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RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING OF TOURISTS, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS IN THE TRANS-HIMALAYAN COLD DESERT OF LADAKH REGION OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The study of tourist's perception on service quality is a critical strategy for success and survival in today's competitive environment (Fynes and Voss, 2001). This study assesses the recreational experiences of tourists and aims to discuss the sustainable tourist development of cold desert of Ladakh region. The region as a whole is a climatic desert, which has imposed severe check on the proper growth of economic activity, even agriculture has not flourished fully. Despite of that tourism is opening new vistas for the region, the total number of the tourists visited in the year 1985 was 18911 which increased to 77800 in the year 2001. The study was conducted with the help of the questionnaires that included different variable measuring the demographic profile, occupational distribution, purpose of visit, and mode of transportation to arrive the destination, level of satisfaction and perception of the tourists towards the environmental condition of the Ladakh. The result shows that about 80% of the tourists visiting the Ladakh are in the economically active age-group and majority of them are from the developed countries of the west Europe which is a good sign for the future tourism of the area. The study also focused on the attitude of the host population towards the tourism and it was found 96% of the tourists were of the opinion that host population was supportive for the development of the tourism industry. On basis of this empirical data, some recommendations are made for the sustainable tourism development of the region.

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INTRODUCTION

The methods of studying perception ranges from essentially biological or physiological approaches, to psychological approaches through the philosophy of mind (Dann, 2002). The importance of tourism and tourists' image of tourism destinations has a paramount importance (Pike, S, 2010; Ortega and Gonzalez 2007). Destination images influence tourists' travel decision making and behavior towards a destination as well as satisfaction levels and recollection of the experience. Therefore, perceived images are the basis of the evaluation or selection process and thus provide the link between motivations and destination selection (O'Leary, & Deegan, 2003). To understand tourists' differences in perceptions, images and motivations toward a destination is essential to comprehend and predict tourism demand and its impact on the destination. In fact, this understanding of destination image and visitors' perceptions is critical to a destination and provides the basis for more effective and efficient future strategic planning of the destination. In practical terms, this implies that perception studies are a prerequisite to a successful marketing strategy. Hsu, et al. (2008), considered destination as the epicenters of

tourism industry of the whole geographical region. The characteristics of tourism products have potential to influence experience and perception of tourist. According to Reisinger and Turner (2003) perceptions of tourists who had never experienced the product before, and whose perceptions are mostly created on a basis of the knowledge gained from promotion instead of first-hand experience, may differ from the perceptions of tourists who had experienced the product. (Pizam and Mansfeld 2000). In this paper, perception means the viewpoint of tourists towards tourism products offered in the cold desert Ladakh which they have visit and enjoyed. Tourism industry in general, should understand the needs of tourist or facilities for tourist satisfaction. Tourism destination should also maintain its reputation, yet abide to local and international law and regulation. According to Goodrich (1978), the key factors of tourist visiting the destination are believed to be a combination of factors between individual taste and destination original perception. Tourist satisfaction is widely accepted as being of central importance to destination management organization and tourism-related sectors. High tourist satisfaction is likely to contribute benefit not only to tourism goods and service providers, but also local governments, residents and other stake holders. To allow it happen an integrated tourist satisfaction index should be carried out of all components of tourism industry such as accommodation, catering, transportation, attractions, retail shops, handicrafts, local cultural events, in a holistic approach.

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Moreover, tourists consider overall destinations when deciding where to vacation. Within a destination, many independent businesses as well as local government organizations all contribute to the visitor experience and post-purchase behavior in different ways. Benchmarking overall destination tourist satisfaction is therefore challenging since so many different elements contribute tourist satisfaction. The number of studies investigating aspects of customer satisfaction in tourism, travel, hospitality and recreation is increasing (Kozak, Rimmington, 2000). It is recognized that satisfaction affects destination selection decisions, consumption of goods and services at a destination, and intention to revisit. Related research indicates that satisfaction is a function of expectations and overall performance. After comparing the expectations with perceived performance of the destination, destination satisfaction can be considered (Korzay and Alvarez, 2005). This study aims to discuss comprehensive tourist perception, level of importance and satisfaction index, which is based on performance and contribution of different elements of these tourism related attributes. It is expected that the study will help a great deal in devising a sustainable plan for the tourism development in the study area.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A self-administered questionnaire survey was conducted to assess tourist experiences at high altitude cold desert Ladakh during peak tourist season at various tourist nodes during 2012. The questionnaire included the variables of importance, satisfaction, sustainable development and demographic, travel characteristics and recreational characteristics. This study used stratified random sampling to select the tourists in the recreation areas. Since study is larger therefore 1000 samples were decided to be cover, ultimately a total of 827 tourists agreed to participate in the survey. Nine items, including constructs of landscapes, service quality, nature of host population and traffic convenience, etc. were used to measure the level of importance that respondents assigned for each aspect of the study. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from strongly unimportant at 1 to strongly important at 5. Visitors' multi-item satisfaction scales were developed, consistent with the studies of Mingfang (2011), Bigne *et al.* (2001) and Lee (2003). Nine items, containing constructs of natural environment, service quality, and traffic convenience, were used to measure the level of satisfaction that respondents designated for each aspect experienced in the cold desert Ladakh. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from strongly dissatisfied at 1 to strongly satisfy at 5.

Study Area

The region of Ladakh consists of two districts, the Kargil district and the Leh district as shown in Figure 1. The region borders with Pakistan occupied Kashmir, Chinese occupied Aksai Chin, Tibet, and Lahul Spiti (Himachal Pradesh, India). Ladakh hosts three mighty parallel mountainous ranges of the Himalayas: the Zaskar, the Ladakh and the Karakoram Ranges. Between these, the rivers Shayok, Indus and Zaskar flow. From an ecological standpoint, Ladakh belongs to the Trans-Himalayan ecosystem (Namgail *et al.*, 2006), that is a high-altitude cold desert, where flora and fauna are characterized by low distribution density, as well as high adaptation to elevation

and aridity. The region has a complex hydrological system of rivers, lakes and enclosed basins that allowed the development of important wetlands. These ecosystems function as oases of productivity in an otherwise arid environment. They host varied plant communities, including most of the bushes and trees found in the region, as well as a diverse wildlife, including an abundant migratory bird fauna (Humbert-Droz and Dawa, 2004). There are several protected areas in the region, among which: Hemis National Park, Changthang High-altitude Wetland Reserve, which is recognized by the Ramsar Convention on wetland conservation, and Karakoram Wildlife Sanctuary, whose boundaries have been not delineated yet.

Economically, most people rely on subsistence agriculture (Goodall, 2004). The region has inherent physical constraints, like prolonged winter, scanty rainfall, rugged mountain terrain, and limited availability of fertile land. Nevertheless, agriculture and pastoralism are the main livelihoods in the region, although these traditional sectors have been adversely affected by the development of tourism and government services (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2006). In the last 30 years, tourist inflow pattern in Ladakh can be divided into three phases (Department of Tourism, 2007): Phase I (1974–1989), Phase II (1989–2002), and Phase III (2002–present). Phase I presented a slow and steady growth in tourist inflow that peaked in 1989 with about 25,000 visitors. Phase II showed high fluctuation: from less than 8000 to slightly over 20,000 visitors per year. Finally, Phase III is characterized by an exponential growth, which reached 77,800 visitors in 2010. Each of these phases was governed by two main factors: policies and accessibility. Steep decreases in Phase II were determined by political crisis aroused in Himalayan states and regions (Dhariwal, 2005), whereas abrupt increases were fuelled by Indian domestic tourist policies, as well as improvement of civil aviations and infrastructures. The growth of Phase III is being propelled by a more stable political situation, by the crisis affecting neighboring Himalayan states, and by the investment in marketing and promotion.

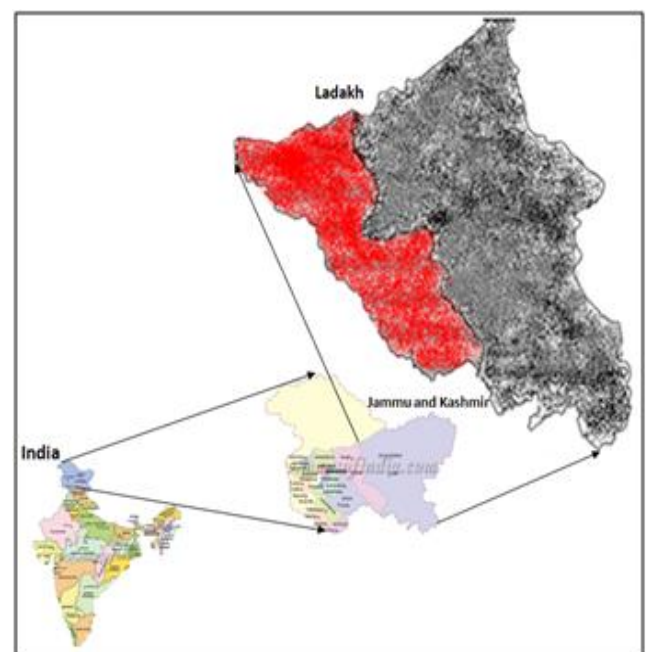


Fig.1. Study Area

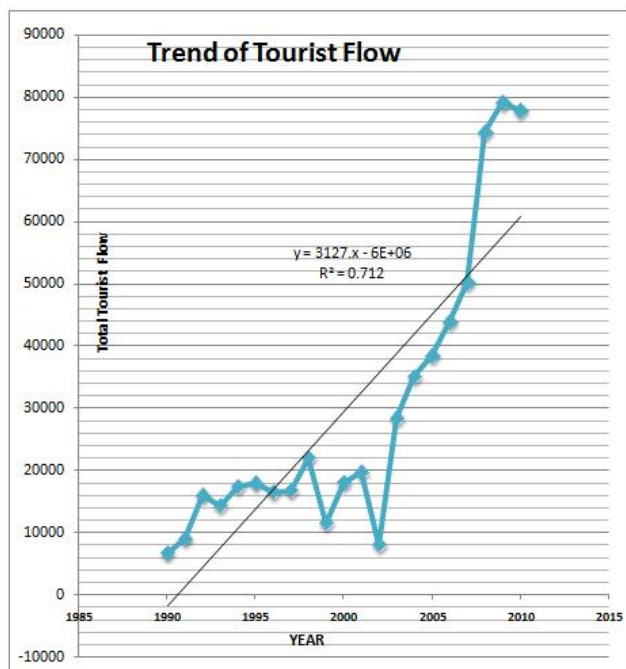
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Keeping in view the remoteness, Ladakh has been visited by & surprisingly large number of visitors & explorers. They can be credited as being the pioneers, those, who founded the base of tourists in this region. Subsequently, in real sense they paved the way for modern tourism in Ladakh. Opening up of Ladakh to the tourists in 1974 and the establishment of air link with Leh and the construction of Srinagar-Leh road constitutes a landmark in the tourism history of J & K. It has added new dimensions to the tourism industry of the state. The perusal of statistics inevitably reveals the growing importance of Ladakh as novel destinations of foreign tourists from a mere figure of 6342 foreign tourists in 1990, the number increased tremendously to 55685 in 2010, while the total number of tourists visiting Ladakh has gone up to 77800 in 2010 as shown in the Table 1.1. The analysis of Fig. 2 shows that that

Table 1.1. Tourist flow to Ladakh

Year	Foreigners	Home	Total
1990	6342	396	6738
1991	8014	1041	9055
1992	13580	2438	16018
1993	12401	2000	14401
1994	15369	2080	17449
1995	12391	5594	17985
1996	13036	3537	16573
1997	12810	3991	16801
1998	15238	6792	22030
1999	9669	1905	11574
2000	11825	6217	18042
2001	15439	4260	19699
2002	5120	2959	8079
2003	15371	13031	28402
2004	13483	21608	35091
2005	24665	13781	38446
2006	26078	17822	43900
2007	28178	22007	50185
2008	35311	39023	74334
2009	30570	48517	79087
2010	55685	22115	77800

Source: Tourism Department, J&K



Source: Compiled From the Data of Tourism Department, J&K

Fig. 2. Trend of Tourist Flow

There has been continuous upward trend tourist flow, which depicts the tourist potential of the Ladakh region falling along the silk road and cradled in the Trans Himalayan range. Tourist flow has a dramatic upward swing from 2002 onwards, that is a good indication for the economy of the state in general and for the Ladakh in particular.

Demographic Profile of Tourists Visiting To Cold Desert Ladakh

Developing the socio-demographic tourist profile of the traveler in any area is important in the academic and commercial arenas and also for the local communities involved. The Table 1.2 depicts about 54% were male and 46% were females. So for the marital status of the tourist is concerned 55% were married and 45% were unmarried youths. On the basis of age structure 47% of the tourists were in young age group of 15-30, age group and age group of 30-45 constitute 32% of the tourist traffic to Ladakh. However old and senior citizen constitute 10% and 1.1% of the tourist traffic to Ladakh. While analyzing tourist flow from occupational structure Ladakh is much popular among students and govt. employees who constitute 23% and 51% respectively. However, only 16% and 10% were businessmen and others. On the basis of educational attainment level 63% tourist were graduates 20% had attained intermediate level while as 12% were post graduates. The major source of Tourist visiting Ladakh are from European market, 32% tourist were from France followed by Germany with 12%, Italy 10%, England 9%, Spain 8%, and Switzerland constituted 2.5% respectively.

Table 1.2. Demographic Profiles of Tourists Visiting To Cold Desert Ladakh

Variable	Description	N	%age
Gender	Male	446	54
	Female	380	46
marital status	Married	455	55
	Un Married	372	45
Age Group	<15	67	8.2
	15-30	393	47.6
	30-45	265	32.9
	45-65	84	10.2
	>65	18	1.1
Occupational structure	students	190	23
	Govt. Employee	422	51
	Businessman	132	16
	Others	83	10
level of Education	Middle	27	3.3
	intermediate	167	20.2
	graduate	526	63.7
	post graduate	107	12.8
Nationality	France	264	32
	Germany	100	12.1
	Spain	69	8.3
	Belgium	141	17.1
	England	78	9.4
	Israel	25	3.1
	Italy	85	10.2
	Australia	34	4.1
	Switzerland	20	2.5
	Others	11	1.2

Source: Field Survey

Travel Characteristics of Tourists Visiting To Cold Desert Ladakh

Another part of questionnaire was pertaining to the travel information of the tourist which is very important for devising

Table 1.3. Travel Characteristics of Tourists Visiting To Cold Desert Ladakh

Variable	Description	N	% age
Purpose of visit	Leisure	231	28
	Adventure	199	24
	Spiritual and religious	140	17
	Exploration	182	22
	Sports	75	9
Commitment of tourist to visit again	Yes	785	95
	No	42	5
Length of stay	One day	32	3.9
	Two days	414	50.1
	Three days	357	43.1
	Four days	19	2.3
	Five days	5	0.6
Mode of transportation used to arrive Ladakh	Air	330	41
	By Road	488	59
Mode of lodging	Hotel	339	41
	Guest house	413	50
	Camping	75	9

Source: Field Survey

transportation used to arrive the Ladakh, it was found 59% tourists used local transport service, however 41% came by air and 59% by road. Since there various modes of lodging so tourist were asked about the type of lodging, it was found 50% prefer to guest houses, 41% prefer hotels and only 9% used camping.

Levels of importance attributed by tourists to selected variables in the cold desert Ladakh

It is clear from the Table 1.4 that The most important attribute was sanitation and hygiene of the destination area, 40% find it very important, and 57% important and 0.2 % consider it unimportant. Second attribute of paramount importance is natural environment 37% consider it very important, 31% find it important, 28% had no opinion and 0.7% considers it unimportant. The third most important attribute was parking convenience, 35% find it very important, 42.7% find it important, 20.3% showed no opinion and only 0.1% consider it unimportant. 26% tourist find accommodation service and

Table 1.4. Levels of importance attributed by tourists to selected variables in the cold desert Ladakh

Attributes	Level of importance				
	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	No Opinion	Important	Very Important
Sanitation and hygiene	0.2	2.5	0	57.1	40.2
Natural environment	0.7	1.3	28.9	31.2	37.9
Local art and culture	0	3.3	13.4	53.1	31.2
Local cosine and food quality	0.3	4.2	11	50	34.5
attitude of host population	0.6	2.6	14.1	52.9	29.8
Traffic convenience	0.2	3.1	15.4	58.3	23
Parking convenience	0.1	1.7	20.3	42.7	35.2
Accommodation services and quality	0.2	4.6	24.4	44.3	26.5
Health care and other services	0.3	6	21.8	39.6	32.3

Source: Field Survey

Table 1.5. Levels of satisfaction acquired by tourists from selected variables in the cold desert Ladakh

Attributes	Level of satisfaction				
	Strongly Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	No Opinion	Satisfied	Strongly Satisfied
Sanitation and hygiene	0.0	0.7	17.3	52.8	29.2
Natural environment	0.8	3.4	13.7	61.3	20.8
Local art and culture	1.4	1.0	21.3	43.9	32.4
Local cosine and food quality	7.3	4.7	42.8	31.9	13.3
Attitude of host population	3.1	8.4	11.7	72.1	4.7
Traffic convenience	3.5	14.3	23.1	40.0	19.1
Parking convenience	0.3	7.1	3.1	70.8	18.7
Accommodation services and quality	8.2	12.6	3.2	57.9	18.1
Health care and other services	4.8	19.7	20.1	47.8	7.6
Overall satisfaction	3.7	9.1	12.2	59.9	15.1

Source: Field Survey

a sustainable tourism development plan for a destination. So for the purpose of visit is concerned, it was found 28% tourist came for leisure purpose, followed by adventure with 24%, for exploration 22%, spiritual and religious purpose 17% and finally for sports tourism 9% only. Respondents were also asked about their commitment to visit the Ladakh again, it was found 95% were committed to visit Ladakh again next time and only 5% responded with negative answer. It means Ladakh has a thrilling impact on the mind set of tourists. Length of stay is yet another variable which specifically used to measure popularity and economic benefits of tourism to the destination area i.e. longer the length of stay more economic returns are expected and vice versa. It is evident from the Table 1.3 that 50% tourists' length of stay is two days and followed by 43% tourists with three days, only 3.9% were overnight visitors. Tourist were also asked about the mode of

quality were very important 44% consider it important 24% respondent had no response and only 0.2 labeled it very unimportant. In general we can say majority of the respondent labeled almost all attributes of the cold desert region Ladakh either with very important or important.

Levels of satisfaction acquired by tourists from selected variables in the cold desert Ladakh

The analysis of tourist satisfaction levels in the table 1.5 shows about 70% Tourist were satisfied with parking convenience, 18% indicated highly satisfied, 3.1% had no response and only 0.3 indicated strongly dissatisfied. This was followed by the natural environment in which 61% indicated satisfied, 20% were strongly satisfied, 13% showed no response 3.4 were dissatisfied and only 0.8% were strongly dissatisfied. Another

striking point to be noted from the table that 70% of tourist were satisfied with nature of the host population, 18% were strongly satisfied and only 8.4 % were dissatisfied with attitude of the local population. It means host population is highly in support of the tourism development in the region. Local art and culture which important tourist resources of Ladakh, 32% tourist were strongly satisfied 43% were satisfied and only 3.4 and 0.8% were dissatisfied and strongly dissatisfied. Besides tourist are also satisfied with other attributes that shown in the Table 1.5 and further improvement and investment will surely bring a revolutionary tourism paradigm of cold desert Ladakh. 47% of the tourists were satisfied with Health care and other services, 7.8% were strongly satisfied but 19% tourists were dissatisfied and 4.8% were strongly dissatisfied. The overall satisfaction 59%, 15% are strongly satisfied, 9.1% tourists are dissatisfied and 3.7% tourist is strongly dissatisfied. This clearly shows that there exists room for the improvement for the overall tourist satisfaction in the Ladakh region. The low level of satisfaction on the certain indicators shows that in order to cater the needs of tourists there is strong need for of policy planning and developmental strategies to be adopted.

Conclusion

The results have important practical implications for the sustainable tourism management of the cold desert Ladakh. This study surveyed tourists' experiences cold desert Ladakh during peak summer, using stratified random sampling to regarding the demographic profile, travel characterization, levels of importance attributed to various variable and satisfaction levels of tourists, who visited the areas. This study showed that Ladakh is popular a popular tourist honey spot among young age group (15-30, 30-45) who together constitute 80% of the tourist traffic to the area. Majority of tourist are either students or govt. employees. From the country of origin point of view the bulk flow come from the developed countries of west Europe, the top ten tourist markets of Ladakh are France, Germany, Spain, England, Belgium, Italy, Israel, Australia and Switzerland. Recreational satisfaction is the most important indicator for recreational experiences. Hence, providing diverse and high-quality experiences is the most important task of managers and marketers of cold desert recreation area. The overall satisfaction levels were very high it can be explained by this fact 95% of the tourist were committed to visit the area again. It can be attributed to the wild and adventurous physiography of the area and friendly behavior of its residents or host population. Yet to develop the tourism industry sustainably and systematically, the quality of accommodation, quality of local cosine and food, sanitation and hygiene of the area has to be improve and develop efficiently. In particular, govt. and private entrepreneurs could utilize the summer to provide alternative tourism, such as ecotourism, cultural Travel, adventure travel and wildlife watching, both to increase their with a view to develop the region as model ecotourism spot.

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