

Opportunities and Challenges of Ecotourism in Dhanushadham Protected Forest of Madhesh Province, Nepal

Namish PAUDEL^{a1}, Pradeep BARAL^{a2}, Sneha PAUDEL^a and Bhuwan BHANDARI^a

^a Tribhuvan University, Institute of Forestry, Hetauda Campus, Nepal

Abstract: This study assesses the opportunities and challenges for ecotourism in Dhanushadham Protected Forest of Nepal using a mixed-methods approach involving direct observations, household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Local perceptions of ecotourism are explored and the key factors influencing its development are identified. The findings reveal the Dhanushadham's significant ecotourism potential due to its rich biodiversity, cultural and religious sites and opportunities for activities like jungle walks, birdwatching and camping. Establishment of mini zoo, Maithili museum, homestays and cultural programs can add more opportunities for the development of ecotourism in the area. While local communities largely support ecotourism and recognize its conservation benefits, key challenges include political instability, inadequate tourism infrastructure, limited promotion, and the absence of a visitor information center. The study concludes that realizing Dhanushadham's ecotourism potential necessitates addressing these challenges through targeted interventions such as awareness campaigns, infrastructure development, and improved governance along with strategies to increase the length of stay for visitors. This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on ecotourism in protected forests, particularly within the Madhesh Province of Nepal, offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to develop sustainable tourism strategies in similar contexts.

Key words: Protected Forest, Ecotourism, Homestays, Biodiversity, Culture

1.Introduction

Tourism, the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment, contributes to local economies, job creation, and long-term development (Beza, 2017; Sukhdev et al., 2010). Fueled by global economic growth and rising tourism demand, the number of international travelers increased by 4% in 2019, reaching 1.5 billion (UN Tourism, 2020). Tourism holds the potential to boost investment, employment, exports, and technology in less developed countries and small island developing states while minimizing negative environmental impacts (UNEP, 2020).

Ecotourism was defined by The International Ecotourism Society (1991), as "a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local

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