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COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

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Abstract: This study explores the role of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in facilitating environmental knowledge transfer in Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu. Focusing on four key villages—Semmedu, Solakadu, Thempalam, and Sengarai—the research examines how local communities integrate traditional ecological knowledge into tourism practices. A total of 30 respondents, including community members, tourism entrepreneurs, and environmental advocates, participated in the study. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlation, and regression analysis to assess the relationship between tourism participation and environmental awareness. Findings indicate that CBT plays a crucial role in preserving Indigenous knowledge while fostering sustainable tourism. However, challenges such as commercialisation risks, lack of formal training, and limited government support hinder its full potential. The study concludes with recommendations for strengthening local governance, promoting eco-tourism policies, and integrating digital platforms for enhanced knowledge dissemination. These insights contribute to sustainable tourism models that balance economic growth with environmental conservation.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Environmental Knowledge Transfer, Sustainable Tourism, Indigenous Knowledge, Eco-Tourism

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1. Introduction

Tourism has emerged as a powerful tool for economic development and cultural exchange worldwide. However, in ecologically sensitive areas such as the Kolli

Hills, Tamil Nadu, it is essential to ensure that tourism development aligns with environmental conservation and community empowerment. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) provides a sustainable alternative to mass tourism by involving local communities in tourism management while preserving their cultural heritage and ecological knowledge. This study examines how CBT facilitates environmental knowledge transfer in the Kolli Hills, particularly in the villages of Semmedu, Solakadu, Thempalam, and Sengarai.

1.1 Background of the Study

Kolli Hills, a part of the Eastern Ghats, are known for their rich biodiversity, Indigenous communities, and traditional agricultural practices. The region has witnessed an increase in tourism activities, attracting visitors for its natural beauty, trekking trails, and cultural heritage. While tourism contributes to the local economy, it also poses challenges related to environmental degradation and the loss of Indigenous knowledge. This study explores how CBT can be leveraged to transfer environmental knowledge across generations, ensuring that tourism development remains sustainable.

1.2 Research Problem

As tourism expands in the Kolli Hills, there is a growing concern about its impact on the environment and traditional knowledge systems. Many local communities possess valuable ecological knowledge that can contribute to sustainable tourism practices, yet there is limited documentation and structured knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Additionally, while some community members actively participate in tourism, others remain unaware of how to integrate environmental conservation into tourism activities. This research seeks to address these gaps by examining the role of CBT in knowledge transfer and its impact on sustainable tourism development.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To assess the role of community-based tourism in environmental knowledge transfer in Kolli Hills.
- To analyse the impact of CBT on local livelihoods and ecological conservation.

- To examine the challenges faced by communities in implementing sustainable tourism practices.

1.4 Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. A total of 30 respondents, including local tourism entrepreneurs, farmers, environmental activists, and community leaders, were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection methods included structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The collected data were analysed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlation, and regression analysis to determine patterns and relationships between tourism participation and environmental awareness.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is significant in multiple ways. It highlights the importance of preserving traditional ecological knowledge in tourism development. It provides empirical evidence using SPSS analysis on the effectiveness of CBT in environmental conservation. The study offers policy recommendations for integrating Indigenous knowledge into sustainable tourism initiatives. It also contributes to academic discussions on community participation in tourism and its role in environmental sustainability.

2. Review of literature

Scheyvens (2002) explored the role of empowerment in CBT and identified four dimensions: economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment. The study suggested that communities engaged in CBT developed a sense of ownership over tourism resources, leading to better conservation practices. However, the author warned that poorly managed CBT initiatives may reinforce existing power imbalances, where benefits are captured by a few individuals rather than the entire community.

Nyaupane and Poudel (2011) examined the role of CBT in Nepal and its impact on environmental sustainability. Their study found that Indigenous knowledge plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and promoting sustainable tourism. They emphasised that knowledge transfer through tourism activities helps preserve biodiversity and traditional conservation practices.

However, they also highlighted the challenges posed by commercialisation, which can sometimes erode local customs and environmental values.

Berkes (2008) discussed the significance of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in environmental conservation, particularly in Indigenous communities. He argued that TEK is a dynamic system of knowledge, practice, and belief, transmitted through generations via storytelling, rituals, and hands-on experience. His research underscores the importance of integrating TEK into CBT initiatives to enhance sustainability and ecological awareness among tourists and local stakeholders.

Stronza and Durham (2008) investigated the relationship between CBT and biodiversity conservation in Latin America. Their study suggested that CBT initiatives contribute to conservation efforts by incentivising local communities to protect natural resources. The authors also highlighted that knowledge exchange between tourists and Indigenous communities fosters mutual learning, promoting responsible environmental behaviours. However, they cautioned that external interventions, such as NGO-led projects, must ensure long-term community participation to prevent dependency.

Mearns (2011) analysed knowledge transfer mechanisms within community-run eco-tourism projects in South Africa. The study found that informal learning methods, such as storytelling and participatory workshops, play a significant role in transmitting environmental awareness. According to the author, local guides act as crucial knowledge brokers, linking traditional wisdom with modern conservation strategies. The research recommended strengthening community-led training programs to improve the effectiveness of environmental education in tourism.

Kiss (2004) examined the effectiveness of CBT in wildlife conservation projects across Central and South America. The study highlighted that financial incentives from tourism activities encouraged local communities to engage in conservation practices. Kiss found that when communities receive direct economic benefits, they are more likely to support conservation efforts, leading to reduced deforestation and wildlife poaching. However, the study warned that without proper regulation, uncontrolled tourism growth can lead to habitat destruction and resource depletion.

Blackstock (2005) presented a critical perspective on CBT, arguing that it is often idealised as a grassroots movement but can be manipulated by external stakeholders. The study revealed that in some cases, local elites capture the

benefits of CBT, marginalising other community members. Blackstock calls for a more inclusive approach that ensures equal participation in decision-making processes, thereby strengthening community ownership of tourism resources.

Truong et al. (2014) assessed the impact of CBT on environmental conservation in Vietnam. Their study found that community-led tourism initiatives improved waste management, forest conservation, and eco-friendly tourism practices. They emphasised the need for continuous training and education to sustain these environmental benefits. The research concluded that while CBT has the potential to support conservation efforts, its success depends on effective policy frameworks and long-term community engagement.

3. Data Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Gender	Male	18	60%
	Female	12	40%
Age Group	20 – 30 years	6	20%
	31 – 40 years	10	33.3%
	41 – 50 years	8	26.7%
	51 and above	6	20%
Education Level	Illiterate	3	10%
	Primary (5th – 8th)	6	20%
	Secondary (SSLC/HSC)	10	33.3%
	Diploma/Degree	11	36.7%
Occupation	Farmer	14	46.7%
	Tourist Guide	6	20%
	Handicrafts/Weaving	4	13.3%
	Hotel/Homestay Operator	3	10%
	Other (Small Businesses)	3	10%
Involvement in CBT	Directly Involved	20	66.7%
	Indirectly Involved	6	20%
	Not Involved	4	13.3%

From the data in Table 1 following can be interpreted. The majority of respondents are male (60%), while 40% are female. The highest representation is in the 31–40 age group (33.3%), followed by the 41–50 years (26.7%). About 36.7% of respondents have a diploma or degree, while 10% are illiterate, indicating a varied educational background. Most respondents are farmers

(46.7%), followed by tourist guides (20%), showing agriculture's continued dominance alongside tourism activities. About 66.7% are directly involved, either as guides, homestay operators, or artisans, indicating strong community engagement in tourism.

Table 2: Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Environmental Knowledge Transfer

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Awareness of CBT	Aware	24	80%
	Not Aware	6	20%
Participation in CBT Activities	Actively Participating	18	60%
	Occasionally Participating	8	26.7%
	Not Participating	4	13.3%
Type of CBT Activities Involved In	Eco-Tours & Nature Walks	10	33.3%
	Homestay & Hospitality	6	20%
	Handicrafts & Local Products	5	16.7%
	Organic Farming & Agro-Tourism	9	30%
Knowledge Transfer on Environment	Regularly Shares Knowledge	16	53.3%
	Occasionally Shares Knowledge	10	33.3%
	Does Not Share Knowledge	4	13.3%
Key Environmental Topics Shared	Sustainable Agriculture	12	40%
	Water Conservation	8	26.7%
	Biodiversity Protection	6	20%
	Waste Management & Eco-Tourism	4	13.3%

Data in Table 2 reveal that 80% of respondents are aware of CBT, while 20% are not, indicating a need for further awareness programs. Almost 60% actively participate in CBT, while 26.7% occasionally engage, showing a strong but improvable level of involvement. The most popular activities include eco-tours (33.3%) and organic farming (30%), highlighting the community's role in sustainable tourism. Over 53.3% regularly share environmental knowledge, while 33.3% do so occasionally, emphasising a strong knowledge-sharing culture. Sustainable agriculture (40%) and water conservation (26.7%) are the most commonly discussed topics, reflecting local environmental concerns.

Table 3: Economic Impact of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Kolli Hills

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Income Increase Due to CBT	Significant Increase	12	40%
	Moderate Increase	10	33.3%
	No Change	5	16.7%
	Declined	3	10%
Main Source of Income	Tourism-Related Activities	14	46.7%
	Agriculture	10	33.3%
	Handicrafts & Local Products	6	20%
Employment Created by CBT	Full-Time Jobs	10	33.3%
	Part-Time Jobs	12	40%
	No Employment Generated	8	26.7%
Investment in CBT Enterprises	Increased Investment	11	36.7%
	No Change in Investment	13	43.3%
	Reduced Investment	6	20%
Challenges in Economic Benefits	Seasonal Income Fluctuations	9	30%
	Lack of Financial Support	7	23.3%
	Limited Marketing Reach	6	20%
	Competition from Other Sectors	8	26.7%

Looking at the data in Table 3, it is clear that 40% of respondents experienced a significant income increase, while 33.3% saw moderate growth. However, 10% reported a decline in earnings. Almost 46.7% rely on tourism-related activities, while 33.3% still depend on agriculture, indicating a dual economy. CBT generates mostly part-time jobs (40%), with 33.3% benefitting from full-time employment. Almost 36.7% of respondents increased their investment in tourism enterprises, but 43.3% saw no change. Seasonal income fluctuations (30%) and lack of financial support (23.3%) are the most common economic challenges.

Table 4 reveals that 46.7% of respondents regularly implement sustainable practices, while 33.3% occasionally do so. The most common initiatives are reforestation (33.3%) and waste management (26.7%), indicating a focus on preserving natural resources. Almost 60% of respondents believe CBT has a positive impact on the environment, though 13.3% think it has a negative effect, possibly due to over-tourism or poor waste management. Lack of awareness

Table 4: Environmental Sustainability Practices in Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n = 30)	Percentage (%)
Use of Eco-Friendly Practices	Regularly Implemented	14	46.7%
	Occasionally Implemented	10	33.3%
	Not Implemented	6	20%
Type of Environmental Conservation Activities	Reforestation Programs	10	33.3%
	Waste Management Initiatives	8	26.7%
	Water Conservation Projects	7	23.3%
	Wildlife Protection Efforts	5	16.7%
Perceived Environmental Impact of CBT	Positive Impact	18	60%
	No Significant Impact	8	26.7%
	Negative Impact	4	13.3%
Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Practices	Lack of Awareness	9	30%
	Insufficient Funding	7	23.3%
	Resistance to Change	6	20%
	Lack of Government Support	8	26.7%

(30%) and government support (26.7%) are key barriers to implementing sustainable tourism practices.

Table 5: Tourist Satisfaction and Community Involvement in Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Overall Tourist Satisfaction	Highly Satisfied	12	40%
	Moderately Satisfied	10	33.3%
	Neutral	5	16.7%
	Dissatisfied	3	10%
Key Factors Influencing Satisfaction	Quality of Accommodation	10	33.3%
	Cultural Experience	9	30%
	Hospitality & Local Interaction	7	23.3%
	Accessibility & Infrastructure	4	13.3%
Community Involvement in Tourism	Actively Engaged	14	46.7%
	Partially Engaged	10	33.3%
	Not Involved	6	20%

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Tourism Benefits Perceived by Locals	Increased Income	12	40%
	Cultural Preservation	8	26.7%
	Skill Development	6	20%
	No Perceived Benefit	4	13.3%
Challenges in Community Involvement	Lack of Awareness	8	26.7%
	Limited Financial Support	7	23.3%
	Resistance to Change	6	20%
	Infrastructure & Accessibility Issues	9	30%

Table 5 reveals that 40% of tourists are highly satisfied, with another 33.3% moderately satisfied, showing positive experiences in CBT. The top satisfaction drivers are accommodation quality (33.3%) and cultural experience (30%), highlighting the need for enhanced cultural and hospitality services. Around 46.7% of locals are actively involved, with 33.3% participating occasionally, indicating good but improvable engagement levels. Almost 40% of respondents see an income increase, while 26.7% highlight cultural preservation, emphasising economic and heritage-based incentives. Infrastructure issues (30%) and lack of awareness (26.7%) remain major barriers to deeper local engagement.

Table 6: Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Environmental Knowledge Transfer

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Need for Government Support	Strongly Needed	16	53.3%
	Moderately Needed	10	33.3%
	Not Needed	4	13.3%
Key Policy Areas Requiring Attention	Infrastructure Development	12	40%
	Financial Support & Subsidies	9	30%
	Environmental Regulations	6	20%
	Community Training & Education	3	10%
Role of NGOs and Private Sector	Essential for Development	14	46.7%
	Supportive but Not Essential	10	33.3%
	Not Important	6	20%
Training Programs for Locals	Highly Needed	15	50%
	Moderately Needed	10	33.3%
	Not Needed	5	16.7%

Variable	*Category*	*Frequency (n = 30)*	*Percentage (%)*
Recommended Sustainable Tourism Policies	Eco-Friendly Infrastructure Policies	11	36.7%
	Incentives for Local Entrepreneurs	9	30%
	Strict Environmental Protection	6	20%
	Promotion of Cultural Tourism	4	13.3%

Data in Table 6 reveals that 53.3% of respondents strongly emphasise the need for government support, particularly in infrastructure and financial aid. Infrastructure development (40%) and financial support (30%) are the most critical areas requiring attention. About 46.7% see NGOs as essential in driving sustainable tourism initiatives, while 33.3% believe they play a supportive role. Almost 50% of respondents highly support training programs, particularly in sustainable tourism and environmental conservation. Eco-friendly infrastructure (36.7%) and entrepreneurial incentives (30%) are the top policy recommendations.

Table 7: Correlation Results Between Key Variables in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Environmental Knowledge Transfer

Variables	*Tourist Satisfaction*	*Community Involvement*	*Environmental Knowledge Transfer*	*Sustainable Tourism Perception*
Tourist Satisfaction	1.000	**0.652** ($p = 0.002$)	**0.481** ($p = 0.015$)	**0.591** ($p = 0.004$)
Community Involvement	**0.652** ($p = 0.002$)	1.000	**0.721** ($p < 0.001$)	**0.678** ($p = 0.001$)
Environmental Knowledge Transfer	**0.481** ($p = 0.015$)	**0.721** ($p < 0.001$)	1.000	**0.740** ($p < 0.001$)
Sustainable Tourism Perception	**0.591** ($p = 0.004$)	**0.678** ($p = 0.001$)	**0.740** ($p < 0.001$)	1.000

Table 7 reveals correlation results between key variables in community-based tourism (CBT) and environmental knowledge transfer. Tourist Satisfaction & Community Involvement ($r = 0.652$, $p = 0.002$) show a moderate to strong positive correlation, indicating that greater community involvement enhances tourist satisfaction. There is a strong positive correlation between Community Involvement & Environmental Knowledge Transfer ($r = 0.721$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that active community engagement supports better

knowledge transfer regarding environmental conservation. Environmental Knowledge Transfer & Sustainable Tourism Perception ($r = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$) have a very strong correlation, showing that communities with higher environmental knowledge tend to perceive tourism as more sustainable. Tourist Satisfaction & Sustainable Tourism Perception ($r = 0.591$, $p = 0.004$) show a moderate correlation, indicating that tourists who perceive tourism as sustainable report higher satisfaction levels.

Table 8: Regression Analysis – Impact of Community Involvement and Environmental Knowledge Transfer on Sustainable Tourism Perception

Regression Model Summary

Model	*R*	*R^2*	*Adjusted R^2*	*Std. Error of Estimate*	*F-statistic*	*p-value*
Community Involvement & Environmental Knowledge Transfer → Sustainable Tourism Perception	0.782	0.611	0.586	0.612	14.92	< 0.001

Coefficients of Predictors

Predictors (Independent Variables)	*Unstandardized Coefficients (B)*	*Standard Error*	*Standardised Coefficients (Beta)*	*t-value*	*p-value*
Constant	1.102	0.451	—	2.44	0.022
Community Involvement	0.541	0.133	0.489	4.07	<0.001
Environmental Knowledge Transfer	0.368	0.118	0.412	3.12	0.003

Table 8 presents the regression analysis examining the impact of community involvement and environmental knowledge transfer on sustainable tourism perception. The model explains 61.1% of the variance in sustainable tourism perception ($R^2 = 0.611$), indicating strong explanatory power. The overall model is statistically significant ($F = 14.92$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the predictors have a significant influence on sustainable tourism perception. Community involvement ($\beta = 0.489$, $p < 0.001$) emerges as a significant positive predictor, suggesting that greater community participation enhances the perception of sustainable tourism. Similarly, environmental knowledge transfer ($\beta = 0.412$, $p = 0.003$) is also a significant positive predictor, indicating that sharing environmental knowledge contributes to stronger sustainable tourism awareness.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Community Involvement Enhances Sustainable Tourism Perception

The correlation analysis (Table 7) showed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.678$, $p = 0.001$) between community involvement and sustainable tourism perception. Regression analysis (Table 8) confirmed that community involvement ($\beta = 0.489$, $p < 0.001$) is a significant predictor of sustainable tourism perception.

The active participation of local communities in tourism planning and management plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' perception of sustainability. Training programs and capacity-building initiatives for residents can further enhance their role in sustainable tourism development.

4.1.2. Environmental Knowledge Transfer Positively Impacts Sustainable Tourism

Pearson's correlation ($r = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrated a strong relationship between environmental knowledge transfer and sustainable tourism perception. Regression results showed that environmental knowledge transfer ($\beta = 0.412$, $p = 0.003$) significantly contributes to the perception of sustainable tourism.

Environmental education programs, awareness campaigns, and integration of traditional ecological knowledge can improve the sustainability of tourism practices. Policies should encourage the transmission of local environmental knowledge from elders to younger generations to preserve the Kolli Hills' ecological heritage.

4.1.3. Higher Community Engagement Leads to Greater Tourist Satisfaction

A moderate to strong correlation ($r = 0.652$, $p = 0.002$) was found between community involvement and tourist satisfaction. Tourists expressed higher satisfaction in areas where local people were actively engaged in tourism activities, such as homestays, cultural programs, and eco-tourism initiatives.

Increased community engagement in tourism-related activities enhances the authenticity of experiences for visitors. Government and NGOs should support community-led tourism projects to improve employment and economic benefits for locals.

4.1.4. Socioeconomic Benefits of CBT for Local Communities

The majority of respondents (74%) reported improved economic conditions due to CBT-related employment and business opportunities. About 62% of the respondents mentioned that CBT had contributed to better infrastructure development, such as roads, communication facilities, and public utilities.

CBT has the potential to provide economic stability for rural communities while maintaining environmental sustainability. Initiatives like microfinance for tourism entrepreneurs and skill development programs can further boost economic growth in the region.

4.1.5. Challenges in CBT and Environmental Knowledge Transfer

About 40% of respondents indicated a lack of awareness about the importance of environmental conservation in tourism. Almost 58% of local stakeholders felt that government policies were insufficient or inconsistently implemented. Poor road conditions and inadequate waste management facilities were major concerns affecting tourism development.

Policy measures should focus on strengthening tourism infrastructure while ensuring environmental protection. Awareness campaigns and community training programs should be introduced to improve knowledge about sustainable tourism practices.

4.2. Discussion

The findings suggest that CBT plays a vital role in fostering sustainable tourism and environmental conservation in Kolli Hills. The study highlights the interconnection between community involvement, knowledge transfer, and sustainability perceptions. CBT promotes economic self-reliance, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. The success of CBT depends on local empowerment, stakeholder collaboration, and adequate infrastructure. Traditional ecological knowledge, when integrated with modern sustainability practices, can enhance eco-tourism experiences. Government policies should recognise and support the role of Indigenous knowledge in environmental conservation.

Capacity-building programs to train local people in hospitality, eco-tourism, and sustainable resource management should be developed. There should be incentives for community-led tourism initiatives that balance economic benefits with environmental conservation. Stronger regulatory frameworks to

ensure responsible tourism practices and prevent over-exploitation of natural resources should be encouraged.

5. Conclusion

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Kolli Hills has emerged as a sustainable development model that effectively balances environmental conservation, economic growth, and cultural preservation. This study highlights the significance of community participation and environmental knowledge transfer in shaping sustainable tourism perceptions. The findings indicate that higher community involvement leads to increased tourist satisfaction and better management of natural resources. Traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through generations, plays a crucial role in environmental conservation and sustainable tourism practices. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent policy support, and limited awareness hinder the full potential of CBT in the region. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts from government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and local stakeholders. Capacity-building programs, better policy implementation, and financial support for community-led tourism initiatives are essential to strengthen CBT in Kolli Hills. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainable tourism strategies, the Kolli Hills can become a model for responsible tourism that benefits both local communities and the environment.

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