

SKARDU'S EMERGING TOURISM INDUSTRY: A STATISTICAL EVALUATION OF FLOW, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Skardu is one of the beautiful districts of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), located in the extreme north of Pakistan. It bordered with China, India, and Kashmir. It stretched along the River Indus between mighty mountains Karakoram and Himalaya. It is the capital of Baltistan region where peoples from other districts of Pakistan are settled for their business, education and a job proposes.

Skardu, a popular tourist destination in Pakistan, is renowned for its stunning landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and unique biodiversity. However, the surge in tourism activities in recent years has led to various environmental and socio-economic challenges, including environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and economic inequity. To address these issues and promote sustainable tourism, this article explored the challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development in Skardu.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature, the article identifies the key drivers of unsustainable tourism practices in Skardu, such as uncontrolled tourism activities, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of community engagement. Additionally, the article highlighted several potential strategies for promoting sustainable tourism in the region, including community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and responsible tourism. Finally, the article proposed a framework for sustainable tourism development in Skardu that emphasized collaboration among stakeholders, conservation of natural and cultural resources, and equitable distribution of benefits. The key findings of this study are that Skardu is an area with natural beauty and unique culture with lack of facilities. Due to its natural beauty people from rest of the country and foreign countries are visiting this area. Government and the residents are taking interest in promotion of tourism in area to get economic benefits but not any action is taking to protect the environment and culture.

1. Introduction

Both economic and industrial development is essential to national development. In many societies, the tourism sector is expanding along with other businesses, and it is crucial to the growth of such nations (Harris et al., 2012). Tourists may be attracted by man-made attractions and stunning natural scenery. Most

tourists are enticed to France and Italy because their supermarkets and restaurants, while Pakistan-like nations lure visitors by their picturesque beauty and high mountains (Lickorish & Jenkins, 2007). Pakistan, a country with a rich history and culture, offers a wide variety of attractions to tourists. From the ancient cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa to

the majestic mountains of Himalaya, Karakoram, and Hindukush, waterfalls, highlands, rivers, lakes, national parks, deserts (hot and cold) and coastal areas, Pakistan is a destination that can satisfy the interests of any traveller (Arshad et al., 2018).

On the one hand, Pakistan possesses cultural and natural attractions, and on the other the massive China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project will play a significant part in the development of tourism in the country, specifically in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), the corridor's Gateway (Ali et al., 2017). The highest mountains in the earth, especially K2, which is the 2nd highest peak in the world is found in GB, attracting mountain climbers and travellers from all over the world (Khalid et al., 2020).

GB is an isolated territory of Pakistan that attracts tourists by richness of natural beauty despite has lack of services and infrastructure. Tourism in this area undoubtedly boosts local economies and provides job opportunities to residents. But because it is not sustainable, it has a negative impact on the areas ecological. It could have a harmful effect on the local physical environment (Oad et al., 2021). Tourism is causing the degradation of the tourist attractions sides, affect man-made items like handicrafts, and harm historical sites like forts. It also has an impact on the local culture also (Tisdell, 1987).

GB was hidden from the rest of the world prior the completion of the Karakorum Highway 1958 - 1978. Initially, GB was only visited by a small number of mountaineers each year for hiking and mountaineering. The number of tourists started increase gradually; however they tend to be largely foreigners, who come throughout the summer months from late April

to September. The mountain peaks tend to excite foreign visitors more than domestic ones, who typically travel there to take in the natural splendour (Hussain et al., 2017). The construction of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) affects the arrival of tourists to the area by providing easy access. This easiness increased the flow of tourist suddenly (Baig & Zehra, 2020). To make easy access for tourists to Skardu the government of Pakistan has rebuild and widened the Baltistan Highway. The reconstruction work were started in 2015 and completed in 2021 (Abbas, 2021).

The flow of tourist in Skardu is creating job opportunities and adding the economy of the local people, but the uncontrolled flow is affecting the ecology, biodiversity, society and the culture of the region. The arrival of tourist in large number is also increasing the solid waste generation, noise and water pollution in the area (Saqib et al., 2019). The tourism affects the people and the region both positive and negatively but the sustainable tourism means minimize the negative impacts and maximise the positive effects (Ko et al., 2022).

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Area

Skardu, the capital of Baltistan region is rich in natural beauty and cultural diversity. With its snow-capped mountains, crystal-clear lakes, and rich history. It has the potential to become a major tourist destination. However, like many other regions, Skardu faces several challenges in promoting sustainable tourism. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities for the promotion of sustainable tourism in Skardu. Figure 01 is the map of geographic location and famous visiting places in Skardu.

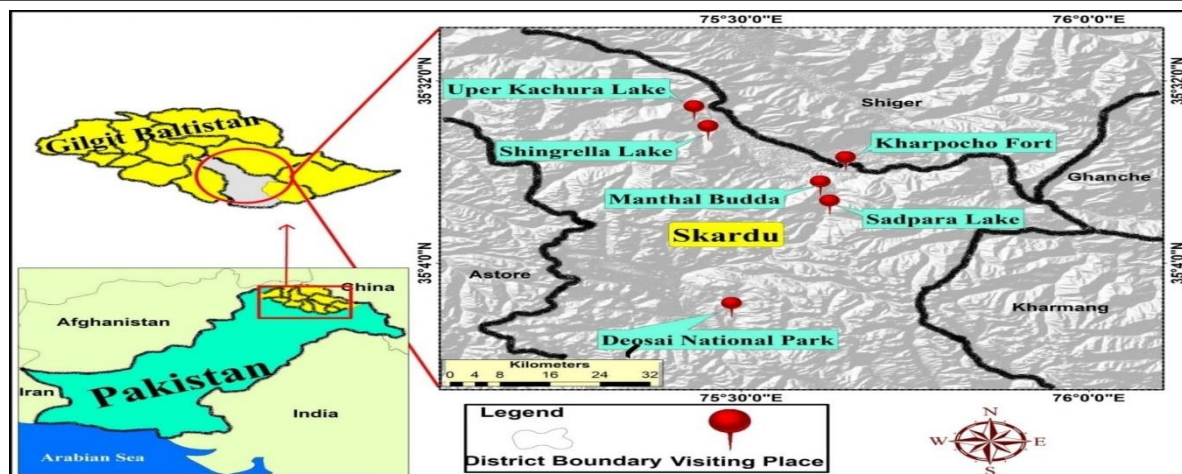


Figure 01. Geographic location and famous visiting places in Skardu.

2.2 Data Collection

This study was conducted through a survey of tourists and local stakeholders in Skardu. The survey was designed to identify the challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in Skardu. A total of 200 tourists and 350 local stakeholders were surveyed. Several techniques have been applied to attain the stated aims. The major data collection process included predefined questionnaires and focus group discussions.

Convenience sampling methods were applied to gather data from the participants. To make the data more accurate, data was collected from different tourist destinations. The respondents from different cities of Pakistan and international visitor were participated in this survey.

Residents close to picnic places were chosen as most responders because they are more directly impacted by tourists than residents of other locations. Few respondents were chosen from the area remote from the tourist destination since the influence of tourism is not limited to areas close to popular tourist destinations.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), consisting of 7-10 participants were held in various tourist hotspots in Skardu as an additional method for gathering the core data for this study. Upper Kachura Lake, Kachura Xhoq resort, Sadpara Lake, Kharpocho fort, Nangxhoq, and Deosai National Park were some of these locations. The issues facing the tourism sector and potential fixes were the topics of discussion for these FGDs, as well as how to make tourism

sustainable by maintaining the local ecology and culture.

After gathering the essential primary and secondary data for this study, the variables were coded, and the data was edited as necessary to ensure that the analysis would be applicable. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), among other statistical software programs, has been used to analyse and examine data. The data has been set up in a sequence that allows the analysis to work properly.

The necessary statistical tests have been done to alter the data after entering it into SPSS. To examine the relationship between the variables, a cross tabulation was performed. This also explains how the respondents responded to a particular question.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Arrival of Tourists in Skardu

Because of the mountainous location and its climatic condition, the travel of Skardu is extremely challenging. The Karakorum Highway (KKH) and airline operations undoubtedly make it easier for people to travel there and explore it, but many parts of this region remain unexplored by the public. The tourism sector is flourishing in this area because of the KKH, reconstruction of the Baltistan Highway and flight operations by PIA and Air Blue. But sometime its weather condition disturbs the flight operation and block KKH.

This new sector is having a lot of challenges and is influencing Skardu's ecology, economy, and culture. Although tourism has a favourable impact on the economy however it's not

environmentally or culturally sustainable. The locals have different opinions regarding this tourism industry. To treasure the challenges and opportunities for the promotion of sustainable tourism in Skardu, GB,

questionnaires were filled from tourists and residents, while Focus Groups Discussions (FGD) were also conducted and required secondary data were collected.

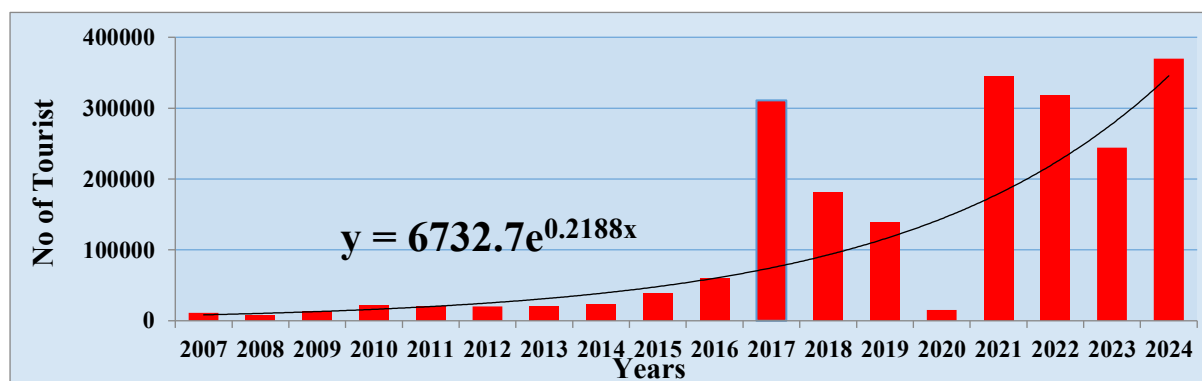


Figure 02. Arrival of Tourists in Skardu (Department of Tourism GB, Skardu Directorate).

Figure 02 shows annual arrival of tourist in Skardu from 2007 to 2024. It depicts that the number of tourists increasing year by year from 2007 to 2024 and showing an exponential increasing trend with $y = 6732.7e^{0.2188x}$. It also shows that during some years the arrival was abruptly very low due to different factors such as law-and-order situations along KKH especially in Chilas and pandemic Covid-19. Before 2007 usually some climbers and adventurers use to visit Skardu to climb different peaks including K2. From 2007 to 2009 the law-and-order situation in Chilas, and Kohistan did not remain suitable for travelers from where the tourists must travel but this issue was resolved by law enforcement authorities. In 2017 the arrival of tourists crossed three lacs in but after that it started to decrease again in 2018 and 2019. This decline was because of the reconstruction work of Baltistan Highway. During those years the road remained blocked frequently because of the blasting to widen the road. In 2020 the tourism industry become under crises like other sectors of life because of the pandemic Covid-19. In 2021 it started to again increase, and more than 3 lac tourists arrived in Skardu which continuously increased in 2022 also. In 2024 the tourist arrivals were 369733, which is the highest ever recorded.

Majority of the tourists arriving in GB were national tourists. The international tourist still avoids visiting Pakistan due to negative image of

Pakistan in media regarding terrorism. To attract the international tourist Pakistan needed to take necessary steps to make positive image of Pakistan in international media. It should be highlighted in national and international media that GB is land of beauty and peace and there is no law-and-order situation in GB. Not a sole case of terrorist activities recorded in especially in Skardu so there is a need to propagate this into national and international media. Compared to rest year in 2024, more international tourists recorded in Skardu, especially at Skardu International airport. Along with government efforts to promote tourism in GB many social media workers and private organizations are also playing their pivotal role in promotion of tourism.

3.2 Month wise Arrival of Tourist

A month-wise analysis of tourist arrival is necessary to understand the seasonal tourism in Skardu. This analysis further appries the months with highest and lowest arrival of tourists in the region. The weather and season play vital role in determining the inflow trends of tourists. Figure 03 shows that summer season (June, July and August) remains the peak tourist season in Skardu, and we can say that summer season is the tourist season in Skardu. The next better season is the spring season for the tourist arrival in the study area. The highest inflow (48716 tourists) remained in July and that of lowest inflow (4488 tourists) remained in the

month of December in Skardu. During summer, the temperature of Skardu always remains low as compared to other region of Pakistan that is why domestic tourist flow towards Skardu. In the recent few years, the spring and autumn inflow have also increased day by day which strengthen tourism industry in Skardu.

Overall analysis seasonal categorization shows that autumn season is third in number of tourist flow in Skardu. The sever climatic conditions in winter season, in which temperature almost remained double figure below the freezing point of water and the frequent snow fall are the major reasons behind the decline of tourist arrival in Skardu.

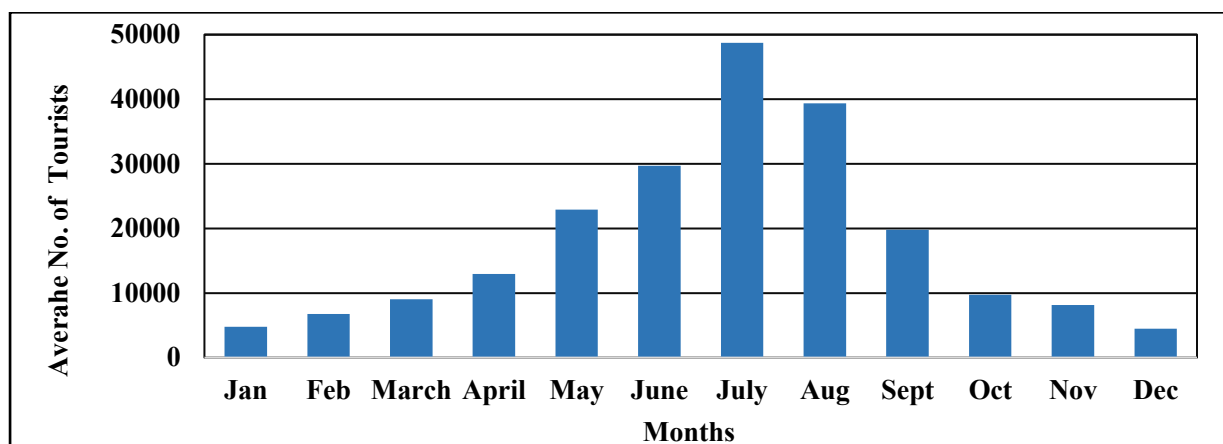


Figure 03. Average monthly Arrival of Tourists in Skardu (Department of Tourism GB, Skardu Directorate).

3.3 Total Tourist Flow Toward Skardu Compared to other Regions of GB

Figure 04 depicts a comparative study of tourist arrival towards Skardu compared to the other regions of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). It clearly shows that during the last five years tourist flow is maximum towards Skardu compared to rest all regions of GB, except in 2020 which is covid period and Shahrah Baltistan construction peak

year in which tourist flow is very low. In 2024 the net flow of tourist towards Skardu is 369733 which is 66.59 % of overall flow towards other regions of GB, it clearly reflects that after the construction of Shahrah Baltistan and declaration of Skardu airport as an International Airport the annual tourist flow towards Skardu increasing day by day and Skardu became tourist hub of GB and Pakistan.

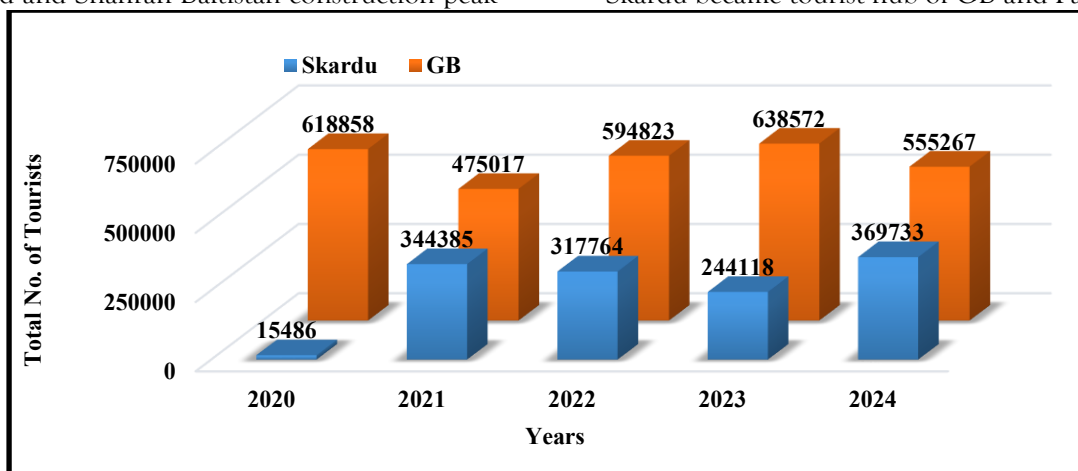


Figure 04. Comparison of Tourists Arrival in Skardu with the whole Gilgit-Baltistan (Department of Tourism GB, Skardu Directorate).

3.4 Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism

To find the challenges of tourism sector, Focus Group Discussions were conducted in different tourist spot with the stake holders. These discussions found that there are several challenges for sustainable tourism in Skardu. These challenges include poor infrastructure, inadequate facilities, lack of awareness about sustainable tourism practices, and limited government support. Additionally, the survey found that there is a lack of collaboration and coordination among local stakeholders in promoting sustainable tourism. Beside the challenges discussed above the weather dependent flights and road is also a challenge for the promotion of tourism in Skardu. Flights are usually cancelled because of the weather and similarly during rainy season the road gets blocked due to land sliding.

Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities for promoting sustainable tourism in Skardu. These opportunities include the region's natural beauty, its rich cultural heritage, and the growing demand for

sustainable tourism experiences. Furthermore, the survey found that local stakeholders are willing to work together to promote sustainable tourism in the region.

The major challenges faced Skardu in promoting sustainable tourism includes improving infrastructure, providing adequate facilities, raising awareness about sustainable tourism practices, and increasing government support. Additionally, it is crucial to promote collaboration and coordination among local stakeholders.

3.5 Tourism Sustainability in Skardu

As the Skardu located in the extreme north of Pakistan, due to its remoteness and physiography not a single industry is working there which is causing lack of economic opportunities. In this situation the major solution is the promotion of tourism industry to provide opportunity to the locals. It is enhancing the business of the residents and adding in the economy of the region but the arrival of large number of tourists creating some ecological and social issues.

Table 01. Solid Waste Generation in Skardu per Day.

	Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Solid Waste Generation in Skardu per Day	Summer (April to September)		35 to 40 tones	37 to 42 tones	35 to 40 tones	40 to 45 tones	42 to 47 tones
	Winter (October to March)	25 to 30 tones	30 to 35 tones	31 to 36 tones	33 to 38 tones	35 to 40 tones	38 to 44 tons
	Average	25 to 30 tones	30 to 35 tones	31 to 36 tones	33 to 38 tones	35 to 40 tones	38 to 44 tons

Source: Solid Waste Management Authority (SWMA) Skardu.

The table 01 is showing that with the promotion of tourism the solid waste generation is also increasing. In summer season sometimes it's become double of the waste generating in winters. It is because of the large number of tourists flux towards this region. No doubt the increasing population of Skardu is also responsible for increasing solid waste generation, but the tourism sector is adding more than the share of residents.

With the development of tourism, the need of hotels and rest houses are also increasing in Skardu to accommodate the tourists. Dozens of

hotels are constructing in which is affecting the agricultural and forested areas of Skardu. The concrete structures are also affecting the climate and contributing to climate induced hazards. There is no construction policy and town planning to safeguard the indigenous climatic conditions.

The municipal committee Skardu (MCS) is responsible to monitor the construction in town area of Skardu. The Figure 05 shows that the NOC's provided by municipal committee to build hotels restaurants and rest houses. The number of hotels may be more than the record

provided by municipal committee because many hotels are running in residential houses. This graph is showing that the number of hotels is increasing rapidly and obviously this is adding in the economy of the local people but reducing

the cultivable land and forested area. With the construction of these building the solid waste generation is also increasing and the beauty of the area is degrading.

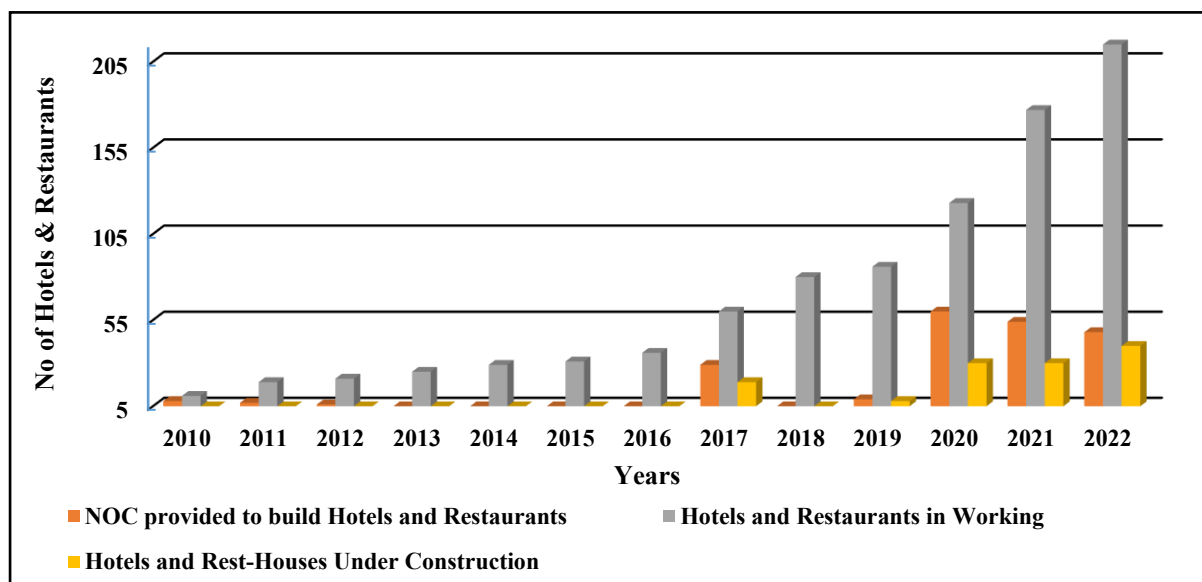


Figure 05. Hotels received NOC from Municipal Committee Skardu (MCS) for Construction (Municipal Committee Skardu (MCS)).

Ko et al in 2022 illustrated that most of the facilitators are not contributing to save the environment from degradation due to the tourism but some are contributing toward local festivals and culture. Government is also providing little support to promote and protect the culture and cultural events, but no concentration is giving to protect the environment. To make tourism sustainable it is necessary that all the stake holders of the tourism industry should be familiar with the importance and need of sustainability. This study found that a large numbers of stakeholder of the tourism industry are not even familiar to the sustainable tourism. There is dire need to provide awareness about the importance of sustainable tourism. For this purpose, it is necessary to organize workshops and educate the stakeholder regarding the need for and importance of sustainable tourism.

The BREAKING travel news on 3rd March 2025 reported that in 2024 there are 121% more international visitors compared to 2023 in

Gilgit-Baltistan, who were drawn to the area’s stunning mountains, lakes, wildlife, excellent trekking, climbing and unique culture. This trend is expected to continue into 2025, with domestic tourism also sharply on the rise, but this presents ecological challenges in a fragile mountainous environment. This increase has been furthered by a streamlining of the country’s visa process, with 126 nationalities now able to apply online for an e-visa. Direct flights have also recently commenced between Dubai and Skardu, Pakistan – the first of their kind, and talks are continuing to create regular services between the two locations, along with other destinations.

No doubt both the government and the residents are taking interest in promotion of tourism but have not any measures to protect the environment and culture. It is also required to make strategies and planning to protect the environment. It is need of the time that the stake holders should convince for sustainable

tourism if it is not so then this sector will be paralyzed in future.

4. Conclusion

Skardu has great attraction because of its picturesque natural beauty, lofty mountains, cold desert, lakes, waterfall and the unique rich culture. Beside these attractions the most important attraction for tourists is the peaceful environment with zero record of crimes and terrorism. Because of these qualities thousands of tourists from other regions of country and foreign countries visit Skardu every year and the number of tourists is increasing year by year.

The government and the local community are interested in the promotion of tourism and for that purpose both stakeholders are taking steps to attract the tourist towards Skardu. Government has reconstructed the Baltistan Highway to give easy access and flights operation from different cities of the country are also a step to promote tourism in Skardu. The private airline, Air Blue also started operation of its flights from Islamabad to Skardu. Besides these, government is also collaborating with the local communities to celebrate cultural and sports events to attract tourists.

The local community is opening hotels, restaurants, making traditional handicrafts and celebrating cultural events to attract the tourists. To make the journey of tourist comfortable and affordable many transport companies are also providing rental vehicles for tourists.

Because of these steps taken by the government and the residents the tourism is flourishing in the area, but all stakeholders of the tourism (government, local community, and tourists) are not thinking to make tourism sustainable.

The tourism is enhancing the economy of the local community and providing business and job opportunities. The arrival of foreign tourist is becoming the source of foreign exchange, which is supporting the economy of Pakistan. But the uncontrolled arrival of tourist towards the region with poor infrastructure may not be sustainable.

Majority of the tourist are national tourist and mostly are not aware about the importance of sustainable tourism. They do not care about the environment and the culture of the destination.

The local community of Skardu has limited earning sources, meanwhile the development of tourism is providing an opportunity of earning to them, so they are also not focusing other negative impacts of tourism. The government is also not taking steps to make tourism sustainable due to lack of resources and investments.

In conclusion, Skardu has the potential to become a major sustainable tourism destination. However, several challenges need to be addressed to achieve this goal. The study recommends that local authorities and stakeholders work together to improve infrastructure, provide adequate facilities, raise awareness about sustainable tourism practices, and increase government support. By addressing these challenges, Skardu can capitalize on its natural beauty and cultural heritage to promote sustainable tourism.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings this research following are some recommendations to address the challenges for tourism and to make the growing tourism sustainable.

5.1 To Address Challenges

1. Take measures to reduce the effects of land sliding and make safe access to different valleys. For this purpose, the deputation of active rescue workers on road with equipment is needed.
2. The number of flights should increase and need to control the fare of flight. There is a need to issue licence for private airlines also.
3. The infrastructure of Skardu cannot afford too much crowd, so needed to develop the infrastructure.

5.2 To Make Tourism Sustainable

1. Most of the tourist hotspots in Skardu are far from the municipal area where the SWMA is not in function so the function of SWMA should be extend to those areas.
2. There should be ban on use of products with wrappers and encourage the use of fruit and unprocessed foods for refreshment at tourist hotspot areas.
3. To accommodate the tourist the construction of hotel, resultants, plazas and

shopping centres are affecting the ecology of the area so there is need to establish a regulatory authority to make sure the constructions are not affecting the ecology.

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