishandle the resources. They consume resources at a much higher rate, leaving much more garbage behind.

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While Bertrand Russel says “The art of using one’s leisure intelligently is a supreme sign of civilization”. We as a nation cannot at this stage of development afford to close our eyes to the exploitation of our natural endowments beyond their carrying capacity on grounds of economic benefits.

The emergence of tourism as a major industry is one of the most remarkable change to have taken place in economic activity in the years since 2nd world war. It is a sizable and complex service industry, governed by the laws of supply and demand. It exhibits strong seasonality of demand in most areas and can be affected by relatively unpredictable changes in consumer preferences, in addition to being influenced by political events. Tourism is on date the third largest contributor to the world economy only after petroleum and automobile sectors. And this is understood by us here in Rajasthan and at Pushkar.

Yet it is felt that travel and sojourn at Pushkar should be at a level that does not disturb natural balance, does not exert pressure on local social values and structures, and this then for as long as possible. Put together, this is a sustainable development and more precisely sustainable development with economic growth. Comparative study of leading indicators like dissolved oxygen, BOD, COD, transparency and bacterial numbers. Before during and after the Pushkar fair clearly indicated that tourist activity at Pushkar has disturbed the ecological concord – water, soil, air, noise and what not – and we owe to the poor management of tourist activity here.

So Pushkar stands out as a case in point of environmentally destructive tourism development resulting in such problems as the despolitation of scenic vistas, destruction of natural habitat, pollution of holy sarovar, erosion of soils, air pollution and to a certain extent-cultural pollution.

Impacts of tourism at Pushkar

(A) Effects of Pollution

Air – Mainly due to motor traffic and kitchen emissions of hotels and restaurants.

Pollution of Holy Sarovar – mainly because of discharge of untreated waste water due to the absence of any sewage treatment plants, holy dips and baths, discharge of mortal remains (ashes), offerings of flowers and garlands.

General pollution of Pushkar valley – by way of littering, picnics, used towels and tissue papers/napkins, polythene bags and inadequacy of household waste disposal facilities.

Noise because of motor traffic, high horse powered cross-country, motor cycles used by foreign tourists, crowds of tourist themselves and the entertainment provided to them.

(B) Loss of Natural Landscape: Agricultural and Pastoral lands

Tourism at Pushkar has brought along construction of houses, resorts, hotels, motels, tourist villages, and other infrastructure for tourists which has inevitably encroached on previously open spaces, i. e. natural landscapes viz., agricultural or pastoral lands, and has disturbed to a large extent, the catchment of the lake.

(C) Degradation of Landscape, Temples and Ghats.

The installation of modern tourist related facilities and infrastructure has led to the aesthetic degradation of the landscape and sites in the valley. The style and architecture of these new constructions are no where in harmony and on scale with the traditional structures in this holy city. Further, the development of tourist facilities is extremely disorderly and scattered, lending a moth-eaten look.

An excessive number of visitors to the historical and holy sites have degraded these monuments by graffiti, pilfering and like.

(D) Congestion

The concentration in time and space of tourists on holidays and incidence of Urs and Pushkar fair in close succession, leads to the congestion of ghats, temples, lanes and byelanes and overloading of tourist amenities and infrastructure, thus causing significant harm to the environment and detracting from the quality of life.

During Pushkar fair and other festivities, there are often major traffic congestions leading to high fuel consumption, heavier air and noise pollution.

(E) Co-existence

During the fair, and also other festive occasions, the resident population of Pushkar not only has to put up with the effects of such congestion, unknown during the rest of the year, but also have to change its way of life completely (faster work pace, an extra occupation, etc.) and to live with people of a very different orientation.

(F) Socio-Cultural pollution

There has been a growing incidence of drug abuse in Pushkar valley. Hippy settlers have been responsible for this menace. Hippy settlements also tend to disturb the local civic balance. While some vested interests shelter them, there is anguish at large among the general population. There are several illegitimate children of foreigner

mothers from Indian fathers, and they are finding it increasingly difficult to get along with the rest of the community.

Positive side of tourism

We believe tourism can be a very positive environmental force. It can provide a commercial rationale for conserving buildings and environments which otherwise might be destroyed. For example, the protection of monuments and natural areas and the conservation of historic buildings can be, and often are justified on the basis that the long-term interests of the tourist economy demand that these resources be maintained. Tourism can also lead to increased knowledge and appreciation of other cultures and thus to greater understanding between peoples and cultures.

Causes of disharmony between environment and tourism

1. Indifference of tourist activity at Pushkar, in getting consideration of ecological sustainability integrated with those relating to economics, efficiency and general welfare.

2. The level of environmental literacy is low and thus there is a gross undervaluation of the economic and ecological aspects of biological diversity. Also, extensive damage is being done to basic life support systems; more than caused by development activities.

3. The policies of government have not incorporated environmental accounting principles with the result that tourism has been oriented for short term gains, overlooking long term ecological and social impact.

4. General failure to elicit co-operation of local population at Pushkar in relating environmental concern with economic development.

Plan

A well thought-out eco-development plan, based on agroforestry system, social forestry programmes, animal husbandry, diversified economic tourism centered activities with eco-friendly technologies, non-conventional energy generation (solar, wind) will all have to be integrated into a comprehensive Pushkar Valley Development Plan. Without such an approach the local population is gradually increasing pressure on natural resources (beyond its carrying capacity) to meet their ends. This is harming Pushkar valley the most.

It would be fair to expect that the economic benefits arising out of tourism development should first percolate to the immediate surroundings in the valley itself. Such an approach would contribute to the people's participation in environmental protection and management in the valley. How much income from the tourist traffic to the valley is now ploughed back for development of local communities – for their education, their health and hygiene – is a big question.

It is high time an holistic strategy be developed for the Pushkar valley that includes people as a part of valley ecosystem and addresses their developmental concerns.

Recommendations

1. Environmental Impact Assessment: Environmental impact assessments should be undertaken for all tourism developments of till now at Pushkar, to evaluate the potential damage to the environment in the light of present tourism activities and forecasted tourism growth and peak demands. Alternative sites in near vicinity of Pushkar for development should be considered, taking into account local constraints and the limits of environmental carrying capacity. This capacity includes physical, ecological, social, cultural and psychological factors.

2. Government commitment: There should be a vision, firm commitment from Government and a policy for sustainable development of Pushkar valley.

3. Integrated Tourism Development Plan for Pushkar: Tourism development plans should be fully integrated with regional land-use and development plans; they should pay particular attention to environmental considerations, especially with respect to the quality of air, water (for human consumption, rituals and for recreation), soil conservation, the protection of natural and cultural heritage in this valley of Rajasthan and the quality of life in its human settlements.

This would mean an integrated systemic management of tourism that is ecologically and socially sustainable, that will limit tourism to the natural carrying capacity of valley and with an insistence on certain minimum eco-developmental requisites as a part of the tourism activities to be taken up.

4. Involvement of Local Communities: Planning authorities should seek out and take into account the views of the local communities in the Pushkar valley on the environmental and social impact of tourism projects and should take advice from the departments of Environmental Studies of the University and colleges in the area. They should also keep in touch with the local NGOs and should gain from their experience.

5. Proactive Planning: Adequate environmental measures at all levels of planning should be defined and implemented. Particular attention should be paid to peak

demand during the international Pushkar fair and its ramifications for sewerage, solid waste disposal, noise pollution, and to building and traffic density control. Developments should be as energy efficient as possible, minimizing their contribution to energy consumption through appropriate choice of equipment and the encouragement of access by public transport.

6. Preventive and Corrective Measures: The principle that “pollution prevention pays” is applicable to tourism, as is the “polluter pays principle”. Investment on corrective measures like waste collection, garbage disposal, etc. should be raised. However it should be remembered that payment does not help if the polluter has destroyed the resource.

7. Tourism Demand Management: Major incentive actions should be taken in both the public and the private sectors to spread tourism demand over time and space in order to use accommodation and other tourism facilities efficiently.

8. Education and Awareness: All components of the tourism at Pushkar (host communities, tourists, travel agents, tourism operators, developers, owners and local planning authorities) need to educate themselves on the mechanisms and benefits of an environmental perspective. Government agencies and local University should share the responsibility for developing and providing the necessary information through structured and semi-structured programmes.

9. Special Tourism Policing Group: Some kind of specially trained group, drawing people from all components of tourism activities, should be developed with government intervention to assist tourism activity in the valley. This group can be made responsible for helping and protecting tourists on one hand and soliciting environmental friendly behaviour from the tourists.

10. Effective Decision Making: Decisions should be based on the fullest available information concerning the environmental implications of development proposals. Where essential information is lacking, decisions should be deferred until it becomes available.

Conclusions

A sustainable development plan for Pushkar valley will have to have people’s involvement. People’s participation in turn will need an additional channel of communication – a micro communication system, where a two-way interaction between the communicator and the receiver is to be nurtured and developed through nongovernmental groups and the scientific community. The sooner these gaps are bridged, the better it will be to relate the developmental activities at Pushkar to the local people and, thereby, ensure their participation.

Environmental considerations at Pushkar can not be divorced from socio-economic and socio-political realities and development of tourism. Development of tourist activity at Pushkar needs a differently flavoured ecology based link between nature, social activity and economic aspirations.

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Acta Univ. Palacki. Olomuc.
Fac. rer. nat. (1999)
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