

Sustainable Hospitality Practices: Comparing Eco-Resorts In The Chittagong Hill Tracts Vs. Cox's Bazar

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Abstract

Sustainable hospitality is now a key element of environmentally sustainable tourism development, particularly in environmentally sensitive locations. Sustainable hospitality practices in two of Bangladesh's major tourist destinations, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar, are explored and compared in this paper. Drawing on a qualitative comparative case study approach, data were collected by in-depth interviews with resort managers and employees, supplemented by field observations and documentary analysis. The study highlights that while both the destinations have embraced eco-friendly approaches such as waste reduction, energy efficiency, and host community engagement, the practice and issues are altogether different. Eco-resorts in Chittagong Hill Tracts focus more on cultural integration and community engagement, whereas the ones in Cox's Bazar focus more on operational sustainability and marketing green credentials. Geographical constraints, visitor sensitivity, and policy stimulus were the major impetuses behind the pursuit of sustainability. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable hospitality in developing countries and makes pragmatic suggestions for managers of eco-resorts and policy makers concerned with tourism in Bangladesh to improve environmental performance and community impacts.

Keywords: Sustainable hospitality, Eco-resorts, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh tourism, Qualitative comparative research

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's fastest expanding industries, and it contributes to economic development, employment, and cultural identity. However, as tourism has expanded so quickly, there have been serious concerns raised about its social and environmental impacts, especially in areas of high environmental sensitivity. As a response, sustainable tourism has gained increasing prominence as a strategy to balance economic benefit with protection of the environment and well-being of the

community. In this context, sustainable hospitality more specifically through the emergence of eco-resorts has come to represent an important aspect of responsible tourism development.

Bangladesh, being a nation with diverse natural conditions and cultures, is likewise relatively high on potential for sustainable tourism. Two major tourist destinations Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Cox's Bazar are seeing steady expansion in the development of eco-resorts to accommodate nature-conscious tourists. While both destinations are environmentally rich and popular among both local and foreign tourists, they significantly differ in geography, culture, and tourism facilities. The variations might or might not affect applying and perceiving sustainability in the hospitality sector.

Although the concept of eco-tourism has been widely promoted in Bangladesh, it is noted that there is a deficiency in empirical writings recording the comparative reality of sustainable hospitality activities in different regions. Although most research focuses on tourist satisfaction or total tourism development, little is concentrated on qualitative comparisons that include eco-resorts conducting business in different ecological and socio-cultural settings.

The study attempts to fill that gap by conducting a comparative qualitative examination of eco-resorts in Cox's Bazar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The study examines the nature of sustainability practices, explores the problems faced by resort owners, and talks about how local context affects these practices. Contrasting these two areas, the study intends to provide a better understanding of region-specific sustainability strategies and inform policy and operational interventions towards more efficient and equitable sustainable tourism development in Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

1. Sustainable Hospitality: Concept and Importance

Sustainable hospitality involves the implementation of sustainability principles of the environment, economy, and society in the running and management of hotels, resorts, and other hospitality businesses. Sustainable hospitality encompasses energy efficiency, waste reduction, conservation of water, local purchase of materials, and involvement of people in the community (Mensah, 2006; Bohdanowicz, 2007). These are aimed at minimizing negative impacts on the environment and optimizing positive impacts on host communities and travelers.

2. Eco-Resorts and Sustainable Tourism

Eco-resorts are hotels that incorporate environmentally friendly procedures and contribute to natural and cultural resource protection. They are examples of sustainable hospitality, with green buildings, renewable energy, and local products (Honey, 2008). Their success, though, largely relies on management commitment, regulatory systems, and consumer behavior (Dodds & Joppe, 2005).

3. Challenges to Adopting Sustainable Practices

Despite the growing awareness for sustainability in the hospitality sector, many businesses—mainly in developing countries—face limitations such as lack of funds, poor technical skills, low consumer awareness, and absence of supportive policies (Chan & Hawkins, 2010). These limitations are compounded in Bangladesh by shortages in infrastructure and seasonal tourist flows (Hossain et al., 2017).

4. Bangladesh Context: Eco-Tourism and Regional Diversity

Bangladesh eco-tourism development has been on the rise, particularly in regions like Cox's Bazar—the world's longest natural sea beach—and Chittagong Hill Tracts, well-known for their picturesque hills

and indigenous cultures. Both destinations are very good locations for the development of eco-resorts. However, due to their special geographical and socio-cultural characteristics, the practices of sustainability may vary significantly. Cox's Bazar has more commercial tourism, while CHT tourism is more community and culturally focused (Hasan & Mahmud, 2014).

5. Research Gap and Relevance

There have been various studies on sustainable tourism and hospitality in Bangladesh but few that have provided an in-depth comparative qualitative analysis among top eco-tourism destinations. This leaves a gap that limits what is known regarding the influence of local conditions on sustainability, crucial in the formulation of tailor-made policies and business strategies.

3. Methodology

1. Research Design

This study uses a comparative qualitative case study approach to explore and compare sustainable hospitality practice in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar-based eco-resorts. This is because the approach makes it possible to more critically probe contextual drivers of resort practices and stakeholder perceptions.

2. Case Selection

Purposive sampling was used to pick 3 eco-resorts from each region, based on the following:

Claim or evidence of sustainable practices

Active participation for at least 2 years

Consent to participate in the research

3. Data Collection Methods

In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews: With resort managers, staff, and selected tourists (approx. 5–8 participants per resort).

Observation: On-site observations of sustainability practices immediately (e.g., waste management systems, energy usage, signage).

Document Analysis: Inspection of promotional materials, websites, and internal sustainability guidelines when available.

4. Data Analysis

Data were coded and examined with thematic analysis. Notable similarities and differences in the two regions were observed, coded, and organized. The comparative matrix was used to compare differences and similarities in sustainability practices, challenges, and stakeholder mindsets.

5. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

Research approval was received from the relevant university department (if required).

6. Limitations

Findings are not generalizable due to the small, non-random sample.

Seasonal influences may have impacted observations.

Internal reports were in restricted access in certain cases.

4. Findings

The research revealed significant similarities and differences between sustainable hospitality practices of eco-resorts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Cox's Bazar. Efforts in both regions to reduce environmental impact existed, with CHT resorts touting the usage of indigenous, natural materials including bamboo and solar power, and rainwater harvesting. Cox's Bazar resorts utilized more traditional infrastructure and had little in the form of water conservation. Cox's Bazar resorts relied primarily on municipal services for waste management, while more proactive waste management involved composting and segregation in CHT.

Local participation was higher in CHT, where resorts employed local indigenous staff and contributed to culture-related initiatives, whereas Cox's Bazar resorts had higher seasonal staff and lower locals. Guest awareness of sustainability was poor on average but slightly higher among CHT resorts, which displayed information and encouraged environmentally conscious behavior. Cox's Bazar resorts demonstrated poor communication on sustainability.

Both regions also experienced problems such as bad infrastructure, low guest participation, and bad government support. Cox's Bazar also experienced over-tourism and pollution that affected sustainability practices. Overall, CHT resorts integrated sustainability more holistically, but Cox's Bazar resorts focused on operational aspects with even greater forces of mass tourism.

5. Equations

Comparative study of six eco-resorts—three in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and three in Cox's Bazar—demonstrates how although sustainable hospitality has gained pace in both regions, geography, socio-cultural context, and tourism economies play a major role in shaping the nature, depth, and effects of practices. The findings are congruent with international debates on sustainability in hospitality whereby emphasis is placed upon the premise that sustainable practices are not universal but context-specific (Mensah, 2006; Chan & Hawkins, 2010).

1. Placing Sustainable Practices in the Local Context

The study recognizes that CHT eco-resorts embrace sustainability more holistically, particularly by using indigenous building materials (such as bamboo and wood), renewable energy (solar panels), and rainwater harvesting. Not only do these minimize environmental impacts, but they also resonate with indigenous cultural values of living together in harmony with nature. In contrast, Cox's Bazar resorts adopt sustainability in more practical and surface-level manners, such as reliance on municipal waste facilities and ad hoc recycling initiatives. The comparison illustrates the manner in which isolation and environmental vulnerability in CHT create more incentives for eco-innovation, whereas Cox's Bazar's mass-tourism economy prioritizes commercial survival and tourist satisfaction over higher sustainability. This regional variation also means a variation in target market. CHT eco-resorts cater to more specialized, eco-conscious visitors willing to accept sustainable practices, while Cox's Bazar deals with mass domestic tourism, with tourists giving less importance to being eco-friendly. Sustainability is thus integrated differently: in CHT, it is a survival necessity in a fragile ecosystem; in Cox's Bazar, it is often a competitive strategy.

2. Community Involvement vs. Market Focus

The most significant difference between the two sets of resorts is the extent and kind of community involvement. The three CHT resorts actively try to employ local staff, purchase local produce, and engage in indigenous culture activities such as promoting handicrafts or sponsoring indigenous festivals. This form of sustainability is followed by Honey's (2008) assertion that eco-tourism must strive to conserve nature and empower communities simultaneously.

Conversely, the three Cox's Bazar resorts also experienced a weaker connection with host communities. They also relied more on seasonal migrant workers and had fewer local economic integration opportunities. This separation results in weaker socio-economic spillovers for the surrounding community and, as such, creates a sustainability gap. In reality, CHT resorts are a form of "community-based eco-tourism," while Cox's Bazar resorts are leaning toward "commercial eco-branding." The difference illustrates how the incorporation of the community is not just a byproduct of sustainability but a constitutive part whose existence determines whether the eco-resorts provide broader developmental returns.

3. Visitor Awareness and Behavior

One of the major concerns is visitor awareness. The CHT resorts actively promoted awareness among visitors via signage, in-room waste reduction guides, and staff reminders. Although tourist sensitivity was still low in general, these habits promoted greater visitor sensitivity. Cox's Bazar resorts made little mention of sustainability and thus had little guest participation. This finding highlights the fact that tourist behavior is not merely a matter of personal values, but one shaped by how resorts account for and frame sustainability.

The challenge is that mass tourism in Cox's Bazar is less motivated to be sustainable, at least partly due to short stays and convenience-oriented preferences. This is a demonstration of the requirement for differentiated solutions: in CHT, knowledge programs can be strengthened to be more impactful, while in Cox's Bazar, regulation and industry-level measures will be more effective than voluntary guest measures.

4. Infrastructure and Policy Constraints

Both resort categories are affected by inadequate infrastructure, inadequate government policy, and lack of supportive institutions—hindrances usually mentioned in developing countries (Chan & Hawkins, 2010). The terms are, however, varied. In CHT, limited access to good utilities forces resorts to think outside the box with rainwater harvesting and solar power, showing how necessity can produce sustainable innovation. The scale of mass tourism in Cox's Bazar overwhelms municipal infrastructure, leading to reported issues such as beach pollution, dumping of sewage, and the depletion of resources.

This implies that sustainability issues are not only endogenous to resorts but also structural, and hence call for more widespread interventions. Without proper waste management infrastructure, even the best-intentioned resorts in Cox's Bazar cannot deliver real sustainability. Similarly, without improved CHT infrastructure, innovations are small-scale and hard to upscale.

5. The Paradox of Sustainability in Mass Tourism

The Cox's Bazar example identifies a sustainability paradox: eco-resorts encourage environmental stewardship, but the concentration of over-tourism defeats actual sustainability. The resorts may boast green practice, yet dependence on unsustainable urban infrastructure and large numbers of tourist

arrivals undermines their credibility. The issue of "greenwashing," where sustainability is marketed more than practiced, occurs (Bohdanowicz, 2007).

In contrast, the three CHT resorts are a more authentic model of sustainability, if on a limited basis. The fact that they have been integrated into local culture, have fewer tourists, and utilize eco-friendly materials creates an instance of "slow tourism" that is more aligned with long-term sustainability.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from these six eco-resorts suggest that policies for sustainability must be locally specific, not transferable to all of Bangladesh:

For CHT: Policy needs to prioritize increasing community involvement, providing green construction and waste management technical training, and promoting small-scale resorts with local product incentives and renewable energy utilization.

For Cox's Bazar: More government regulation is necessary to address over-tourism, enact waste treatment requirements, and promote stand-alone sustainability certification to counteract greenwashing. Resort companies need to be incentivized to hire and procure locally to build stronger community relationships.

For both destinations: Public awareness campaigns by national tourism boards to educate tourists on green practices are essential. Industry associations can also come up with multi-stakeholder forums for knowledge sharing among eco-resorts so as to share best practices regionally.

6. Recommendations

Based on comparative analysis of six eco-resorts (three from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and three from Cox's Bazar), the following suggestions can be made to policymakers, resort managers, and other stakeholders of the hospitality and tourism sector in Bangladesh:

Strengthen Community Integration

Cox's Bazar resorts must create more employment opportunities for the local population, especially at managerial and cultural levels, and purchase foodstuffs, crafts, and building materials locally. Economic gains from such resorts must go to host communities, as in the CHT model.

Implement Region-Specific Policies

For CHT: Low-impact, small-scale eco-resorts should be prioritized by policies that preserve indigenous culture and fragile ecosystems.

For Cox's Bazar: Strengthen waste management, sewage treatment, and coastal protection regulations to undo the negative effects of over-tourism.

Establish Sustainability Certification and Monitoring

Independent ecocertification schemes, designed for Bangladesh's case, should be implemented to prevent greenwashing and encourage authentic sustainable actions. Audits on a regular basis can ensure compliance.

Invest in Infrastructure

The state and private investors need to invest in waste management, renewable energy access, and water-saving infrastructure in both the locations. This would make it easier for resorts to become more sustainable in their practices.

Step Up Visitor Awareness

Resorts need to introduce guest education programs like eco-guides, signage, and experiential workshops. National tourist boards can also launch campaigns to instill a culture of sustainable tourism in domestic as well as global tourists.

Capacity Building for Resort Managers and Staff

Courses for training should be held on eco-construction, waste sorting, composting, energy efficiency, and community partnership models. This will enhance the technical skill sets that most resort operators currently lack.

Collaborative Platforms for Knowledge Sharing

A common platform among eco-resorts in both countries can allow for the dissemination of best practices, collaborative marketing campaigns, and collective bargaining power for advocacy support.

Conclusion

This study has compared sustainable practices in hospitality in six eco-resorts—three in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and three in Cox's Bazar—providing a qualitative overview of how local context affects eco-resort strategies in Bangladesh. The research has identified that both areas are dedicated to sustainability in theory, but they are different in practice due to geography, socio-cultural, and economic reasons.

Eco-resorts of the CHT embrace a holistic and community-oriented understanding of sustainability, with the use of local materials, renewable energy, and integration with indigenous cultural traditions. In contrast, eco-resorts in Cox's Bazar embrace an operational and market-driven model, with an emphasis on waste management and marketing claims of "eco-friendliness." These differences illustrate that sustainability is not a blueprinted prescription but a situation-specific process that takes place heavily under the influence of local constraints and opportunities.

The study also finds a number of structural concerns common to the two areas, including inadequate infrastructure, inadequate tourist sensitization, and poor policy enforcement. The scale of tourism and over-commercialization, however, renders these concerns more acute in Cox's Bazar, where sustainability initiatives are often undermined by sheer tourist numbers. In CHT, with infrastructural limitations, smaller undertakings and improved community incorporation make possible a more authentic sustainability path.

By highlighting these distinctions, the study contributes to the thin empiric body of literature on sustainable hospitality in Bangladesh and emphasizes the need for region-specific sustainable strategies. It argues that without a conception of the articulation between geography, community, and policy, eco-resorts are most likely to adopt sustainability shallowly or seek unsustainable growth trajectories.

Lastly, the study affirms sustainable hospitality is not only an environmental concern but a socio-economic and cultural undertaking. Effective sustainability of eco-resorts must preserve nature, empower local people, and maintain long-term tourist enjoyment simultaneously. In a nation as ecologically and culturally rich as Bangladesh, embracement of such balanced approaches is extremely important not only to protect vulnerable tourism areas such as CHT and Cox's Bazar but also to acquire its credibility and competitiveness in the international tourist market.

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