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# Key Factors Influencing Revisits to Eco-sites: A Case Study in the Western Ghats of Chikmagalur District, Karnataka State, India

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**ABSTRACT :** This study was carried out to assess the key factors influencing revisits to eco-sites in the hilly areas of Chikmagalur district. Simple random sampling was done to select predetermined number of respondents and the targeted usable sample size was set at 200. Questionnaires were placed at pre-selected tourist accommodations to receive direct feedback from Eco-tourists. The filled in questionnaires were collected for compiling and analyzing the data. Fourteen indicators were monitored in the study area by collecting data from eco-tourists. Principal Component factor Analysis (PCA) methodology was adopted and it demonstrated that five factors significantly influence the intention to revisit hilly areas of Chikmagalur. Calmness, custom, accessibility, beautiful nature and inclination towards tourist places, displayed high levels of satisfaction.

**KEYWORDS:** Eco-tourism, Revisits, Principal Component factor Analysis, Calmness, Chikmagalur.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry is one of the world's largest industries with a global economic contribution (direct, indirect and induced) of over 7.6 trillion U.S. dollars in 2016. The direct economic impact of the industry, including accommodation, transportation, entertainment and attractions, was approximately 2.3 trillion U.S. dollars in the same year [21]. In 1950 the number of tourist went from 25 million up to 702 million in 2000[40]. According to the World Tourism Organization, tourism growth rate will reach 1.6 billion in 2020[11]. People love traveling for entertainment, relaxation, business and many other reasons in-between. Some tourists prefer calm places surrounded by beautiful nature.

Since the 1970s, increasing ecological and environmental protection awareness, combined with the transformation of consumer market, has led to a new mode of tourism, which combines ecological conservation, environmental education, and cultural experiences [10]. Public travels mainly involve in the "natural landscape appreciation", which is followed by the "cultural experiential activity". To cope with the requirements, a lot of touring spots would attract people who live in urban jungles to visit the countryside with the ecological environment and historic and cultural monuments for appreciating landscapes and experiencing the local culture [9].

This study was carried out to assess the key factors influencing revisits to eco-sites since ecotourism is a fast growing market compared to the other tourism sectors [16]. The people perception on the tourism is changing in according with the progression of their live quality. They are aware of the important of the tourism existence. They tend to choose the tourism objects which are more natural, and saver to environment such as the ecotourism. Basically, the ecotourism is the tourist activity in natural environment that maintains the natural conservation, social empowerment aspect, culture, education and empowerment of local economic. The term ecotourism was coined in 1983 by "Hctor Ceballos Lascrain" a Mexican environmentalist, and was initially used to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed

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areas with an emphasis on education [37]. Ecotourism, a unique subset of the tourism industry, is focused on the enhancement or maintenance of natural systems through tourism. Ecotourism means different things to different people. To some, it is the general term that encompasses nature-based, adventure, soft adventure, and cultural tourism [37]. Ecotourism involves travelling to relatively well-preserved and not degraded natural areas in order to study, admire and enjoy the landscape, plants, wildlife, and cultural events (past and present)[7].

Ecotourism destination represents protected natural area (mainly national parks) or a landscape with perceived natural characteristics and rich biodiversity, where the intensity of developed and urbanized is at a very low level, and where tourism is not developed at the expense of fundamental natural resources [14].

In 2007, ecotourism accounted for 7% of the international tourism market, increasing rapidly at an annual rate of 10% to 30%[25]. The ecotourism is massively developed in the world because it elicits the advantage of economic empowerment and natural conservation[35]. According to GlobalData, 'Top trends in sustainable tourism' reveals that increased awareness of social, economic and environmental sustainability has spread rapidly through the digital world and social media. This has given rise to a new type of tourist, characterized by environmental and cultural sensitivity. Such travellers are more likely to see eco-tourism holidays as a serious option when choosing their next destination and more likely to support businesses and brands that are committed to social values and respect the environment. According to GlobalData's Q4-2016 consumer survey, 35% globally are likely to book eco-tourism holidays[18].

The model of ecotourism is relevant to Chikmagalur, owing to the growing popularity of her immaculate classiness. The Western Ghats of Chikmagalur has got ample potential in satisfying the requirements of ecotourism. With the growing concern about environment and to get respite from stressful urban life, people are increasingly spending their weekends and holidays in serene natural environment. Many private entrepreneurs have introduced the concepts of "home stays" and "resorts" with the intention of profiting from the benefits of ecotourism. The focus of this paper is to identify the factors which contribute in attracting ecotourists and increase their revisits to the hilly areas of Chikmagalur. Ecotourists are looking for "less crowded" places that have direct links with a natural surroundings. For that purpose, they can use mountain trails [14].

Questionnaires used to get feedback from visitors were framed based on the previous work "Eco-Tourism impact/success indicators" conducted at "Samakov Pilot Region" of "Rila National Park", Bulgaria in 2002[15]. Some modifications have been done and adequate care was taken so that the questions will suit the requirements of our study area. The following indicators were considered to study the revisits to the ecotourism sites in the hilly areas of Chikmagalur.

1. Beautiful nature
2. Calmness
3. Accessibility, nearness to their place of living
4. Habit, of rest in the pristine environment
5. Cordiality, kindness of the local population
6. Sense of security during the vacation
7. Opportunity for various activities during the vacation
8. Affordability
9. Interest towards natural and the culture heritage of the place
10. Spontaneous emerging opportunity for traveling to that place
11. Appropriate places for accommodation and dining
12. Good services
13. At the request by a member of the family, the group which I am traveling with
14. Other / please specify

## II. RELATED WORK

Size of global ecotourism is expanding year by year, indicating ecotourism's intentions in visiting natural environment, a positive sign in promoting and preserving the ecosystem. As per World Tourism Organization), ecotourism/nature tourism was growing globally 3 times faster than the tourism industry as a whole[39]. Nature tourism is growing at 10%-12% per annum in the international market [26]. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and

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Conservation International have indicated that most of tourism's expansion is occurring in and around the world's remaining natural areas [12]. In 2006, analysts predict a growth in eco-resorts and hotels, and a boom in nature tourism and suggest early converts to sustainable tourism will make market gains[36]. Effective marketing mix strategies should lead to high intention to visit and to revisit other things being equal[29].

In the literature on tourism and recreation, "revisit intentions" are equivalent to "repurchasing intentions" in product and service marketing. Most of the studies employed consumers' revisit intentions and willingness to recommend as measurement factors of tourists' behavioral intentions and tourist loyalty. Kotler (2003) argued that customers experience to some extent of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service provided, and this psychological change influences their subsequent behavior. In other words, satisfied customers are more likely to have stronger revisit intentions. Bigne *et al.*(2001) divided tourists' behavioral intentions into two dimensions: revisit intentions and recommendation intentions, where revisit intentions refers to the possibility of tourists revisiting the ecotourism destinations, and recommendation intentions refers to the likelihood of tourists recommending their experience to others[10].

Looking ahead, more than two-thirds (68%) of travelers intend to stay in an eco-accommodation in 2018, up from 65 percent in 2017 and 62 percent in 2016. Additionally, the percentage of travelers who have not considered eco-friendly stays because they were unaware of their existence continues to decline, resting at 31 percent in 2018, compared to 39 percent and 38 percent in 2017 and 2016, respectively[22].

Similar type of inclination towards eco- friendly stays was observed among tourists in the hilly areas of Chikmagalur. The local people started observing uptrend's in the tourist's interest in visiting the calm and beautiful natural areas. So as to encash this opportunity, they started converting residential buildings into home stays and many entrepreneurs started resorts/hotels to provide hospitality to the visitors. In 2004, it started in a small way and in 2019 there are more than 171 Home stays and 25 resorts/hotels in Chikmagalur [19][23]. The activities such as trekking, bird watching, hiking, kayaking and beautiful mountain peaks, waterfalls along with traditional malnad food attracting more and more visitors each year. In May 2005 – April 2006, 105149 number of visitors visited Chikmagalur [1].

Further according to the statistics available in the Chikmagalur Tourism Department, 85,81,493 tourists visited the district in 2010 while 2,615 foreigners have visited the district in 2009. In fact Karnataka boasts of a diverse flora and fauna and a 320 km natural coast line, which makes it a nature tourist's paradise. Tourist arrivals in the state increased from 25.2 million in 2005-06 to 120.5 million in 2015-16, Chikmagalur being a hill station in Karnataka playing a major role in attracting large number of tourists. [17].

The phenomenon of revisit intention is therefore considered important because it could lead to increased patronage and assurance of the sustainability of funds and socio-cultural preservation of local communities which are needed to sustain ecotourism destinations. Several studies have shown that revisit intention of tourists is subject to their experiences with such destination [5]. The hilly terrain of Chikmagalur is away from urban centers, free from traffic nuisance and is extremely depopulated. Because of its natural beauty and rich biodiversity, this place is recording high rate of visitors year after year.

### III. DESCRIPTION OF STUDY AREA

Nestled in the Baba Budan hills, Chikmagalur is a calm, serene town in Karnataka State. The Malnad, which in the local, Kannada or Canarese language means the land of hills covered with forests, is the Western Ghats area of Karnataka in Southern India. Malnad receives an annual 2610 mm rainfall, of which nearly 83% is received between June and September. The minimum temperature being 6.5<sup>0</sup>C (January) and the maximum is 35.5<sup>0</sup>C (March-May). Malnad is located between 13<sup>0</sup>10' and 13<sup>0</sup>94' North and South, longitudes 75<sup>0</sup>30' and 76<sup>0</sup>85' East and West with elevation of 900 m in major areas and with lateritic soil. In its expanse, Malnad is replete with natural scenery and support a rich variety of geographical features - rolling mountains, deep valleys, bluish-green swamps, streams, tanks, riverbeds, plateaus and forests. Of 15.5 lakh hectares in Malnad, 10% is forest with moist tropical forests, dry tropical forests, montane sub-tropical forests and montane temperate forests being the four major forest types recognized [4].

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Fig. 1. The map of study area of Chikmagalur (Source: GIS)

Chikmagalur with its natural beauty and forest wealth is an important tourist district. This district has many beautiful hill resorts; the lofty hill ranges like Mullainagiri, Kudremukha, Kemanagundi, Hebba falls, and Kalathi falls are all beautiful. Mullainagiri is the highest point in Karnataka at about 1926 meters above the sea level.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

### DATA COLLECTION

To study the revisits to the ecotourism places in the study area, data was collected from tourists. After preliminary meeting with the tourist entrepreneurs to clarify the importance of information; the questionnaires were handed over to them. The tourists' questionnaires were completed at places of their stay. After a period of seven days, the completed questionnaires were collected from tourist destinations. This type of data collection was fitting to the objective, since it was a quick, one-time research to obtain relatively reliable information based on spontaneous answers.

### SAMPLE AND SAMPLE SIZE

Table 1. Survey Response Details

Respondents	Delivered questionnaires	No. of Respondents	Response Rate
Tourists	200	100	50%

Simple random sampling was done to select predetermined number of respondents from the hilly area. It is suggested that a minimum sample size should be at least 200 (or more) to minimize the chance of getting exaggerated goodness-of-fit indices due to small sample size[3]. The targeted usable sample size for this study was set at 200 from visitors. Previous tourism development studies reported a response rate between 67% [2] and 68% [32]. All of these studies used the survey method, hand-delivered by trained surveyors to each occupied household that could be identified. This may explain the high response rate because respondents are more willing to answer when the surveyors ask them face to face. Response rates tend to be low with mail surveys, with a 30% response rate for general population surveys being common. Rates can be as low as 10%, depending on the questionnaire contents and design [34]. Surveys should be designed and conducted to get the highest possible response rate, meaning that the survey findings can be more confidently generalized to the whole visitor population. Response rates of 50 to 60 % are regarded as acceptable, although higher rate is preferable [28]. The response rate is considered as sufficient to achieve the targeted sample size (table 1).

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## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF VISITORS

Table 2. Demographic profile of visitors (N=100)

Indicators	Question from the questionnaires	Frequencies	Percentages
<b>Visitors</b>			
1. Income, demographic characteristics and other data on Visitors	<b>I- Your national identity?</b>	Indian ( all visitors are Indians)	
	<b>Your state?</b> (N = 100)		
	Karnataka	96	96
	Other state	04	04
	<b>II- Your sex?</b> (N = 100)		
	Male	63	63
	Female	37	37
	<b>III- Your age group?</b> (N = 100)	10-20= 01	10
		21-30= 59	59
		31-40= 26	26
		41-50= 07	07
		51-60 = 07	07
		>60 = 00	00
	<b>IV- Your family status</b> (N = 95)		
	Not married	34	35.8
	Married	61	64.2
	<b>V- Your education</b> (N = 98)		
	Graduate	83	84.7
	Non Graduate	15	15.3
	<b>VI -Your</b> (N = 85)		
	Engineers	26	30.6
	Doctors	08	09.4
	Business	06	07.1
	Others (Bank employees, Teachers, Advocates, Clerks, students, etc.)	45	52.9

A total of 100 responses were received from the various tourist establishments. The sample consisted of engineers (30.6%), doctors (9.4%), business (7.1%), others - bank employees, teachers, advocates, clerks, students (52.9%). Out of which 96% were from Karnataka and 4% were from out side Karnataka. The demographics of the sample indicate that 63 percent of the respondents were male and 37 percent were female (Table2). Among 100 visitors, 10% were in the age group of 10-20yrs, 59% were in the age group of 31-40yrs, 26% were in the age group of 41-50yrs, 7% were in the age group of 51-60yrs , None above 60 yrs of age. 64.2% of respondents were married and 35.8% were unmarried. 84.7% of respondents were graduates.



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## V. DATA ANALYSIS

### PRINCIPAL COMPONENT FACTOR ANALYSIS

Principal Component factor Analysis (PCA) methodology was adopted in this research and is the technique used to find optimal ways of combining variables into a small number of subsets. The main application of this technique can be found in the analysis of multiple indicators, measurement and validation of complex constructs, index and scale construction, and data reduction.

This section will provide a discussion of which items were chosen and how they were determined to be valid. One of the objectives of a pretest is to establish a uni-dimensional scale for the measurement of construct. Uni-dimensionality refers to the existence of a single construct explaining a set of indicators. To detect scale dimensionality, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a principal component method was conducted for each construct and sub-construct. A separate principal component analysis was conducted for each sub-construct because the items of each sub-construct were pre-determined. First of all, to determine the appropriateness of factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were examined. A value of 0.60 or above from the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy test indicates that the data are adequate for exploratory factor analysis and that a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity is required [38]. In order to make sure that each factor identified by EFA has only one dimension and that each attribute loads on only one factor, attributes that had factor loadings of lower than 0.40 and attributes loading on more than one factor with a loading score of equal to or greater 0.40 on each factor were eliminated from the analysis [8]

## VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Visitors' monitoring in tourist locations was targeted at management of product quality by using indicators. The indicators were used to determine visitor's degree of satisfaction with goods and services offered. Monitoring visitors was an important element in the management system. Visitors should be monitored continuously, and the data should serve as a basis for evaluating quality of services. Data obtained was used for making positive changes in services and developing the tourist product. It was also used for strategically planning tourism development at the destination.

The primary concern of Principal Component factor Analysis was to determine specific indicators that contribute to their level of satisfaction and subsequently increase the revisits. The following indicators were considered to study visitors' destination selection (table 3)

Table 3. Indicators used to determine visitor's destination selection

01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
beautiful nature	Calmness, silence, breaking away from the civilization	Accessibility, nearness to the place, where I live	Habit, I am used to resting here	Cordiality, kindness of the local population	I feel safe during the vacation	Opportunity for various activities during the vacation	Affordable prices	Interest towards the natural and the culture heritage of the place	Spontaneous emerging opportunity for traveling to that place	Appropriate places for accommodation and dining	Good services	At the request by a member of the , family, the group which I am traveling with	Other / please specify /
84	36	28	11	06	06	12	19	22	02	05	08	07	00

Indicators can show steady tendencies in ecotourism development. This is why measuring changes and providing this information to the stakeholders will help them make the best decisions. The use of indicators makes it possible to collect and develop a considerable amount of data on tourism in the community, including opportunities for periodic

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updating as well as measuring and assessing change. Quantitative and qualitative measurements of the indicators serve as a keystone to address the basic problem associated with the eco-tourism in the hilly areas of Chikmagalur district. For effective and efficient maintenance, continuous monitoring of all ecotourism activities is needed.

Table 4. Principal component factor analysis of visitors' destination selection

	Loading	Eigen value	variance explained
Choosing the place	0.648*	1.527	74.81%
<b>Calmness</b>	<b>0.959</b>		
Habit	0.887		
Accessibility	0.820		
Beautiful nature	0.819		
Interest towards tourist places	0.747		
Kaiser Meyer –Olkin	0.546		
Bartlets test of Sphericity	0.001		

From the principal component factor analysis, results of the Kaiser Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy test (0.546) and the Bartlets test of sphericity ( $p < 0.001$ ) indicated that data were acceptable for factor analysis. All factor loadings were greater than 0.7 and loaded on only one factor. Cronbach's alpha reliability for visitor's destination selection in general was 0.648 and that the factor represented 74.81% of the explained variance of the scale. Therefore selection of visitors' destination can be measured by 5 items, and that all items were valid and reliable since the reliability was more than 0.70.

The factor analysis of visitors' destination selection yielded five factors: Calmness ( $\alpha = 0.959$ ), Habit ( $\alpha = 0.887$ ), Accessibility ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), Beautiful nature ( $\alpha = 0.819$ ), Interest towards tourist places ( $\alpha = 0.747$ ), displayed especially high levels of satisfaction. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 4.

Visitors were also questioned through the prepared questionnaire regarding the number of visits they have made to spend their vacation in hilly areas of Chikmagalur. The following data indicates visitors revisits to eco-sites in Chikmagalur (Table 5).

Table 5. Have you been so far on a holiday / vacation in Chikmagalur?

01	02	03
No, this is my first time	Yes, once	Yes, several times
28	33	39

For any ecotourism destination, the higher the number of repeat tourists indicates that the place is more attractive when compare to other ecotourism destination in the same region. In some cases, repeat visits can be a problem as well as strength. Oppermann (1998: 135), however, claims that "in fact, destination marketers do not really have to worry too much about the repeat visit ratio until it exceeds the 70 % and 80 % mark. By that time, however, the destination really needs to reposition itself to attract new and different segments and to maintain its long-term viability". He further suggests that although the repeat business ranging between 50 % and 80 % from the same market is accepted to be in the critical boundary, destination management should take this into account in their future planning. In his most recent paper, Oppermann (1999) emphasised that destination management does not have to focus on raising the percentage of

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repeat customers, but could release a strategy to serve a mixture of both first-time and repeat customers. Therefore, authorities should establish different marketing strategies appropriate to each market segment [27].

Overall, the analysis provided the much-valued information on the role of ecotourism in preserving the pristine environment of Western Ghats, which is one of the ten “hottest bio-diversity” areas of the world. The analysis places the visitors’ satisfaction high, which reflects strongly on the natural beautiful landscapes offered by the Western Ghats, and with 39% of the visitors’ revisiting, it is clear that the local community have performed well in maintaining the natural beauty of the ecotourism areas. Furthermore, there is a high potential for improvement in promoting and providing better eco-friendly goods and services to increase the revisit ratio. Various Government initiatives have provided good opportunities for active involvement of local communities and private entrepreneurs. The involvement also establishes the fact that the local communities and private entrepreneurs appreciate the fact that this economy is possible only by maintaining the environment as naturally as possible, which is better for the environment as well as the people, from the sustainability perspective.

## VII. CONCLUSION

**Calmness:** Chikmagalur town is not so crowded and has all sorts of shops, banks, hotels and in the interior hilly plantation areas number of resorts, home stays constructed for the tourists is an ideal place for a relaxing and rejuvenating holiday, away from the routine busy life. Ecotourists can easily feel a distinct and cleaner atmosphere because of the calmness, something which is missing from hectic city life.

**Habit:** Chikmagalur, with its unparalleled scenery of hills and mountains and natural greenery of the overlooking Western Ghats, should not be missed by the footloose and fancy-free holiday makers. Because of breathtaking scenic beauty of Western Ghats, people are making a habit of visiting this place several times during holidays and weekends, to get rid of the hectic urban life. This is reflected with 39% of the visitors’ revisiting ecotourism spots in Chikmagalur.

**Accessibility:** since connectivity to Chikmagalur by road is of very good standards, the journey will be comfortable, enjoyable and safe. From Chikmagalur city, the ecotourism sites are spread all along the hilly terrains and accessibility to these sites is also in good condition. In some parts ecotourists will have to travel by short dirt road to reach the destinations. The eco-sites are therefore accessible by all vehicles throughout the year.

**Beautiful nature:** Located in the south-western part of Karnataka, Chikmagalur is a malnad district i.e., a largely forested hilly region of heavy rainfall. The weather in Chikmagalur is very pleasant all round the year; the higher altitude keeps the climate cool. The spectacular hill station of Chikmagalur is an exciting tourist hotspot. The mountain trails of the Baba Budangiri hills and the adjoining forests make Chikmagalur a paradise for adventure sports and trekkers. The sprawling coffee plantations streams and misty mountains offer an ideal getaway for those looking at a quiet weekend. Thus it boasts of a flourishing tourism culture.

**Interest towards tourist places:** Chikmagalur with its natural beauty and forest wealth is an important tourist district. The celebrated Sringeri mutt at Sringeri, Balehonnur Rambapuri Mutt, Dattathreya Peeta at Bababudangiri and Amruthaeshwara temple at Amruthapura are some of the important religious places. This district has many beautiful hill resorts; the lofty hill ranges like Mullainagiri, Kudremukha, Kemanagundi, Hebbe falls, Kalathi falls are all beautiful. Mullainagiri is the highest point in the district i.e. about 1926 meters above the sea level. Because of the rich history and heritage, people are showing more interest in visiting Chikmagalur.

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