

# Sustainable Ecotourism Models for Integrating Local Craft and Food Ecosystems in Chhattisgarh: A Community-Based Development Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

### Purpose

This study explores the potential of integrating local craft traditions and indigenous food ecosystems into sustainable ecotourism models in Chhattisgarh. The research aims to examine how community-based tourism can simultaneously support environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local livelihood development.

### Design/Methodology/Approach

The study adopts a qualitative conceptual approach based on secondary data analysis. Academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and tourism-related studies were reviewed and analysed using thematic analysis.

### Findings

The findings indicate that ecotourism initiatives in Chhattisgarh have contributed to biodiversity conservation and livelihood generation. However, traditional crafts and indigenous food systems remain inadequately integrated into tourism experiences. An integrated ecotourism framework comprising nature-based tourism, craft-based tourism, culinary tourism, and community participation is proposed.

### Practical Implications

The study provides guidance for policymakers, tourism planners, artisans, and community organizations in developing sustainable and culturally inclusive tourism products.

### Originality/Value

The paper contributes to the literature by proposing a multidisciplinary framework linking ecological conservation, cultural heritage, indigenous food systems, and community-based development.

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**KEYWORDS:** Sustainable ecotourism, community-based tourism, cultural heritage, Dhokra craft, culinary tourism, Chhattisgarh.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical approach for balancing economic development with environmental conservation and social well-being. Traditional tourism models often prioritize economic gains while overlooking environmental sustainability and community welfare. Consequently, ecotourism has gained global recognition as an alternative tourism model that promotes responsible travel, biodiversity conservation, and local community participation (Fennell, 2021).

Ecotourism is particularly relevant for regions rich in natural and cultural resources. Chhattisgarh, located in central India, possesses extensive forest cover, diverse wildlife, and a vibrant tribal heritage. Destinations such as Bastar, Kanger Valley National Park, Chitrakoot Waterfall, Tirathgarh Waterfall, and Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve attract visitors seeking nature-based experiences. The state is also renowned for traditional handicrafts such as Dhokra metal casting, wrought iron craft, bamboo products, terracotta art, and wood carving.

In addition to its craft heritage, Chhattisgarh possesses rich indigenous food traditions based on millets, forest produce, bamboo shoots, tamarind, mahua flowers, and traditional rice varieties. These food systems reflect deep ecological knowledge and cultural identity. However, tourism development in the state continues to focus largely on natural attractions, while crafts and culinary traditions remain underutilized tourism resources.

The growing demand for authentic and experiential tourism presents an opportunity to integrate craft ecosystems and food traditions into ecotourism products. Such integration can diversify tourism offerings, enhance visitor experiences, strengthen cultural preservation, and generate sustainable livelihoods. Therefore, this study examines how local crafts and food systems can be incorporated into sustainable ecotourism models in Chhattisgarh.

## 2. Literature Review

### Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Ecotourism emerged during the 1980s as a response to concerns regarding the environmental impacts of mass tourism. It emphasizes responsible travel, environmental education, conservation, and local participation (Honey, 2008). According to Fennell (2021), ecotourism seeks to create positive relationships between tourists, host communities, and natural environments.

Research suggests that ecotourism can contribute significantly to sustainable development when local communities participate in tourism planning and benefit-sharing processes (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Community involvement promotes environmental stewardship and strengthens support for conservation initiatives. Moreover, ecotourism generates alternative income opportunities, thereby reducing dependence on environmentally destructive activities.

### Community-Based Ecotourism

Community-based ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as an important strategy for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. CBET emphasizes local ownership, participatory governance, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits. Kunjuraman (2024) argues that community participation is essential for ensuring long-term sustainability and local empowerment.

In the context of Chhattisgarh, community-based tourism initiatives have created employment opportunities in guiding services, hospitality operations, transportation, and handicraft production. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited market access, and insufficient training continue to hinder tourism development.

### Craft Heritage and Tourism

Handicrafts represent an important component of cultural tourism because they embody indigenous knowledge, artistic traditions, and cultural identity. The Bastar region is internationally recognized for Dhokra metal casting, one of the oldest metal-working traditions in the world. Other notable crafts include wrought iron sculptures, bamboo handicrafts, wood carving, and terracotta products.

Studies indicate that artisans face numerous challenges, including rising raw material costs, weak market access, technological limitations, and dependence on intermediaries (Yadav et al., 2024). Tourism can address some of these challenges by creating direct interactions between visitors and artisans through workshops, demonstrations, and craft villages.

### Culinary Tourism and Indigenous Food Systems

Food tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of cultural tourism. Hall and Gössling (2016) argue that local food systems contribute significantly to destination identity and visitor satisfaction. Culinary tourism also supports local agriculture, entrepreneurship, and cultural preservation.

Chhattisgarh possesses diverse indigenous food traditions based on millets such as kodo and kutki, traditional rice varieties, forest mushrooms, bamboo shoots, mahua products, and tamarind-based preparations. Despite their cultural significance, these food systems remain largely absent from mainstream tourism products.

## 3. Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined ecotourism, handicrafts, and culinary tourism separately, limited research has explored their integration within a single framework.

**Table 1. Research Gap Analysis**

Author (s)	Focus Area	Key Findings	Research Gap
Fennell (2021)	Ecotourism	Conservation and sustainability	Limited cultural integration
Honey (2008)	Sustainable tourism	Community participation	No craft-food linkage
Stronza & Gordillo (2008)	Community ecotourism	Local involvement improves outcomes	Limited artisan focus
Hall & Gössling (2016)	Food tourism	Food strengthens destination identity	Tribal food systems overlooked
Yadav et al. (2024)	Dhokra craft	Marketing and livelihood challenges	Tourism integration unexplored
Present Study	Ecotourism, crafts and food systems	Integrated framework	Addresses multidisciplinary gap

The review highlights the absence of a comprehensive framework that simultaneously incorporates ecological conservation, craft traditions, indigenous food systems, and community participation. This study seeks to address this gap.

#### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, tourism reports, government publications, and policy documents related to ecotourism, community-based tourism, handicrafts, indigenous food systems, and sustainable development. The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate.

Keywords such as “ecotourism,” “community-based tourism,” “Dhokra craft,” “culinary tourism,” “tribal tourism,” and “Chhattisgarh tourism” were used to identify relevant studies.

The collected literature was analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative technique used to identify and interpret recurring patterns within data. The analysis involved a systematic process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Relevant information from the selected literature was reviewed and coded according to common concepts and issues related to sustainable tourism development. Similar codes were then grouped to form broader thematic categories.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Ecotourism and Conservation,
2. Community Participation,
3. Craft Heritage and Livelihoods,
4. Indigenous Food Systems, and
5. Sustainable Tourism Governance.

These themes were further examined to understand their interrelationships and contribution to sustainable community-based ecotourism. The findings derived from these themes formed the basis for the proposed

conceptual framework of integrating local craft and food ecosystems into sustainable ecotourism development in Chhattisgarh.

#### 5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals that ecotourism has generated positive socio-economic and environmental outcomes in several regions of Chhattisgarh. Nature-based tourism activities such as trekking, wildlife observation, and eco-guiding have created employment opportunities while promoting conservation awareness.

However, tourism development remains concentrated around natural attractions. The potential contribution of local crafts and food traditions has not been fully realised. This limits opportunities for value addition, cultural preservation, and income diversification.

Craft traditions represent significant cultural assets that can enhance tourism experiences. Instead of treating handicrafts solely as souvenirs, tourism initiatives can incorporate artisan workshops, live demonstrations, heritage centres, and craft villages. Such experiences provide visitors with deeper cultural engagement while creating additional income streams for artisans.

Similarly, indigenous food systems offer substantial opportunities for tourism development. Traditional foods such as Chila, Faraa, Angakar Roti, Bore Basi, and millet-based dishes can be incorporated into food trails, cooking classes, community dining experiences, and culinary festivals like Bore Basi Diwas celebrated on May 1<sup>st</sup> of every year from 2022. These initiatives can strengthen local food value chains while preserving traditional culinary knowledge.

Community participation emerged as a critical factor influencing tourism sustainability. Studies consistently demonstrate that tourism initiatives are more successful when local communities actively participate in planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing processes. Community ownership enhances

accountability, conservation commitment, and long-term sustainability.

## 6. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The study proposes an Integrated Sustainable Ecotourism Framework consisting of four interconnected pillars -

- The first pillar is Nature-Based Tourism, which includes forests, wildlife reserves, waterfalls, trekking routes, and protected areas. These resources serve as the primary attractions for visitors.
- The second pillar is Craft-Based Tourism, encompassing Dhokra workshops, artisan demonstrations, craft villages, cultural exhibitions, and handicraft markets. These activities promote cultural preservation while generating livelihood opportunities.
- The third pillar is Culinary Tourism, which includes indigenous food trails, millet festivals, traditional cooking workshops, community dining experiences, and local food markets.
- The fourth pillar is Community Participation, involving homestays, artisan cooperatives, women's self-help groups, farmer producer organizations, and local tourism enterprises.

The interaction among these four pillars contributes to biodiversity conservation, cultural preservation, rural entrepreneurship, employment generation, community empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods.

## 7. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to ecotourism literature by expanding traditional ecotourism frameworks beyond environmental conservation. Existing models primarily emphasize ecological sustainability, whereas the proposed framework incorporates cultural and culinary dimensions.

The study also contributes to community-based tourism theory by recognizing artisans and food producers as central stakeholders within tourism systems. Furthermore, it advances discussions on cultural entrepreneurship by demonstrating how tourism can create economic opportunities for indigenous communities while preserving traditional knowledge.

## 8. Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for tourism planners, policymakers, and community organizations. Tourism authorities should develop integrated tourism circuits that combine natural attractions with craft villages and culinary experiences.

Investment in infrastructure, digital marketing, and skill development is essential for strengthening tourism competitiveness. Training programmes should focus on entrepreneurship, hospitality management, digital marketing, and sustainable tourism practices.

Policymakers should support artisan cooperatives, women's self-help groups, and local food enterprises through financial assistance, marketing support, and institutional capacity building. Additionally, tourism planning should incorporate environmental carrying-capacity assessments to ensure sustainability.

## 9. Conclusion

Chhattisgarh possesses significant potential for sustainable tourism owing to its biodiversity, tribal culture, handicrafts, and indigenous food systems. However, existing tourism initiatives continue to focus primarily on nature-based attractions.

This study demonstrates that integrating local craft traditions and food ecosystems into ecotourism frameworks can diversify tourism products, enhance cultural preservation, and strengthen community livelihoods. The proposed framework highlights the importance of combining nature-based tourism, craft-based tourism, culinary tourism, and community participation within a unified development strategy.

Future research should undertake empirical field studies in Bastar and other tribal regions to assess the practical implementation of the proposed framework and its impacts on local communities.

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