



Research Article

VISITORS' VIEWPOINT ON SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM IN TILAGOR ECO PARK OF SYLHET, BANGLADESH

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Article info	Abstract
<p>Article history</p> <p>Received: 27.03.2024 Accepted: 22.05.2024 Published: 30.06.2024</p> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Ecotourism, Environment, Sustainable Ecotourism, Tilagor Eco Park, Visitor's Viewpoint</p> <p>*Corresponding author</p> <p>Mohammad Samiul Ahsan Talucder E-mail: talucdermsa.aes@sau.ac.bd</p>	<p>Sustainable ecotourism promotes an optimal balance between economic benefits, environmental conservation, and sociocultural preservation in developing countries. Thus, the purpose of the study is to determine the visitors' viewpoint on sustainable ecotourism and its impacts on the local economy, environment, and society. It strengthens Bangladesh's attempts to protect its wildlife. The study was carried out in Bangladesh's Sylhet district at the Tilagor Eco Park from April 2023 to February 2024. A structured questionnaire comprising demographic variables and impacts categorized into economic, environmental, and sociocultural categories was used to interview 105 visitors. Although random, the sampling strategy was impartial. The result of the study showed that ecotourism is especially popular among young people. The main attraction of Tilagor Eco Park was the forest setting, which 93.3% of visitors agreed upon. The majority of the visitors were satisfied and faced no problems while visiting (65.7%) the park. 95.2% of visitors agreed that the community would benefit from the development of a framework for sustainable tourism, and 87% thought that increasing employment opportunities and supporting local cultural activities would benefit the local economy. Most visitors feel increasing local awareness is necessary, emphasizing the connection between ecotourism and conservation. Through infrastructure development tourism can cause soil erosion and damage vegetation. The study revealed that without compromising ecotourism's environmental and aesthetic aspects, visitors recognize the economic and sociocultural benefits it conveys.</p>

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Introduction

The term "ecotourism" describes the growth of tourism in a culturally and ecologically sustainable manner that benefits both the local community and the larger community on an economic and social level. Ecotourism is established based on the surrounding community and the environment with social, cultural, and economic impacts on it (Jahan and Akhter, 2018). As a developing South Asian country, Bangladesh has a great potential for ecotourism with multiple renowned natural sites including Sundarban and Cox's Bazar, which are rich in cultural heritage sites in addition to several hilly terrain, wildlife, waterfalls, and rivers (Afroz and Mahmud, 2017; Khondkar and Anis, 2013). Bangladesh has enormous potential for growing its ecotourism industry. In 2023, the travel and tourism sector contributed to the global GDP by 9.1% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2023). In 2020, travel and tourism made up a mere 4.4% of Bangladesh's total GDP (World Bank Development Indicators, 2020). Tilagor Eco Park is the third Eco Park of Bangladesh which is implemented for biodiversity conservation.

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Though tourists are attracted to the naturally reserved forests, Tilagor Eco Park has a great demand for eco-tourism. To extend ecotourism, several projects are being carried out. The preservation of biodiversity in Sitakunda, the creation of an eco-park and botanical garden, the growth of ecotourism, and the creation of a marine park on the island of St. Martin, etc. Currently, initiatives centered around ecotourism are being implemented quite quickly. Increasing awareness among locals and visitors, promoting trade shows and journals, social media, NGOs, etc. can help to grow ecotourism. In addition, our government ought to prioritize the development of communication networks, protection of the environment (fauna, tree species), local community development, visitor welfare, and the preservation of customs and cultural values through tourism-related initiatives. As many people visit Bangladesh to take in the terrain, vegetation, and fauna of the nation, its popularity is rising. One of the main categories of ecotourism is nature and forest-based travel (Landell-Mills and Poras, 2002). The most popular and successful method for preserving the biodiversity of forests and wetland areas worldwide is the use of protected areas (Lewis, 1996). Ecotourism has the potential to boost the local economy as well as the country (Walpole et al., 2001). However, due to a lack of focus, ecotourism centered around protected areas has not yet really taken off in Bangladesh.

Yet, there exists a limited amount of published information on the sustainability of ecotourism in Bangladesh, though. This made the study at Tilagor Eco Park, the first to investigate how visitors perceive the potential and sustainability of ecotourism as well as the significance and promise of ecotourism in conservation areas. The primary hypothesis posited in this research was that nature-based ecotourism could potentially transform how people think about potential and sustainable management. Alongside the benefits to local communities, ecotourism can also serve as a means of sharing local cultural activities with a global audience and promoting eco-park conservation. This might aid in the planner's creation of a viable and sustainable management strategy, as well as a gauge of visitor satisfaction and the economic, social, and environmental effects of visitors to the eco-park. In light of this, the objectives of the study are to investigate the visitors' viewpoint on sustainable ecotourism alongside the impact of tourism on the local economy, society, and environment.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

Bangladesh's third eco-park is Tilagor Eco Park, which is situated on the eastern edge of the Sylhet District. Its coordinates are 24.917118°N 91.906730°E. It has 112 acres of land. Lakkhachora Tea Garden and Chevron Gas Field, which are next to the Eco Park, are two other tea gardens in this evergreen tropical region. Autorickshaws and private vehicles can easily reach Tilagor Eco Park, which is located in a reserve forest on the eastern side of the city, close to Sylhet Agricultural University and Sylhet Engineering College. Figure 1 represents the study area of the conducted study.

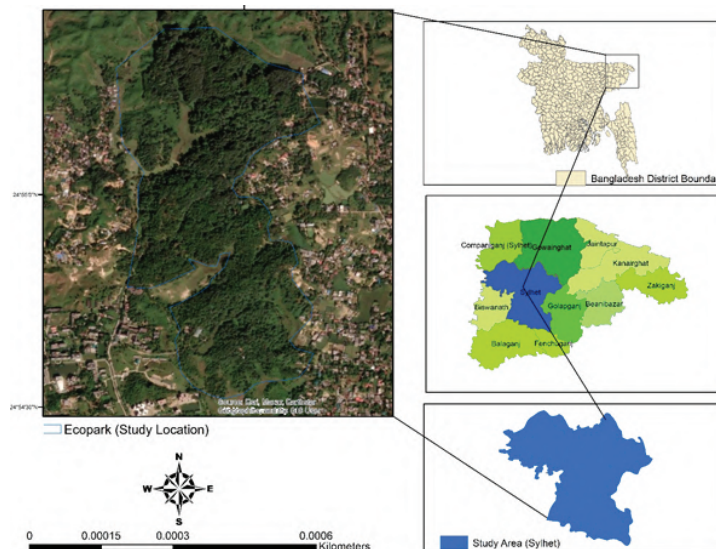


Figure 1. Study Area (Tilagor Eco Park, Sylhet)

Theoretical Framework

We determined the impacts of ecotourism on sustainability using the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability (Figure 2) of Tourism of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). In our study, we evaluated the base strategies of the visitors using three dimensions of sustainability (Economic, social, and environmental) through observation and interviewing using a questionnaire (Figure 3).

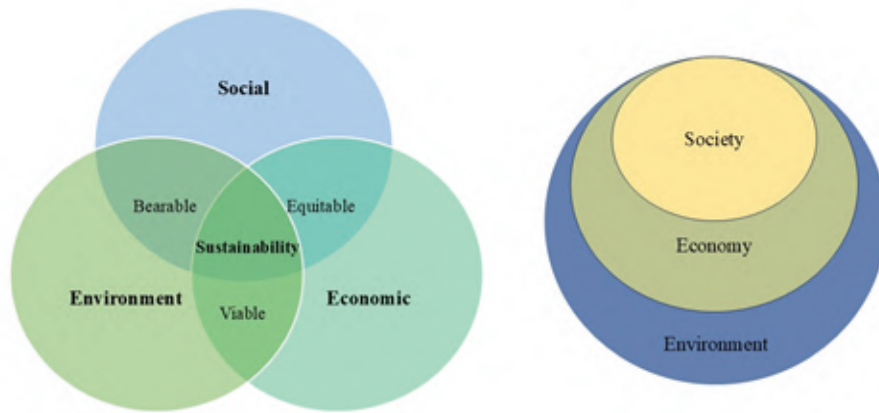


Figure 2. Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (Source: UNWTO,2024)

Economic Impact	Social Impact	Environmental Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote local economic development Promote Industrial development Increase the income of residents Give locals as much an opportunity to get involved with business Local sellers to sell their local goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting local cultural activities Giving protection to the cultural heritage Increasing the employment opportunities for residents Raising the local frame Facilitating the exchange of local and outside Improving national unity Improving local infrastructure Improving local quality of life Improving the price and cost of living Disrupting normal life for residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating any infrastructure in a natural environment like soil erosion and vegetation damage Creating pressure on wildlife Causing reduction of biodiversity Negative effect on the terrestrial ecosystem Maintaining the mutual relationship between eco tourism and natural resource conservation Improve resident awareness of the protection of the environment

Figure 3. Impacts of ecotourism on sustainability

Data Collection

Data were gathered through personal interviews with 105 randomly selected visitors from Tilagor Eco Park. A structured interview schedule was developed to collect relevant data with a clear focus on dealing with the social, economic, and environmental dimensions in accordance with the study objectives. A pre-test survey was conducted before the actual data collection. Considering the pre-test experience, required corrections, adjustments, additions, and rearrangements were made. The interview schedule was therefore finalized. A focus group discussion was held to confirm the data.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, they underwent sorting, compilation, and analysis to be utilized for the result and discussion sections. 10 demographic variables of respondents were taken including sex, age, marital status, educational level, profession, monthly income, the purpose of visit, no of visit, source of information, traveling mindset, etc. Four variables of reasons for attraction were taken including wildlife, forest, picnic spot, and others. The variables for attitude were taken in 3 aspects, including social, economic, and environmental, for all of these data analyses MS Word, Excel, and SPSS were used. The data were expressed in frequency and percentage.

Results and Discussion

Responses were taken from the surroundings of Tilagor Eco Park. Sustainable ecotourism is subjected to the 4Es: environmental conservation, equality, education, and economic advantages (Powell and Ham, 2008). The survey aimed to collect the visitors’ opinions, experiences, and preferences from visiting the Tilagor Eco Park.

Basic Demographic Profile of Visitors

The participation of females is higher than males in eco-tourism and the participation of young people is the highest (Masum et al., 2013). The majority of the visitors were ranged in age from 18 to 36 years (93.3%). Students are the main target audience of ecotourism (Rahman et al., 2013). Nafi and Ahmed (2017) showed that the majority of the respondents are studying at university and qualify themselves as graduate.

80.9% of the visitors arrived there for vacation purposes (Table 1). Asrianny et al. (2020) conveyed that the majority of the respondents who visited had a goal for visiting the park most likely for vacation.

Table 1. Basic Demographic Profile of Visitors in Tilagor Eco Park.

Parameters	Description			
	Sex	Male	Female	
Age		32(31)	73(69)	
		Below 18 years 2(1.9)	18 to 36 years 98(93.3)	37 to 54 years 4(3.8) Above 54 years 1(1)
Educational level		College 2(2)	University 103(98)	
	Marital status	Married 14(13.3)	Single 91(86.7)	
Profession		Govt. Job 4(4)	Non-govt. Job 6(6)	Student 95(90)
	Monthly income	Below 25000 tk 97(92.4)	25000-50000 tk 6(5.7)	Above 50000 tk 2(1.9)
Purpose of Visit		Education 11(10.5)	Event 9(8.6)	Vacation 85(80.9)
	No of Visit	Below 5 times 44(41.9)	5 to 10 times 35(33.9)	More than 10 times 26(24.8)
Source of information		Friends 77(73.4)	Neighbors 3(2.8)	Social media 7(6.7) Others 18(17.1)
	Traveling mindset	1 location every 2 months 63(60)	2 locations every 2 months 23(21.9)	3 locations every 2 months 13(12.4) 4 locations every 2 months 6(5.7)

Reasons for Attraction

Tilagor Eco Park offers a close-up look at different species in their natural habitat and an enticing opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in a diverse range of wildlife. A major percentage of the respondents agreed with the reason for attraction is Forest (93.3%), while 6.7% indicated disagreement (Table 2). Because of their rich biodiversity, scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, educational value, and cultural significance, forests frequently draw larger crowds of visitors than just wildlife. Visitors give more importance to close-up nature activity rather than encountering wildlife (Chin et al., 2000). The findings of our study also demonstrated that the wildlife on the site, what draws visitors in is its attractive forest. About 79% of respondents agreed with wildlife, while 21% disagreed. Ryan (2000) discovered that it is accurate when considering wildlife attractions more generally in connection with Australian tourist locations that have a wildlife theme, including National Parks. Picnic spots and other options were not preferable to the visitors as they disagreed with it. The picnic spot earned 41% agreement of respondents and 59% disagreement showing varied preferences. In addition, 20% favored other aspects, signaling openness to diverse park activities, while 80% disagreed with these.

Table 2. Reason for Attraction to Tilagor Eco Park

Parameter	Description	
Wildlife	Agree	Disagree
	83(79)	22(21)
Forest	Agree	Disagree
	98(93.3)	7(6.7)
Picnic spot	Agree	Disagree
	43(41)	62(59)
Others	Agree	Disagree
	21(20)	84(80)

Problem Observed in Tilagor Eco Park

As per the visitors' statements, the noteworthy issues include minimal wildlife, lack of oversight and care for animals, small areas, poor communication, safety issues, management problems, and lack of aesthetic appeal (Table 3).

8.5% of respondents cited a lack of wildlife as a problem, indicating a desire for increased biodiversity. The access of humans is hurting wildlife though it is raising the economic value. Furthermore, 1.9% of respondents voiced worries about the absence of supervision and animal care, highlighting the need for better animal welfare procedures. An additional 1.9% of respondents mentioned feeling that the park's size was limited, indicating a desire for growth or better use of the current areas. In addition, 3.9% emphasized inadequate communication, 7.6% raised safety concerns, and 6.6% pointed out management problems, highlighting how critical it is to address these areas for a better visitor experience. Finally, 3.9% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the park's aesthetic appeal, indicating a chance to improve the park's visual elements. However, most of the visitors agreed with no issue (65.7%) because of the aesthetic appeal of Tilagor Eco Park.

Table 3. Problem observed in Tilagor Eco park

Parameter	Description
Minimal wildlife	9(8.5)
Lack of oversight and care for the animal	2(1.9)
Small area	2(1.9)
Poor communication	4(3.9)
Safety issues	8(7.6)
Management problem	7(6.6)
Lack aesthetic appeal	4(3.9)
No issue	69(65.7)

Attitude towards Sustainable Ecotourism

Visitors’ varied perspectives on sustainable ecotourism are evident in their attitudes (Figure 4). About 80% of visitors concurred that they understand the concept of ecotourism. The study shows that most of the visitors understand the concept of sustainable ecotourism because it has become a need for us. The community would benefit from developing a sustainable tourism framework as believed by 95.2% of respondents. According to 90.5% of respondents, well management in nature is important to attract ecotourism. An overwhelming majority of visitors agreed that sustainable ecotourism encourages visitors to be concerned and protective of nature (Rahman et al., 2013) which is important to attract ecotourism agreed by the majority of respondents. Most visitors (95.2%) concurred that creating a framework for sustainable tourism would be beneficial for the community because it will minimize environmental damage and conserve natural resources. The community around Tilagor Eco Park is conservative and indigenous and the main purpose is to visit the forest and wildlife. So minority (55.2%) of the visitors agreed with the fact that the production of local heritage and ecotourism can be compatible. Believing that there is a demand for sustainable tourism in Tilagor Eco Park is confirmed by 93% and believing that Tilagor Eco Park is fulfilling sustainable ecotourism is agreed by 59% of the visitors. Any community, given its constraints in the areas of economy, society, culture, ecology, and physicality, has a great potential for sustainable development (Bhuiyan et al., 2012). That’s why most of the visitors agreed that there is a demand for sustainable ecotourism in Tilagor Eco Park.

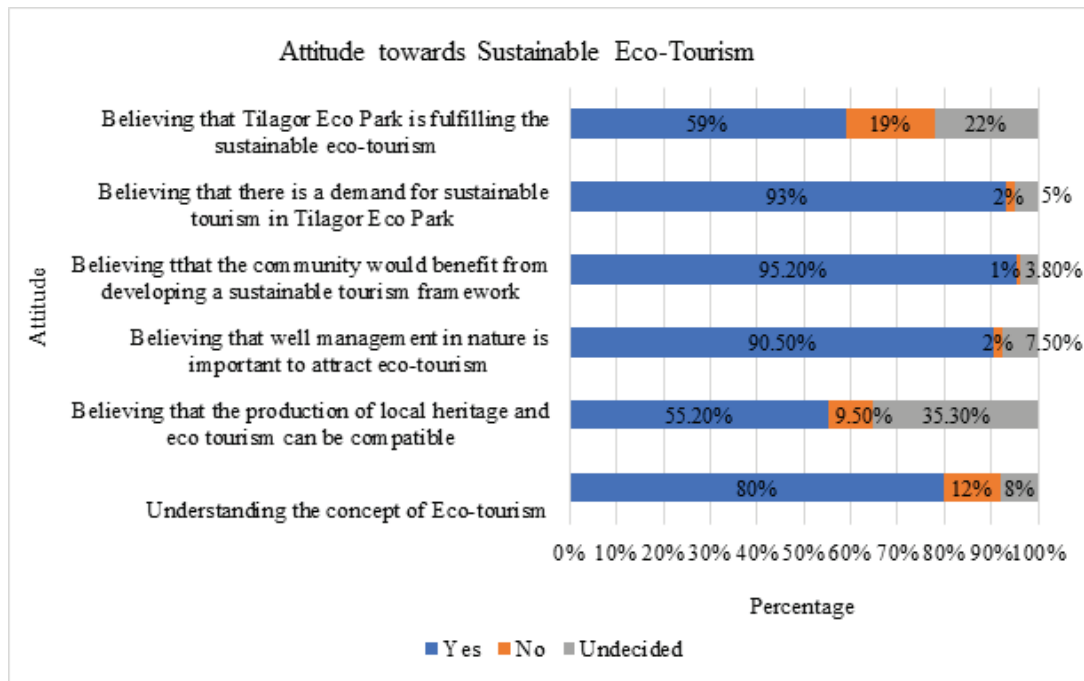


Figure 4. Visitor’s attitude toward sustainable ecotourism

Views Towards Impact of Ecotourism

This section illustrates visitor’s perception of ecotourism activities. 21 impacts were categorized into 3 divisions which are economic, social, and environmental.

Views Towards Economic Impact of Ecotourism

Some research papers focused on creating new employment opportunities for the locals (Jahan and Akhter, 2018). Goh and Rosilawati (2014) argued that ecotourism boots local economies even though there are concerns regarding possible hazards to the sustainability of the environment. However, from this study, it is seen that minorities (30%) agree that local income will increase with ecotourism (Figure 5). Ecotourism will promote the local economic development that is reoccurred by the majority (87%) of the visitors. Economic development from ecotourism refers to the way of income, earnings, sales, distribution, and other sources from sustainable ecotourism practices (Ahsan, 2008). For wide marketing channel the working opportunities of residents will increase as well as their cultural activities will be promoted too.

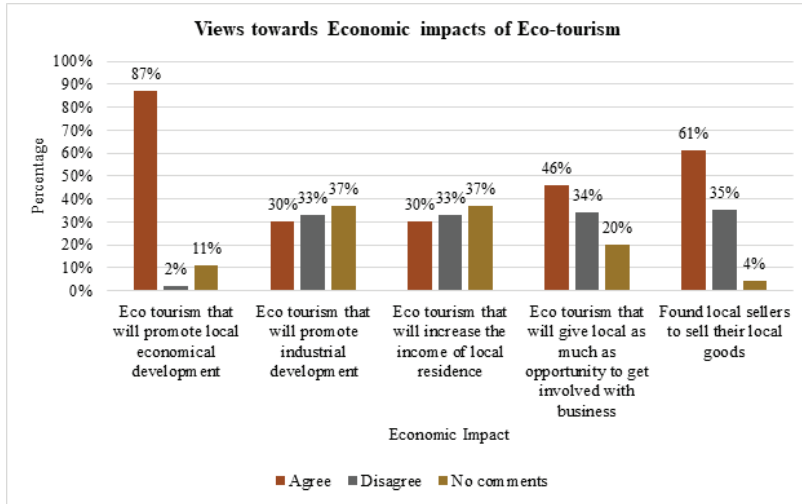


Figure 5. Visitor's Perspective on the Economic Impact of Ecotourism

Views Towards Social Impact of Ecotourism

For long-term benefits and social harmony, most of the visitors deny the fact that ecotourism will disrupt the normal life of the residents. Two social factors were chosen by the respondents "Improvement of employment opportunities of residents and promoting the local cultural activities ". These two items (Figure 6) were more preferred with similar frequency (87% of respondents agreed). Of the questions about the situation the majority number of respondents agreed with "the exchange of local and outside facilities", "Giving protection of cultural heritage" and "improvement of local life"(79%,72% & 71% agreed respectively).

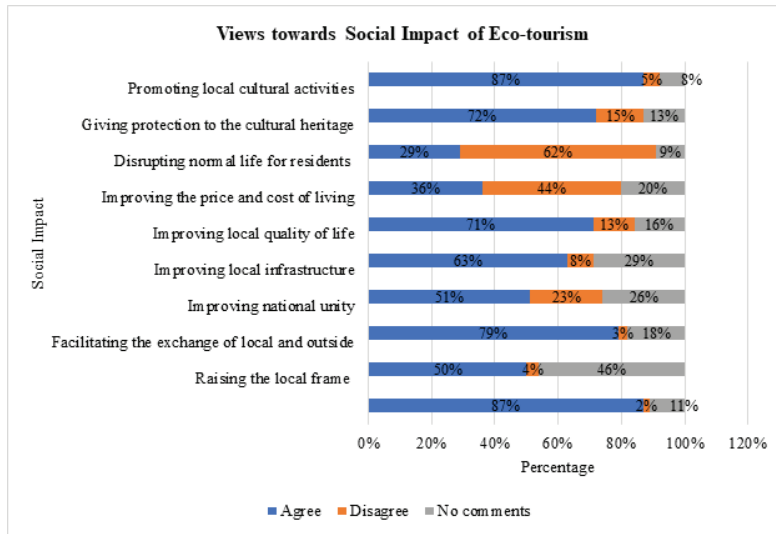


Figure 6. Visitor's perspective on the Social Impact of ecotourism

Views Toward Environmental Impact of Ecotourism

There has been an increase in local awareness of environmental conservation through participating in forest clearing, biodiversity preservation, and forest conservation by the local people (Jahan and Akhter,2018). The majority number of respondents agreed on the items namely, " improvement of resident awareness on the environment protection" and "ecotourism and natural resource conservation maintaining the mutual relationship " (95% and 86% of participants agreed on these items respectively, depicted in Figure 7. Almost every visitor believed that ecotourism would promote awareness of the locals of Tilagor Eco Park to protect the environment. Jahan and Akhter (2018) also said that due to the inappropriate activities of visitors, wildlife is getting much pressure. However, a minority number of respondents (53%) agreed that tourism creates any infrastructure in the natural environment like soil erosion & damaging the vegetation system.

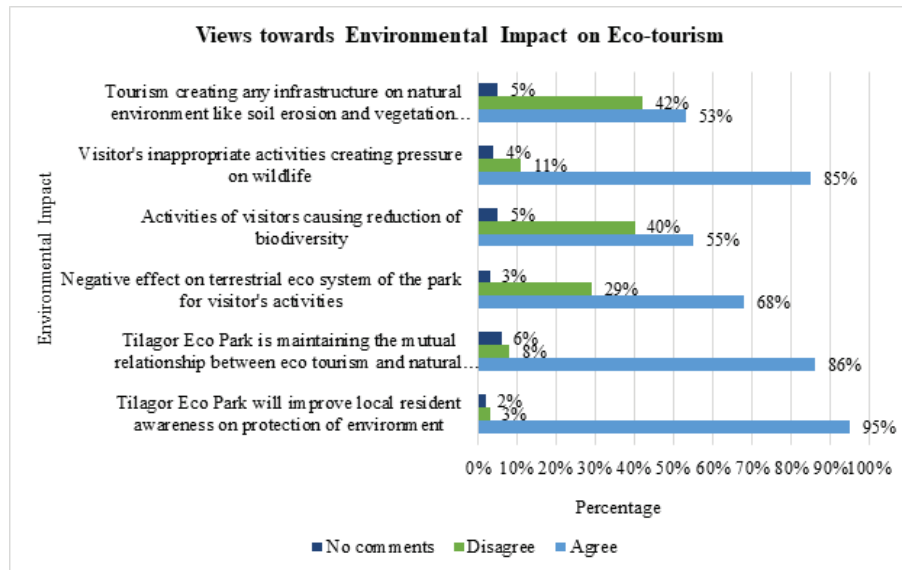


Figure 7: Visitor’s perspective on Environmental Impact of ecotourism

Conclusion

Visitors’ opinions on sustainable ecotourism at Tilagor Eco Park have a variety of viewpoints. Remarkably, there are two things that people agree on the management of natural resources is vital, and the community would benefit from a sustainable ecotourism framework. The study has some limitations where it has not covered everyone’s perception like the management team of the park, streak stakeholders, and mainly the Government. By reflecting on the attitude of visitors we can say that this study meets the parameters to maintain sustainable ecotourism in Tilagor Eco Park. Participation of both public and private sectors is necessary to conserve the park. To better understand the effects of ecotourism in the study area, more research on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Economic, Ecological, and Environmental levels is required. Understanding the need and cooperation between the public and private sectors is a must for maximizing the tourism industry's potential.

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