

Promoting Sustainable Tourism Through Local Culinary Practices: A Case Study of Nepal

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Abstract

Gastrotourism is one of the unexplored types of tourism in Nepal that has great potential. Nepali society, being a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural tightly woven society, has similar as well as vivid, diverse culinary practices (Shrestha, 2025; Dangol, 2025; Tamang, 2016). Most of the tourism businesspeople are aware of its theoretical importance; however, they have little practical exposure. Similarly, regarding the relationship between the sustainability of gastrotourism, the ground-level tourism operators do not carry a significant level of awareness. The tourism operators look for state-level intervention to build the awareness and capacity of the nation to host gastrotourism (Nishihara, 2014).

Keywords: Gastrotourism, Local Cuisine, Nepali Food Culture, Tourism Development, Sustainable Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The history of tourism in Nepal has been changing throughout the centuries, starting with ancient pilgrimage paths and trading-oriented travel, to become an internationally recognized tourism destination in the world in terms of adventure tourism and cultural tourism. Traders and Buddhist monks visiting Nepal from the 12th to 18th centuries were among the first to pass through the country, mostly to exchange ideas on religious, commercial, and cultural levels. Nevertheless, tourism started attaining a more organized shape after the mid-20th century and finally became one of the most significant economic activities of Nepal. Nowadays, tourism is one of the largest employers and income generators, with its contribution to Nepal's gross domestic product being approximately

6.7 percent, generating significant foreign exchange for the country (Nepal Economic Forum, 2025). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2024), the field of tourism may be considered one of the oldest existing worldwide, with the origins of this industry traced back to ancient civilizations, where traveling was associated with pilgrimage, trade, and entertainment. This further evolved into the notion of organized tourism, as the first package tour was launched by Thomas Cook in 1841, which laid the foundation for the modern travel industry.

The unique natural and cultural resources in Nepal are also a significant boost to the tourism attractiveness of the country. The nation boasts spectacular geographical features with the highest Himalayan peaks on Earth, lowlands, tropical forests, biosphere-rich areas, and large river

catchments, all originating in the Himalayas (Shrestha, 2025; Dangol, 2025). Nepal is also among the oldest countries in the world that has a rich cultural heritage due to the presence of a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society and natural landscapes. This cultural diversity is reflected in its traditional cuisine culture, customs, festivals and lifestyle, all of which have an impact on its own tourist character.

Nepal has been influenced by regional and international cuisines for many years especially in relation to its historical trade links with its neighbors. Consequently, Nepali cuisine has developed by integrating Tibetan, Indian and regional culinary traditions while maintaining its regional identity (Long, 1999; Long, 2019; Tamang, 2016). The varied culinary options include regional dishes such as Thakali thali, staples such as momos (dumplings), sel roti (traditional rice doughnuts) and *dal bhat* (lentil curry with rice). Fermented products like gundruk, spicy achar pickles, Newari bara (lentil pancakes), and local vegetables and herbs also emphasize the usage of local organic products. Beyond the aspect of cultural identity, these culinary practices have high potential for tourism development.

Nepal has received Asian, European, and American tourists since it officially opened to international tourists in the mid-20th century. Pilgrimage and adventure-based tourism have always been central to tourism, and this includes trekking, mountaineering, hiking, wildlife tourism, and cultural tours. New adventure and leisure activities in recent decades, such as white-water rafting, paragliding, bungee jumping, kayaking, jungle safari, birdwatching, licensed hunting, and MICE tourism have increased the range of tourism in Nepal. Gastronomy tourism has not yet reached the targeted level in terms of development despite its diversification. Gastronomy tourism (or food tourism or gastrotourism) is the promotion of food and beverage experiences as the primary incentive of travelers, enabling them to immerse themselves in the culture of a given area through cuisine, food production, and food culture.

Regarding tourist experience, gastronomy tourism provides the opportunity to explore authentic flavors through street food, cooking lessons, visiting markets, staying on farms, and home-cooked meals, which contribute to better cultural involvement and satisfaction with the traveling experience. Tour operators are increasingly appreciating the importance of eating experiences to the extent that they are incorporating food heritage into itineraries, conducting guided tastings and visits to producers, and in many cases, they associate this experience with sustainability and cultural narration. Restaurateurs play a part in presenting local foods made using fresh and locally available food items and strike a balance between innovation and maintaining the original recipes. For local communities, gastronomy tourism helps in the preservation of culture, develops job opportunities, promotes rural entrepreneurship, as well as promoting pride in the local heritage without necessarily developing vast infrastructures. Food tourism serves as a cultural intermediary at a larger societal level, facilitating national identity, ethical consumerism, and sustainable tourism development, and lessening congestion in overcrowded attractions through rural and community-based tourism.

In recent years, gastronomy tourism has gained more attention with the advent of digital media. The use of social media and YouTube by travel bloggers, vloggers, and documentary creators has

caught the attention of huge audiences and drawn attention to local food cultures and culinary traditions. Additionally, the appeal of global and national cooking contests and broadcast food shows has made people more interested in food, understanding of cooking traditions, and novelty.

The concept of sustainability has emerged as a very important aspect of modern-day tourism development, especially in gastronomy tourism. Sustainable gastrotourism insists on environmentally conscious practices, community involvement, and promoting the local culture and resources with little ecological footprint. Farm-to-table meals, zero-waste kitchens, local and in-season foods, and practices in food preparation that use traditional preparation methods are some of the practices that are leading to environmental conservation and economic stability. Sustainable gastronomy tourism can pursue sustainable food supply through sustainable farming, reduced food waste, biodiversity conservation, and enhanced supply chains locally, while serving the national development agendas and global sustainability agendas. Within the Nepal context, sustainable gastrotourism can provide a significant avenue towards enhancing genuine foods, preserving cultural activities, empowering the local people, and increasing the competitiveness of the tourism industry in the long term.

Objectives

The main objective of the study was to explore the existing level of awareness of sustainable gastrotourism among Nepali travel operators. Specifically, the objectives are:

- To identify three culinary practices in Kathmandu Valley.
- To assess awareness of gastrotourism among travel operators.
- To evaluate awareness of the significance of sustainable tourism among travel operators.

METHODS

The research design was exploratory because of the research nature. This method was found appropriate as the research is aimed at discussing the awareness, perceptions, and issues of sustainability of gastrotourism in Kathmandu valley with little empirical research carried out in the context of Nepal. The research was limited in scope and the clarity of results was provided through a quantitative research strategy.

Primary data were collected through a structured survey questionnaire, developed in accordance with the research objectives and supported by the literature on gastronomy tourism, culinary heritage and sustainable tourism. The questions were a mixture of rating scales, multiple choice questions, binary (yes/no) questions and one open-ended question to allow the researcher to get more views from the respondents. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted and improvements were made following feedback, in order to achieve clarity, relevance and reliability of the instrument.

The study adopted purposive sampling technique, since the population was finite, the respondents required were those that were knowledgeable and relevant to give a clear picture of the problem of the study. Respondents were selected according to their direct or indirect involvement in tourism-related practices or the provision of gastrotourism experiences. The sample was further refined to include travel agents, tour operators, hoteliers, restaurant owners, tourism entrepreneurs, teachers

and students at tourism colleges at the college level The sampling method was selected to ensure that the respondents were familiar with tourism activities and local cuisine.

The study area was the Kathmandu Valley, comprising the three primary cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. This was selected for the fact that it is one of the areas with high tourist influx, great culinary heritage and a significant impact on the tourism sector of Nepal. The valley can be considered a suitable environment to study the relation between gastrotourism and sustainable tourism development.

A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur districts through both online and physical mediums. Data were coded and analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS

The results are discussed in an interpretive manner and presented in tables and pie charts, which align with the research purposes and are supported by the existing literature.

In total, 104 responses were collected. Convenience sampling was adapted considering the required responses. The area of research was confined within Kathmandu Valley including Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur cities.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic analysis indicates that the sample is mainly that of young adults, indicating the dynamic and changing nature of the gastrotourism industry.

Table 1: Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rate

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)	Key Statistic
Age	Mean Age	N/A	28.9 years
	Median Age	N/A	26.0 years
Gender	Male	62.5%	N/A
	Female	37.5%	N/A
Residence	Kathmandu	74.0%	N/A
	Other Districts	26.0%	N/A
Occupation	Other	53.8%	N/A
	Local Community Member	23.1%	N/A
	Restaurateur	9.6%	N/A
	Tourist	7.7%	N/A
	Tour Operator	5.8%	N/A

The mean age was 28.9 years with a median of 26.0 years, indicating that the young generation has higher engagement. The sample consisted of a large percentage of males (62.5%) and was very concentrated in Kathmandu district (74.0%). The occupational breakdown, presented in Figure 1, indicates that the highest segment is the category Other, followed by the category Local Community Members, indicating that the number of people interested in the topic of professional tourism is broadly distributed among other stakeholders of the tourism sector.

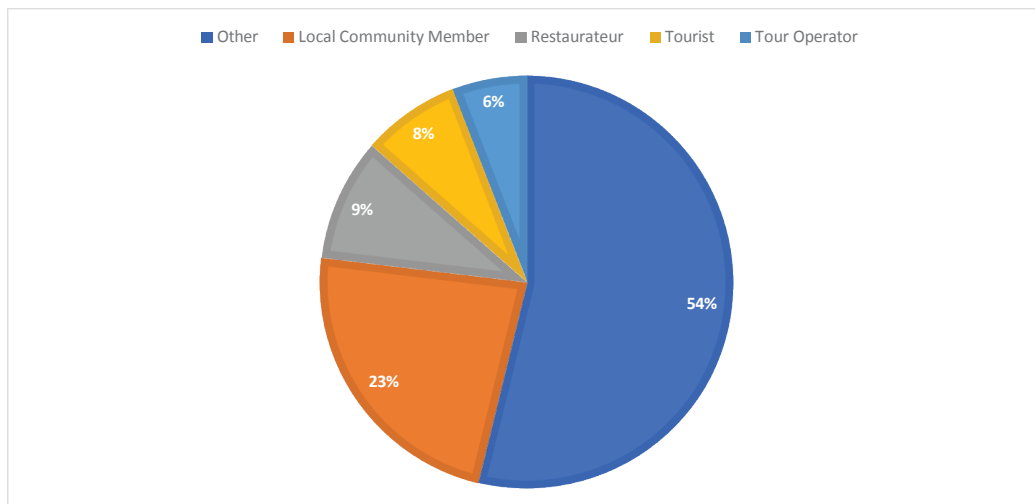


Figure 1: Occupation Distribution of Respondents

Awareness and Perceptions of Gastrotourism

There was a moderate to high awareness of gastrotourism that was reported by the respondents, and they gave a high value to sustainable practices, both as travelers and in their business.

Table 2: Awareness of Gastrotourism

Perception Variable (1-5 Scale)	Mean Score	Median	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Awareness of Gastrotourism	3.68	4.00	1.25	Moderate Awareness
Importance of Sustainable Tourism (Travel)	4.12	4.00	1.04	High Importance
Importance of Sustainable Tourism (Business)	4.06	4.00	1.03	High Importance
Awareness of Local Initiatives	3.46	3.00	1.18	Moderate Awareness

The awareness of gastrotourism had a mean of 3.68 and a median of 4.00, indicating that although people are aware of the concept, more public education can be done. More importantly, the importance of sustainable tourism was rated high with a mean of 4.12 and 4.06 during travel decisions and business operations, respectively (both with a median of 4.00). This means that there is a great moral and practical correspondence to sustainability values among the respondents. Awareness of local initiatives, however, was slightly behind at 3.46 (median 3.00), indicating a possible discrepancy between the wish towards sustainability and awareness of local activities. Figure 2 represents the distribution of these scores.

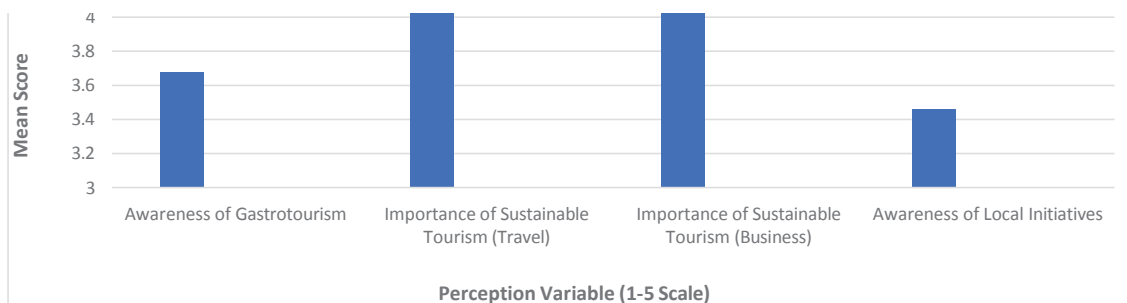


Figure 2: Awareness and Importance Ratings on a 1-5 Scale

Culinary Practices and Engagement

The trend shows that there is a tendency towards more authentic, traditional, and convenient cuisine, and much attention was devoted to the cultural background of the area.

Table 3: Culinary Practice Experience

Culinary Practice Experienced	Frequency (%)
Traditional Newari Cuisine	32.4%
Street Food Tours	29.3%
Home-Cooked Meals with Locals	22.3%
Culinary Workshops	14.9%

Table 2 and Figure 3 illustrate that the most popular culinary practices were street food tours (29.3%) and traditional Newari cuisine (32.4%). This shows how important it is to have a culture that is deeply ingrained in the local way of life. The fact that they shared home-cooked meals with locals (22.3%) further demonstrates the value of community-based relationships over commercial offerings.

Additionally, the survey discovered that 90.4% of the enterprises (restaurateurs and tour operators) claimed to provide traditional foods in their area, while 72.1% of the respondents participated in traditional culinary activities in their region. The culinary heritage is being preserved in a dynamic and vibrant way.

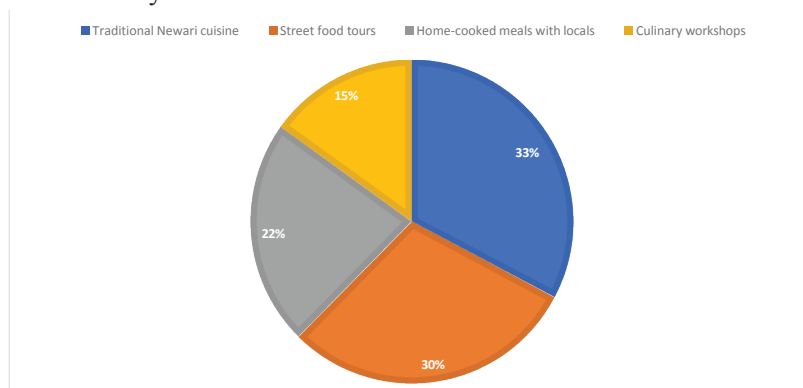


Figure 3: Culinary Practices Experienced by Respondents

Contribution to Sustainable Tourism

Respondents, when questioned on their contribution towards sustainable tourism, gave their highest consideration to those things that provide direct support to the local economy and the environment.

Table 4: Contribution to Sustainable Tourism

Contribution to Sustainable Tourism	Frequency (%)
Promoting local food and beverage	45.6%
Using eco-friendly practices	28.1%
Organizing community events	25.0%

Promoting local food and beverage (45.6%) was pointed out as the most important contribution, and it is directly related to the objectives of gastrotourism, as it helps local producers and preserves local food cultures. Stakeholders help the local community to remain economically stable as the focus on the consumption and promotion of products based on indigenous food and beverage helps in protecting the intangible cultural heritage. This was followed by adopting eco-friendly practices (28.1%) and holding community events (25.0%), which represent a comprehensive vision of sustainability that focuses on the environment and the community.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are very insightful on the level of awareness of gastrotourism and sustainable operations in the Kathmandu Valley and directly related to the research questions. The initial purpose was to determine three culinary practices in Kathmandu Valley. The findings clearly show that Traditional Newari Cuisine (32.4%), Street Food Tours (29.3%), and Home-Cooked Meals with Locals (22.3%) become the most common culinary activities that are in line with the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural culinary legacy of Nepal as suggested in the extant literature (Shrestha, 2025; Dangol, 2025; Tamang, 2016). These results prove that Kathmandu Valley provides excellent authentic cuisine experiences, which are strongly tied to the culture and traditions of the country.

As far as the second goal of determining the level of awareness about gastrotourism among the travel operators, the study indicates an average degree of awareness (mean score 3.68) and this indicates that there is room to enhance it. The result is in line with Nishihara et al. (2014) who observed that tourism operators in Nepal desired the intervention of a state level in developing awareness and capacity of gastrotourism. The moderate level of awareness shows that there is recognition of gastrotourism concept although more detailed education and training programs are still required to further increase awareness of tourism stakeholders. The high rating on importance of sustainable tourism (average scores of 4.12 in the case of the travel decisions and 4.06 in the case of business operations) is a clear indication that the stakeholder values are well aligned with the sustainability principles which is important in the development of sustainable gastrotourism.

The third goal was aimed at determining the level of knowledge on the importance of sustainable tourism among the travel operators. The results indicate that sustainable tourism is a valued concept among the respondents and is rated to be of great importance both in the travel and business context. The awareness of local initiatives (mean score 3.46) is, however, less, which means that there is no correspondence between the importance of sustainability recognition and the knowledge of local activities. This gap implies that there is need to enhance communication and market leader initiatives of local sustainable tourism to close the gap in awareness.

The descriptive demographic profile of the young sample (mean age 28.9 years) tells that the future of gastrotourism in Nepal is in the hands of younger, more innovative tourism experiences loving generation. The participation of young people in traditional activities in the culinary sector (72.1%) and in most of the enterprises (90.4%) that offer traditional food shows that things are heading in the right direction and that the local gastronomic heritage is safeguarded and promoted. This agrees with global trends, where young tourists are more in need of authentic and culturally immersive experiences (Long, 2019).

The demand of Traditional Newari Cuisine, as well as Street Food Tours, is associated with the authenticity of the experiences, their accessibility, and their presence in the local culture. The high involvement of locals in home-cooked meals (22.3%) highlights the relevance of community-based tourism strategies, which do not only offer genuine experiences to the tourists but also directly result in the local economic growth. This result will help to validate the literature on community-based culinary tourism, which also focuses on the importance of the human element, which in this case is the local community in the development of sustainable tourism (Dangol, 2025).

The focus of local food and beverage (45.6) as the major input to sustainable tourism proves that the stakeholders have a clear vision of the economic and cultural value of gastrotourism. This strategy works well on the principles of sustainable tourism that put emphasis on the development of the local economy, cultural conservation, and environmental conservation. The incorporation of environmentally friendly activities (28.1%) and community activities (25.0%) also suggest that there is the holistic view of sustainability that covers the environmental, economic, and social aspects.

The results indicate that although the sustainable gastrotourism development in the Kathmandu Valley has strong grounds, the opportunities to promote awareness, in particular, local projects are available. The findings of the study suggest that the stakeholders appreciate sustainability and are practicing traditional culinary which is a good starting point to the development of gastrotourism in the region. Yet, the average levels of awareness are an indicator that specific measures should be implemented to achieve the potential of sustainable gastrotourism in Nepal, such as awareness campaigns, capacity building programs, and improved coordination of stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The data collected and presented in the study offer a significantly broad picture of the gastrotourism market in the Kathmandu Valley, as it is focused largely on cultural authenticity and ethical aspects. The high response rate and consistency of data determine that the patterns that are observed are

reflective of the target demographic, even though there is a slight difference from the original aim of the sample size.

The discussion shows that gastrotourism development in the region is reliant on the capacity of integrating genuine culinary experiences along with sustainable management of the practices. The high participation of the younger generation in Traditional Newari food and touring of street food stands out, which implies that these food items are the major attractions in cultural tourism. The trend is also endorsed by the fact that the community is very engaged in the practice of traditional culinary arts, which supports the social sustainability of the sector.

Furthermore, this data has created a strong connection between respondent values and sustainable tourism goals, as the importance ratings of ethical travel and business operations are of high value. The fact that the major sustainability contribution is local food and drinks promotion proves the active interest in taking care of the local economy and preserving the local traditions.

Finally, the paper indicates the possibility of the Kathmandu Valley developing a sustainable tourism model with its rich culinary heritage. To realize this potential, policymakers and stakeholders in the industry are advised to fill the existing knowledge gap about local efforts. Through the coordination of culinary experiences that are initiated by the local community with strategic sustainability models, the region should easily have the capabilities of balancing its historical culture with the long-term objectives of tourism development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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