

TOURISM IN HIMACHAL HIMALAYAS: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Sport Tourism as an emerging segment of the world's largest and fastest growing industry has broadened its scope due to the growing interest for unusual holiday different from the conventional, which has been accompanied with wide variety and availability of travel products. With regard to adventure sport tourism, the basic spatial reference is a site, mainly influenced by destination technical factors. Himalayas being an ideal adventure sport destination, Billing in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Himalayas, due to its technical supportive strength, is recognised by Fédération Internationale de l'Aviation (FAI), who have also granted it a category - II status in international ranking for aero spots. The International hang-gliding Competition was held in the year 1984, since then a number of events have been organised, some of the international level competitions were held in the year 1992, 1995 and 1998. Since 2002, the pre-world cup have been successfully organised in a row. In light of growing demand and popularity of the site, an attempt through this study has been made to evaluate Billing as an aero sport tourism destination from the pilot's perspective. The conclusions suggest that presence of various aero sport technical factors is a prerequisite for an ideal aero sport tourist destination. The study offers strategies, ways and options to improve the existing support structure for developing aero sport tourism.

Key Words: Aero Sport, Tourism, Himalayas and Billing.

Introduction

As emerging segment of the world's largest and fastest growing industry, sport tourism is now among the world's most sought-after leisure experiences. Significantly it has become very important economic activity. Recent researches have indicated that sport's contribution to the GDP of industrialised nations is between one to two percent, while the contribution of tourism is between 4 to 6 percent (WTO, 2001). Sport tourism together is valued globally at \$118 billion (Fyal O., et al, 2008). While the global tourism and travel market is expected to grow by five per cent per annum up to 2020, the World Tourism Organisation forecast a ten per cent growth for sport tourism (www.unwto.org). However, till last two decades scholars, policy makers and governing bodies involved in both sports and tourism have largely ignored the travel dynamics generated by the synthesis of these two activities, with sport and tourism

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each being seen as incidental to each other, or as Glyptis (1991) suggested ‘as a separate sphere of activity’.

This is partly because sport tourism traditionally comprising two separate fields of study- sport and tourism-with limited integration and discussion between the two academic sub-disciplines and industry sectors. Therefore, there is a need to bring practitioners in both fields together, as there is a mutual advantage in such collaboration (Ritchie & Adair, 2002)

The economies of cities, regions and even countries around the world are increasingly reliant on sport tourism. In some countries, sport can account for as much as 25 percent of tourism receipts, while the indirect benefits are visible in the years to follow-on tourists. Sport tourism is now a tool to achieve many things – to make money, create thousands of new jobs, and even help in changing cultural perceptions as in case of Middle East and South Africa (Standeven, Joy & Knop H, www.humankinectics.com). As a result, all the key stakeholders at international, national and local levels have begun to take the significant interest in the subject of sport tourism so as to manage it in a way to maximise its full potential.

The WTO and International Olympic Committee, in a jointly organised international conference on sports and tourism in 2001 in Barcelona, Spain, have underlined significant synergetic relationship between sports and tourism, which was further recognised by leading international organisation for sport and tourism (Hinch & Higham, 2004). These attempts to articulate the relationship between the unique characteristics of tourism and sports are scholarly advances, which were further strengthen by a study “Analysing the relationship between sports and tourism : A case study of Island of Madera” (M Barros, 2007), which has pointed out “positive and statistically significant relationship between sports and tourism, where sports promote regional development and in doing so potential synergies of sports and tourism needs to be captured”.

In the past two decades the number of participating tourists and their interest in sport tourism has burgeoned with realisation that it is a growing segment of tourism industry. In fact, sport tourism involves combination of travel and sport activity. As per Standeven and Deknop, Sport tourism is all forms of active and passive involvement in sporting activity, participated in casually or in an organised way of non-commercial or business/commercial reasons that necessitate travel away from home and work locality (Standeven and Deknop, 1999). Gibson meanwhile defines sport tourism as “leisure-based travel that

takes individual temporary outside from their home communities to participate, to watch or to venerate attraction associated physical activities (Gibson, 1998). Weed and Bull have referred sport tourism as synergetic phenomenon of simple combination of sport and tourism, which has five main categories: sport participation, tourism with sports content, luxury sport tourism, sports event and sports training (Weed & Bull, 2004).

Notwithstanding, and irrespective of how one defines sport tourism, but a common and important characteristics from all of the above most acceptable definitions is that it is travel to take part, or watch sport, as also pointed out by Hinch & Higham, that in context of activity a spatial and temporal dimensions is a sport-based travel being influenced by travel motives and desires to pursue sport activities.

In sport tourism, the desire to pursue sport activities at a tourist destination is the main motive to travel. In such cases destination choice of tourist can be expected to be influenced by a complex set of motivations, both general tourist motivation as well as specific sport-related motivations. Gammon & Robinsone, and Fluker & Turner, have suggested that sport tourist motivations are not homogeneous and differs depending upon situational factors, type and nature of activity, destination suitability and features etc (Gammon & Robinsone, 1997; Fluker & Turner, 2000; and Gammon & Robinsone, 2004) .

With regard to adventure sport tourism, the basic spatial reference is a site or often called as a destination, defined essentially on the basis of physical, hydrographic and climatic characteristics which determine its ability to provide its support for a sport activity with particular requirements regarding access, style, level of competence, safety and so on (Bourdeau; Corneloup & Mao, 2002). Thus the purpose of the study is to evaluate one of the most popular site for aero sport tourism.

Aero Sport Tourism in Himachal Himalayas

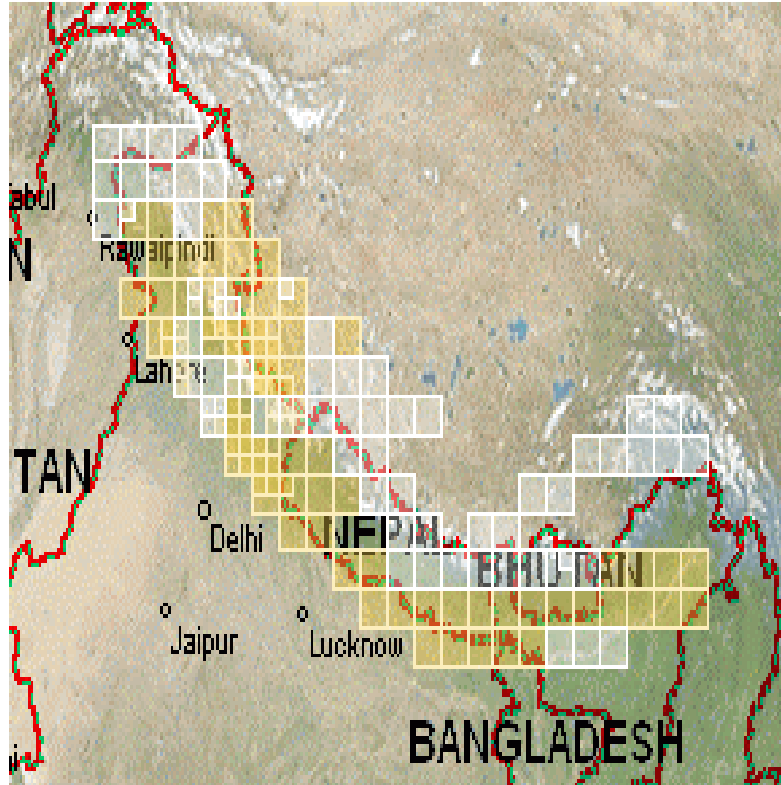
Adventure tourism is rapidly growing in popularity as tourist seek unusual holidays different from the conventional vacation. Adventure travel has now become one of the fastest-growing travel market segments and has broadened its scope in international travel and tourism. The variety of adventure travel products for a wide range of interest and abilities appear to be limitless (Sung, Morrison & O'Leary, 1997). In fact, the growth of adventure tourism has been accompanied by an enormous variety and availability of adventure activities. Mountaineering expeditions, trekking, bungee jumping, rafting and rock climbing are frequently cited examples of adventure tourism. Among the various

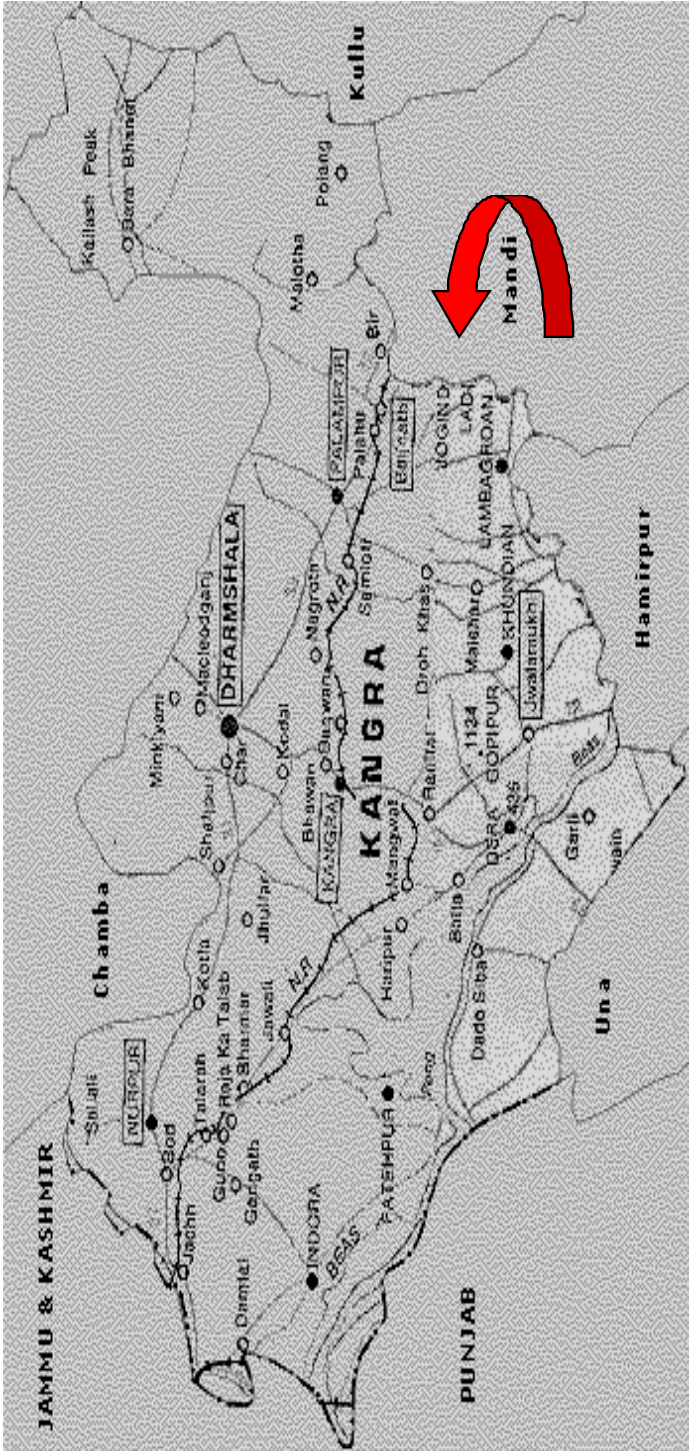
types, aero sport occupies a prominent position in adventure sports. Paragliding, Parasailing, Hanggliding, Ballooning are different types of aero sport. Of these, Paragliding and Hanggliding are the latest aero sport that takes the world by storm.

Be it Para gliding, Parasailing, Hanggliding or any other, Himalayas is undoubtedly, one of the most spectacular and impressive mountain range, that makes it an ultimate adventure sport destination. The Himalayas, World's highest mountain massif, for its sheer geographical diversity is richly endowed as an ideal destination that is stimulating demand for international tourism. Expanded over 2400 km from the north-southward from Tibetan Plateau to the Indus-Gangetic Plain, it covers countries of India, Nepal, China, Pakistan and Bhutan. The width of this mountain system varies from 180 to 350 Km with total area of 650,000 sq km and average height is about 6000 m, while the system include 11 peaks towering above 8000 m. These several thousand mts peaks, rivers in deep gorges, thick forests and acres of spire, green alpine meadows all form a part of immense spectrum and possibility for a wide range of adventure activities.

Among the various destinations in Himalayas, the climatic conditions and topography of Himachal Pradesh make it the best suitable destination for aero sport. Billing at an altitude 8500 fts in the Kangra valley, of Dhauladhar ranges of Himachal Himalayas, became the legend in the international paragliding circuit for hosting International and pre world-cup hang-gliding and paragliding competition. Since 1984, with first international hang-gliding competition, this site has been referred as one of the finest site by most of the international pilots like Bruce from New Zealand, Andy from England, Masleuiker M from Russia (www.templepilots.com).

Large number of foreign pilots, including some big names in the sport, have enjoyed flying off from Billing. In the year 2002, Norman Luach, an American Pilot ranked number 5 in the world ranking, who participated in the competition, have also mentioned Billing as one of the most favourable site for aero sport. Nikolai Shorokov, event manager Paragliding Himalayan Cup- 2006 and two times champion of the Paragliding Pre world cup has described it as legend in the international paragliding circuit and have ranked the site among the world's top 10 paragliding site (Hindustan Times, 19 Oct, 2006, Chandigarh). Following maps are showing Himalayas and Billing near Bir, in the Kangra valley in Himachal Pradesh.





Encouraged by the opinion of the experts, Himachal Pradesh have organised various national and international level hang-gliding and paragliding competitions every year with the support of Aero Club of India. The International hang-gliding Competition was held in the year 1984, since then a number of events have been organised. Some of the mega international level competitions were organised in the year 1992, 1995 and 1998. Since 2002, the pre-world cup have successfully been organised in a row.

Billing (2600 mH) is the takeoff site and Bir (2080 mH) is the landing site. The distance between the two cities is 14 km and it offer opportunities for high altitude and cross country flying for more than 200 km ([www.vacations.com/Himachal Pradesh](http://www.vacations.com/Himachal%20Pradesh)). The cross country distance flying from Billing to Manali or Billing to Dharamshala is 90 km. The flying is generally “ridge-hopping” i.e. getting lift from the ridges or cliff edges running down from the main spine of the range. “Ridge lifts” caused by wind hitting a hillside and “Thermals” are used by the glider to rise higher. Thermalling is an essential skill for flying and in Billing, thermals are found on regular basis running down to Bir. In Billing-Dharamshala route, there are 15 or so ridges (www.mcllo.com). This technical edge makes Billing as one of the best site for hang and paragliding in the world (IANS, 2008, www.thaindian.com/newsportal/worldnews). Billing due to its technical supportive strength, is recognised by Federation International de l’Aviation (FAI), who have also granted it a category – II status in international ranking (Saransh Sehgal/mcllo.com). It also has the distinction of organising first ever paragliding competition according to the rule of Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. In light of hosting various national and international hang-gliding and paragliding competitions, it becomes important to analyse and evaluate the site as per the global benchmarking from the perspectives of the pilots participating in these events.

On the basis of above, it can be assumed that Billing in Himachal Himalayas, is an ideal destination for aero sport, so on the basis of this hypothesis, an attempt through this paper has been made to conduct an in depth study regarding the evaluation of the site, as per the global standards. Moreover in aero sport tourism, pilots occupy a dual identity of sport tourists and competitors who attract other sport tourists as spectators. Therefore pilots being very important as tourists as well as for attracting spectators, study have taken pilots’ perspective for site evaluation. The study aims at following objectives :

1. To study the aero sport pilots’ perception of Billing as an aero sport tourist destination.
2. To evaluate gap in terms of importance of various aero sport tourism factors for an ideal site vis-à-vis their performance i.e. the extent to which selected site supports these factors.

3. To suggest ways and options to (reduce/bridge-up the gap, if found) improve the existing support structure for aero sport tourism.

The above objectives and literature generates the following hypothesis.

- H1** Billing being an ideal aero sport tourist destination, there exists no gap in terms of importance and performance of aero sport tourism factors.
- H2** Significant difference exists in the perceptions of aero sport pilots on the basis of their demographic profile i.e. Experience, Nationality and Gender.

Research Methodology

Sampling Design:

The target population for this study was aero sport Pilots, who participated in the various aero sport events hosted at Billing during the last three years. In the year 2006, International Paragliding Cup was organised from Oct 18 to Oct 25, 2006, in which a total of 57 pilots participated in this event. In the year 2007, due to climate and weather conditions as temperature not being sufficient high for thermal lifting, Paragliding Himalayan Cup as scheduled from Nov 14, 2007 was cancelled for the year 2007. In 2008, Himalayan Paragliding Pre world Cup was organised from Oct 16 to Oct 19, 2008, in which 82 pilots in all participated in the event.

A personal survey was conducted during these two events i.e. during the period Oct 18 to Oct 25, 2006, and Oct 16 to Oct 19, 2008. The survey was conducted at take off site, landing site and various accommodation units at Bir being used by the participants. The selected target sample comprised 139 pilots, who participated in the Himalayan Paragliding Pre-World Cup organised in the year 2006 (57 pilots) and 2008 (82 pilots). The survey was first pre-tested with an initial 20 pilots (2006) in order to find out scope for improvement needed in the research instrument. However, as no major improvement was required, rest of the data collection was done. Out of 139 respondents, 14 could not be contacted, 41 refused to participate, the remaining 84 (60.43%) agreed to participate.

Research Instrument:

The survey instrument was a self-administered, two part questionnaire. The questions in the first part of the survey asked about respondents' demographics i.e. age, gender, nationality and experience in aero sport. In second part survey measured respondents' perception of importance and performance of 10 items,

which were developed keeping in view various considerations and factors for aero sport tourism in the study area. The 5 item aero sport index included **Physical Factors**- landscape, altitude, climate and direction of wind etc.; **Technical Support**- Equipments, communication devices, instructions etc.; **Safety aspects** – Medical support, helicopters, quality of equipments etc.; **Communication support** – Efficiency, effectiveness, accuracy, clarity etc.; and **Take off and landing possibility**. The 5 **Tourism Factors** as undertaken in the study were **Touristic Appeal**; **Accessibility to the site**; **Transportation to the base camp**; **Accommodation and F&B facilities**; and **Other Public Utilities**. Respondent rated importance level of each attribute on five-point scale, where 1=Not important, 2=Least important, 3=Average, 4=Important, and 5= Very important. To evaluate the performance i.e. to what extent the destination supports aero sport tourism factors, respondents used 5 point scale (1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, and 5=Very good). Moreover in aero sport tourism, pilots occupy a dual identity of sport tourists and competitors who attract other sport tourists as spectators. Therefore pilots being very important as tourist as well as for attracting spectators, study have taken pilots' perspective for site evaluation.

Apart from structured questionnaire, open-ended questions were also asked to gain qualitative understanding and factors associated with aero sport tourism. These comprises depth techniques through detailed free exchange with the focus group of pilots having more than 10 years of experience for developing and improvising aero sport tourism in the study area.

Methods:

The study adopted importance – performance analysis (IPA) to assess the aero sport pilots' perception for evaluating Billing as a aero sport tourist destination and finding the gap between the importance and performance therein. The study made use of IPA, since the pioneering work of IPA being done by Martilla & James (1977), its application has extended to a diverse context of tourism such service quality (Hudson & Shepard, 1998; Weber, 2000), ski resort (Uysal *et al*, 1991), escorted tours (Duke & Persia, 1996), hotels (Martin, 1995), satisfaction of Campsites (Wallace, O'Leary, Dottavio & Perine, 1985), tourism destination (GO & Zhang, 1997 and Huan, Beaman; & Shalley, 2002). While deemed to be considered as a useful tool, all the researchers, who have applied IPA have underlined its significance in terms of its capability to provide decision making with useful information. Therefore, IPA has been applied in the present study to assess aero sport pilots' perception for evaluating Billing as a aero sport tourist destination and also finding the gap between importance vis-à-vis performance in terms of various aero sport tourism factors being supported by Billing as a tourist destination. The 't' is used as a test of significance for the significant scores of aero sport pilots' perception on the basis of demographic groups.

Discussions And Findings

The study is limited to the aero sport pilots who participated in two mega events organised during the last three years i.e. International Paragliding Cup 2006 and Himalayan Paragliding Pre world Cup in the year 2008. Table 1 shows the distribution pattern of the respondents.

Table 1 - Demographics of the respondents

Description	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
a) Gender		
i) Male	65	77.38
ii) Female	19	22.62
b) Age (years)		
i) Less than 20	0	0
ii) 20-30	22	26.19
iii) 30-40	31	36.90
iv) 40-50	27	32.14
v) 50-60	3	03.57
vi) 60+	1	01.19
d) Nationality		
i) Indian	16	19.05
ii) Foreigner	68	80.95
f) Experience (years)		
i) 1-3	21	25.00
ii) 4-6	35	44.67
iii) 7-9	11	13.09
iv) 10-12	12	14.29
v) 13-15	3	03.57
v) More than 15	2	02.38

Out of 84 respondents, majority of the respondents i.e. 65 accounting for 77.38% are males in comparison to females, who are 19 (22.62%). It may be due to the fact, that these adventure activities attract more males than their counterpart, in both the two events as undertaken in the study, there are approximate 30 female pilots, who have participated. Respondents' age ranged from 24 years (Dutch) to 65 years (Indian Instructor) with mean of the participants as 37.03 years. Majority of the participants were from 31 to 50 years, out of six interval categories of age, 31(36.90%) were from 30-40 years, 27(32.14%) from 40-50 years, 22(26.19%) from 20-30. Comparatively, there was less participation from the age group of more than 50 years having 3(3.57%) from 50-60 years and 1 from 60+ years, there was no representation from less than 20 years of age category. Table 1 indicates that more foreigners i.e. 68(80.95%) are covered in the survey than Indians i.e. 16 (19.05%), but it may be due to the fact that these events attract more international pilots. In the year 2006, out of 57, 44 were foreigners and in 2008, approximately 50 out of 82 represented foreign countries. Taking experience into account, majority of the respondents have the experience of 1 to 12 years, with 35 (44.67%) having an experience of 4-6 years, 21 (25%) with 1-3 years, 12 (14.29%) with 10-12 years and 11 (13.09%) with 7-9 years. Comparatively less number of participants were highly experienced with more than 12 years with 3 (3.57%) having experience of 13-15 years and 2 (2.38%) for more than 15 years. An average experience of the respondents is calculated to be 6.08 years, which is sufficient enough for evaluating any aero sport tourist destination.

H1: Billing being an ideal aero sport tourist destination, there exists no gap in terms of importance and performance of aero sport tourism factors.

Assessment of Billing as an aero sport tourist destination: A gap analysis
Ten aero sport tourism factors comprising, 5 aero sport factors and 5 tourism factors were developed and respondents were asked for their opinion regarding the importance of these factors for any ideal site as per international standards for aero sport and performance in terms of presence of these factors at the selected site. The various aero sport used in the study are Physical Factors (ASF1), Technical Support (ASF2), Safety aspects(ASF3), Communication support (ASF4), Take off and landing possibility (ASF5). And Tourism factors included Touristic Appeal (TF1), Accessibility to the site (TF2), Transportation to the base camp (TF3), Accommodation F&B facilities (TF4) and Other Public Utilities (TF5).

Table 1 depicts the opinion of the respondents towards the importance vis-à-vis performance of Billing on selected 10 aero sport tourism factors. In terms of

the importance, the table shows that the mean values of all the aero sport factors as undertaken in the study is found to be above 4, which indicates that all the aero sport factors as identified in the study are almost very important and are expected to be present in an ideal aero sport site. The level of importance was found highest for Physical factors (ASF1) with mean value of 4.79 and lowest about communication support-ASF-4 (4.24).

For the 5 tourism factors, as undertaken in the study, the mean value of the importance was found above mid value ($d=3$), which is still on the positive side and it indicates that these factors are also important and are expected from an ideal tourism site. Three tourism factors have higher level of importance with mean value above 4 i.e. Accessibility to the site (TF2, mean=4.58), Transportation to the base camp (TF3,4.45) and accommodation and F&B facilities (TF4,4.5), whereas the other tourism factors with mean value between 3 to 4 are touristic appeal (TF1,3.75) and Other public utilities (TF5,3.69). It can be interpreted from the data that pilots are more inclined towards aero sport factors as the average of mean value of aero sport factors is found to be more than tourism factors. May be it is due to the fact that aero sport is the main motive of travel, however the three of the tourism factors (Transport, accessibility and accommodation and F&B) being highly supplementing aero sport tourism have also found to be more important.

The extent to which, Billing as a site supports these aero sport factors (ASF) is evaluated in terms of performance as well. For aero sport factors, performance was found highest about physical factors (ASF1, mean = 4.4) and lowest about safety aspects (ASF3,3.69). Only two aero sport factors have mean value above four i.e. physical factors and take off and landing possibilities (ASF5, 4.15), while other three variables performance between 3 to 4 were technical support (ASF2, 3.8), Communication support (ASF4, 3.74) and safety aspects(ASF3,3.69).

In terms of tourism factors, performance of accessibility to the site was found highest (4.24) while other public utility was lowest (3.58) The performance of two tourism factors was found above 4 i.e. accessibility to the site (4.24) and transportation to the base camp (4.14); while other three factors between 3 to 4 are touristic appeal (3.96), accommodation and F&B facilities (3.87) and other public utilities (3.58). Interestingly, all the performance value of aero sport and tourism factors have come out to be above the mid value ($d=3$) indicating that all the factors are present in the site.

Table 2. - Assessment of Billing as a Aero sport tourist destination : A gap analysis

A	Aero Sport factors	Performance Mean X1	Importance Mean X2	Aero sport Tourism Gap X1-X2
ASF1	Physical Factors - landscape, altitude, climate and direction of wind etc.	4.4	4.79	-0.39 **
ASF2	Technical Support - Equipments, communication devices, instructions etc.	3.8	4.26	-0.46 **
ASF3	Safety aspects – Medical support, helicopters, quality of equipments etc.	3.69	4.54	-0.85**
ASF4	Communication support – Efficiency, effectiveness, accuracy, clarity etc	3.74	4.24	-0.50**
ASF5	Take off and landing possibility	4.15	4.71	-0.56**
B	Tourism factors			
TF1	Touristic Appeal	3.96	3.75	+0.21*
TF2	Accessibility to the site	4.24	4.58	-0.34 *
TF3	Transportation to the			
	base camp	4.14	4.45	-0.31 *
TF4	Accommodation F&B			
	facilities	3.87	4.05	-0.18 *
TF5	Other Public Utilities	3.58	3.69	-0.11 *

Note: For importance; 1=Not important, 2=Least important, 3=Average, 4=important and 5= very important

For Performance; 1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, and 5=very good.

* Moderate gap = below 0.35

** Serious gap = above 0.35

The study has identified gap on the basis of difference between means of performance and importance as also by Wade and Eagles, 2003; Kitcharoen, 2004; Ainin and Hisham, 2008.

Further all the mean scores of both performance and importance were plotted as coordinates on importance –Performance matrix as depicted in figure II. All the means were above 3 this shows that both importance and performance of the site are satisfactory. Therefore, site qualifies for further maintained (cf. Bacon, 2003; Martilla and James, 1977).

All the gap value has been found to be negative except for touristic appeal (+0.21), which indicates that Billing as a site possesses the touristic appeal more than desired or as expected from an ideal site. Ironically, the gap value of all other aero sport tourism factors is found negative that shows that in relation to the importance or expectations, Billing as a site, possesses less features, giving enough scope for improvement. Highest gap was found in safety aspects (-0.85) and the lowest gap (-0.11) was in other public utilities. Further, the researcher has divided the identified gap values into two categories, with an average gap value of 0.35(Total Gap Value divided by total number of factors), moderate gap(below 0.35) and serious gap(above 0.35). Moderate gap has been found in all the five tourism factors with the gap value between 0.21 to -0.34. Whereas all the five aero sport factors were found to have serious gap. In fact, the research outcome on the basis of categorisation of the identified gap values resembles with the various research findings that the major influencing factor for destination success in sport tourism is the destination's ability to provide support for technical features associated with the sport such as level of competence, safety and other technical and communication support etc. The identified gap suggests serious efforts on part of all stakeholders with special emphasis on public-private strategic partnership. It is therefore recommended that all the organisations associated directly or ancillary both in government and private sector such as government health department, Himachal Road Transport Corporations, Public Works Department, Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporations, Tourism Department, Private Transport agencies, Travel Agencies and tour operators, Hotel Industry, Army and Para-Military Organisations for helicopter and rescue, medical evacuations and emergency services etc, need to collaborate and develop strong partnership and liaison, so as to ensure better aero sport tourism support structures and service delivery.

Importance Performance Analysis

As the gap between importance and performance has been identified, therefore to gain better understanding, IPA has been applied in the present study to plot aero sport tourism factors (ASTF) into two-dimensional matrix, where all point ASTF fall in one of the four quadrants (figure I), where each of the quadrant has following interpretations:

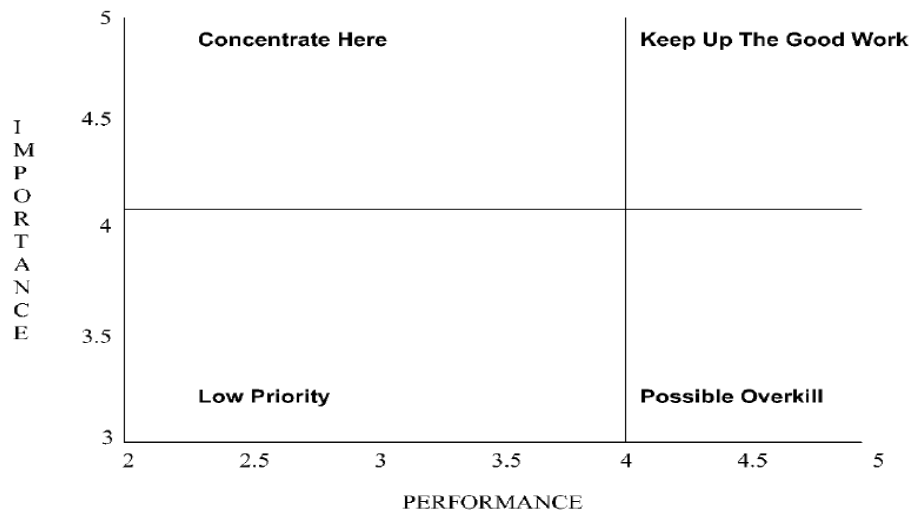


Fig. 1

Quadrant I “Keep up the good work” – The upper right-hand quadrant includes factors which are viewed as important and gave high marks on performance i.e. both meet or exceed the standards.

Quadrant II “Concentrate here” – The upper left-hand side quadrant, contain factors, which are important, however received low priority with reference to performance, therefore requires great attention.

Quadrant III “Low priority” – The lower left-hand side quadrant received low on both importance and performance, therefore require little or no attention.

Quadrant IV “Possible overkill” – Final, lower right-hand quadrant has factors with low importance and high performance, hence possible overkill on the performance as are not important.

IPA on Billing as Aero Sport Tourist Destination

Importance of considering views of various constituencies have been well documented, Absher 1986; Allen and Gibson 1986; Wicks and Crompton, 1987. Each of these studies have plotted various research attributes in the relative quadrants identified by importance performance grid due to the difference between importance and performance between the perception of various constituencies group (employees, participants, elected officers, volunteers, customers, students and visitors etc).

Since the Billing as a aero sport tourist destination has been ranked one of the best site in the world, therefore, gridlines were placed at values of 4.0 to evaluate on the standards of ‘extremely important’ and ‘excellent’ performance.

Some debate exists in the literature as to whether mean or median values are better for the importance and performance ratings (Burns, 1988). Mean values were chosen for this study, since they are easily derived. In addition, the study followed the example of Hudson and Shepherd (1998) that did not 'force' variables into all quadrants. Figure II illustrates importance performance grid results for non-segmented sample of aero sport tourists (n=84). Based on this homogeneous group, four aero sport tourism factors Physical Factors (ASF1), Take off and landing possibility (ASF5), Accessibility to the site (TF2), and Transportation to the base camp (TF3), fall in the first quadrant (Keep up the good work). Areas where Himachal Tourism, Government and other stakeholders need to concentrate on improving respondents experience include - Technical Support (ASF2), Safety aspects (ASF3), Communication support (ASF4).

Infact, plotting of the variables in the quadrants helps to identify the areas for improvement and actions for minimizing the gap between importance and performance.

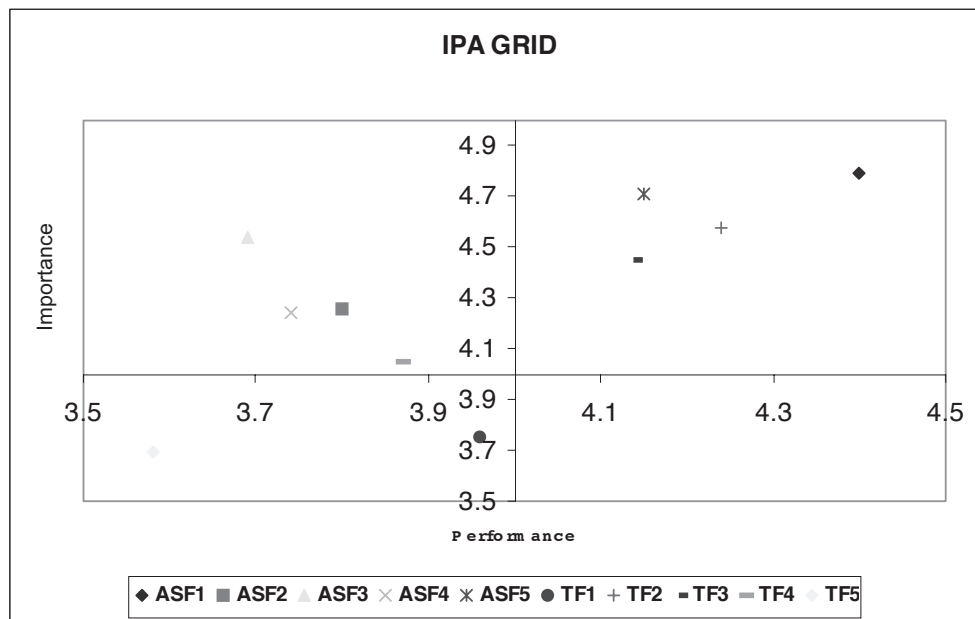


Fig. 2

Note : ASF1=Physical Factors, ASF2=Technical Support, ASF3= Safety aspects, ASF4=Communication support, ASF5=Take off & landing possibility
 TF1=Touristic Appeal, TF2=Accessibility to the site
 TF3=Transportation to the base camp, TF4= Accommodation F&B facilities,
 TF5= Other Public Utilities

Figure 2 also suggests that destination has more issues well handled than address to. Other factors i.e. TF1, TF4 and TF5 are on low priority hence require less/no attention. Therefore, on the basis of the above, it can be interpreted that H1 can be rejected.

H2: Significant difference exists for the perceptions of aero sport tourists in terms of demographic profile i.e. Experience, Nationality and Gender.

In order to test second hypothesis, t-test has been used as a test of significance. Table III depicts Significant Different Scores of the presence (Performance) of Aero sport at Billing on the basis of demographic variables taken in the study namely gender, nationality and experience. On the basis of gender, the difference came on 4 factors i.e. physical factors, Touristic appeal, accessibility to the site and transportation to the base camp. Interestingly males in all these four factors found to have better performance than their female counterparts. For physical factors, males scored 4.41 whereas females scored 3.95 (t-test, $p < 0.05$); for Touristic appeal males (4.10) and females (3.52) with $p < 0.01$; for accessibility males mean=4.38 and females mean=3.74 with $p < 0.01$; and for fourth variable i.e. transportation, males(4.28) while females(3.68) with $p < 0.01$.

Taking into consideration, the nationality and dividing it into two groups i.e. Indians and foreigners; six factors comprising all five aero sport factors and one tourism factor are found significantly different. Among these six factors, Indian pilots opined two factors performing better i.e. for Physical factors, (Indians mean=4.94, while foreigners mean=4.28 with $p < 0.01$); and for Touristic appeal (Indians = 4.38, Foreigners=3.87 having $p < 0.05$). The remaining four aero sport factors for which foreign pilots opinion was found more present at Billing includes Technical Factors (Foreign=3.93 & Indians=3.25; $p < 0.01$), Safety Aspects (Foreign=3.93 & Indians=2.69; $p < 0.01$), Communication Support (Foreign=3.88 & Indians=3.15; $p < 0.01$); and Take off and Landing Possibilities (Foreign=4.24 & Indians=3.81; $p < 0.01$).

For testing hypothesis in terms of experience, two groups were made i.e. above the average experience and below the average experience (6.08 years). For experience, four factors were found significantly different i.e. Physical factors for which mean value of below average was 4.95 and above average was 4.22 with $p < 0.01$; for safety aspects (below average 3.10, above average 3.89 & $p < 0.01$); Touristic appeal (Below average-4.38, above average-3.82; $p < 0.01$); and accommodation and F&B facilities where mean value of below average was 3.86 in comparison to 3.49 for above average experience with $p < 0.05$.

Note :1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, and 5=very good
* $p \leq 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$

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So, on the basis of the above it can be concluded that out of total ten factors, nine factors were found significantly different either at one percent or at five percent on the basis of gender, nationality or experience, hence H2 is accepted which is "Significant difference exists for the perceptions of aero sport tourists in terms of demographic profile *i.e.* Experience, Nationality and Gender".

Conclusions and Suggestions

The conceptual relationship between sports and tourism has validity in terms of illustrating the importance of aero sport and tourism factors in context of Billing as an aero sport tourist destination. In terms of the importance mean values of all the aero sport factors as undertaken in the study is found to be above 4, which indicates that all the aero sport factors as identified in the study are almost very important and are expected to be present in an ideal aero sport site. For the 5 tourism factors, as undertaken in the study, the mean value of the importance was found above mid value ($d=3$), which is still on the positive side and it indicates that these factors are also important and are expected from an ideal tourism site. Interestingly, all the performance value of aero sport and tourism factors have come out to be above the mid value ($d=3$) indicating that all the factors are present in the site.

The importance and performance analysis has helped the researcher to get insight into the importance/expectation as well as performance/experience level of the pilots for the site. Aero sport tourism gap has also been calculated on the basis of the difference between mean of the performance and importance. All the gap value has been found to be negative except for touristic appeal (+0.21), which indicates that Billing as a site possesses the touristic appeal is more than desired or as expected from an ideal site. Ironically, the gap value of all other aero sport tourism factors is found negative that shows that in comparison to the importance or expectations, Billing as a site, possesses less features giving enough scope for improvement.

All the factors have proved to be very important for planning and development of Billing as well as other aero sport tourist sites. Further analysis of supply side in terms of performance and gap analysis can help the planners, policy makers to develop strategic options for bridging up the gaps. The construction of gap values into four quadrants of IP grid, further gives clarity to understand the areas that needs concentration.

Importance performance grid results shows that four aero sport tourism factors Physical Factors (ASF1), Take off and landing possibility (ASF5), Accessibility to the site (TF2), and Transportation to the base camp (TF3), fall in the first quadrant (Keep up the good work). Areas that needs mote serious attention

on improving respondents experience include - Technical Support (ASF2), Safety aspects (ASF3), Communication support (ASF4). Other factors, TF1, TF4 and TF5 are on low priority hence requiring less/no attention. The study has also found nine out of total ten aero sport tourism factors significantly different on the basis of demographics.

To bridge-up the aero sport tourism gap as identified in the study, there are some of the pertinent suggestions which emerged in the open ended questions having a detailed free exchange with the focus group of pilots having more than 10 years of experience, these are :

1. **Public-Private Partnership:** Effective strategic partnership among all public and private organisations, which are associated with aero sport tourism, so as to understand each individual's and joint responsibility, thereby ensuring each contribution with emphasis on continual improvisation on the various controllable factors such as better communication support, quality accommodation and F&B facilities, transportation and other public utilities ensuring better aero sport tourism support structures and service delivery.
2. **Information Networks:** An effective and strong technological enabled information network\ is required for the continuous transformation of accurate, timely and updated information among all the stakeholders.
3. **Active Industry Involvement:** Active industry involvement is required that should focus on better liaisoning among the various tourism organisations for the marketing and development of site, product development and for further ensuring qualitative services.
4. **Safety Aspects:** Government should adopt a policy based framework primarily on two approaches, the first approach should focus on crisis management in terms of pro-active medical support, technical expertise for medical evacuation and rescue team involving army personnel, helicopters, quality equipments, communication devices, experienced instructors etc. The second approach should emphasize on getting participating pilots and aero sport tourists, acquainted with technical features of the site such as directions of the wind, nature and characteristics of thermal current, landscape and altitude etc. This can be attained through publication of the literature in different languages and through its distribution at right place and time.
5. **Technical Expertise:** In the year 2006, Government took help of technical expertise of Nikolai Shorokov, World renowned Russian Pilot and two times champion of the Paragliding Pre world cup, who was appointed as an event manager for Paragliding Himalayan Cup- 2006, which proved as a mega success. It is recommended that government should take more of such initiatives and explore other such expertise

both at international as well as local levels, as locals better understand destinations topography, which is most important aspect in crisis management.

6. **Continuous Evaluation:** There must be a provision of continuous system for evaluation of tourist's and aero sport pilot's expectations vis-à-vis their satisfaction so as to develop necessary strategic interventions to meet and exceed aero sport tourist's expectations.
7. **Community Participation:** Since the destination is passing through growth and development stage of a product life cycle, where most of the researches suggest emphasis on societal aspect especially with reference to developing economies, it is therefore suggested that community participation be encouraged in terms of organising events, employability, income distribution with special thrust on professional and entrepreneurship development.
8. **Sustainable Tourism Development:** Keeping in view the fragile ecological characteristic of the destination, it is suggested that sustainable tourism development strategies be planned and implemented. However, apart from environmental aspect, it should also address cultural and social sustainability.

Suggestions for future Research:

Following suggestions are recommended for future studies:

1. The present study identifies ten aero sport tourism attributes and has used IPA to compare their perceived importance and performance. The instrument developed can contribute to the existing literature for assessment of aero sport tourism sites.
2. A separate study may be made to develop the strategic options to bridge-up the aero sport tourism gap as identified in the study.
3. Perceptions of the locals can also be included in the study as their behaviour and attitude also affects building tourists' perception.
4. A separate study can be conducted to assess the level of coordination among the various organisations and their impact on building tourists' perception.
5. Controlling all the variables and taking all the precautions to maximise the destination's performance to determine the level of change of perception.
6. An attempt can also be made to study the relationship between destination features and destination image on travel decisions.
7. Relationship between sports and tourism can also be separately studied in context of aero sport & tourism.
8. Comparative study can be made to various destinations having similar situations in the Himalayas or between the Himalayas and Alps.

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