


## Chapter 6

# Cultural Tourism and the Wellbeing of Local Citizens: Examining the Mediating Role of Cultural Conservation in Northern Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*Cultural tourism is an increasingly visible trend in the tourism industry. The chapter is one of the first academic studies to specifically analyze the possible impacts of cultural tourism on the local culture itself and the wellbeing of the host community while highlighting cultural conservation as a mediator. The study utilizes primary data collected from rural areas in the Himalayan Gilgit Baltistan region in Northern Pakistan. This region has experienced a significant rise in cultural tourism due to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As a result, there has been a significant and visible development of touristic facilities in the region. Hence, there is a visible shift from earlier tourism, which was mostly linked to mountaineering adventure, to more relatively mass cultural tourism. The results suggest that cultural conservation serves as a partial mediator and that cultural tourism tends to positively and significantly influence the host community's wellbeing, and cultural conservation partially mediates this relationship.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7335-8.ch006

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is frequently viewed as a threat to the preservation of local cultures and cultural sites. Tourism is, in reality, a platform and a vehicle for exposing heritage to the masses, protecting it, and ensuring its economic and social sustainability. As a result, tourism is frequently a balancing mechanism that preserves and protects the culture of a society.

Cultural tourism has clear economic advantages. It is of crucial importance for many mountain communities in developing countries, where there is a lack of economic opportunities due to harsh geographic and climatic conditions (Wester et al., 2019). Tourism has emerged as one of the key sources of economic activities for these mountain communities, as building large industrial infrastructure is not viable in these regions in most cases (Nepal, 2020). Cultural tourism is quickly expanding in the Himalayan Gilgit Baltistan region in Northern Pakistan, and this has been strongly linked to culture conservation. On the one hand, cultural heritage is a fundamental resource for attracting visitors in cultural tourism. Cultural tourism, on the other hand, can provide the financial base for the protection of culture.

Cultural tourism has been referred to as one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in the world tourism market (UNWTO, 2005). Some scholars have found that cultural tourism has both positive and negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts on residents of host communities (Fang, 2020; Richards, 2007; Richards 2018). The commodification of cultural resources for attracting tourists and consumption by these tourists has burgeoned in the recent years. However, not all communities are able to translate the benefits of tourist arrivals into development; though, tourism being an economic activity can be an effective strategy for regional economic development (Fang, 2020; Yang & Wall, 2009). In their study, Perdue et. al. (2010) stressed that the usefulness of cultural tourism is that it expedites and sustains wellbeing such as reducing poverty in host communities, the renaissance of heritage and community culture and the preservation and protection of both cultural and natural resources. In this context, sustainable cultural tourism has been stressed as being useful in avoiding immoderate abuse of resources and encouraging preservation of culture and heritage for the next generation (e.g., Boniface, 2013; Asmelash and Kumar, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the current chapter focuses on a mountainous region in the north of Pakistan that borders China's West (Gilgit Baltistan). The region is rich in cultural heritage in the form of arts and crafts, archaeological heritage, as well as the world-famous rock carvings and inscriptions discovered in the area, which date back to prehistoric times.

Currently, the Gilgit-Baltistan region is experiencing an exponential increase in tourist arrivals (and especially cultural tourists) due to the improvements in

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