

Sustainable Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan

Interview with Mr Arif Aslam Khan, Chairman, Shangrila Resort, Skardu

Synopsis

This interview features Dr Jawad Syed in conversation with Mr Arif Aslam Khan, Chairman of Shangrila Resort, Skardu, on the challenges and opportunities of sustainable tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan. The discussion argues that environmental degradation is driven not only by tourists but also by local stakeholders, including communities, hotel owners, government agencies, transport providers, and religious leaders. Mr Khan highlights issues such as unplanned construction, weak regulation, poor waste management, and short-term commercial interests, while proposing practical solutions including stronger governance, community awareness, architectural controls, fixed tourism standards, and university engagement. The interview emphasises collective responsibility for preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2ncSICCBXE>

Video duration: 16 minutes

Intended Learning Objectives (ILOs)

By the end of this session (video review and discussion), participants should be able to:

- Analyse the responsibilities of different stakeholders in promoting sustainable tourism.
- Evaluate the governance and environmental challenges facing tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Assess the trade-offs between economic development and environmental conservation.
- Recommend practical strategies for responsible and sustainable tourism involving government, businesses, communities, universities, and civil society.

Indicative Discussion Questions

1. Who bears the greatest responsibility for sustainable tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan: tourists, local communities, businesses, or government? Why?
2. How can Gilgit-Baltistan balance tourism-led economic development with the protection of its natural environment and cultural heritage?
3. Should stricter controls be introduced on hotel construction and land use around lakes, valleys, and mountain destinations? Why or why not?
4. What role should local communities, religious leaders, universities, and tourism associations play in promoting responsible tourism?

5. What lessons can other tourism destinations learn from the opportunities and challenges discussed in this interview?
6. If you were advising the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan, what would be your top three policy recommendations for sustainable tourism?

(English Translation of the Interview Transcript)

Dr Jawad Syed (Professor, LUMS):

Mr Arif, based on your experience, do you think practical measures can be taken by the local community, tourists, tour associations, and hotel owners to protect the natural beauty of the Gilgit Baltistan region, its environment, and the interests of the local community? Is it possible to safeguard all of these together?

Arif Aslam Khan:

From what I have seen, the administration has a very important role to play.

The Deputy Commissioner (DC) is the main authority in every district. Under the DC are various government departments, including food inspectors and many other agencies. New government departments have also recently been established in Gilgit-Baltistan to oversee hotel construction, waste management, and related matters.

However, unfortunately, very little is actually being implemented. Officials come here from other parts of the country, serve for two years, and then leave. Their mindset is not aligned with tourism. They have never been trained in how tourism can be improved or managed properly. They simply come to complete their tenure, enjoy the beautiful surroundings themselves, and then leave.

Meanwhile, they often create unnecessary difficulties for hotel owners through inspections and other administrative matters. The local community also lacks the level of awareness that should exist. When tourist numbers suddenly increased, people also became increasingly attracted by the opportunity to make money quickly. Many people from the villages are not well educated. The younger generation began thinking, "How can we also make money from tourism?"

Let me give you an example. I suggested this to the Inspector General of Police and the Deputy Inspector General. There should be tourist traffic police within the city. Whenever they stop a tourist vehicle, they should politely greet the visitors: "Assalamu Alaikum. How are you? Where are you going today?" Then they should ask: "How much are you paying for this journey?" If the tourists reply that they are paying Rs. 400, the officer should simply note down the vehicle number and allow them to continue after confirming that the fare is reasonable.

There should be fixed rates for travel to different destinations. At present, no such system exists. Visitors arrive from Karachi, Lahore, and many other cities. They have no idea what the normal fares should be. Some drivers charge double simply because the tourists do not know the local rates. Whoever gets the opportunity takes advantage of the situation. I have been strongly advocating that this issue be addressed. The first step should be to establish fixed, officially declared transport fares.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Absolutely. The fares should be fixed and publicly displayed.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Exactly. The rates should be displayed prominently at the airport.

I have repeatedly raised this issue with the Pakistan Airports Authority because a new airport building is under construction. All transport fares and destination information should be displayed there.

That should be the first step toward bringing some control to the system. Another major problem is that an excessive number of guest houses have now been built.

There is virtually no monitoring of cleanliness. Drainage systems are inadequate or nonexistent. Food inspectors come, have a meal, and leave without addressing the actual problems. These are the issues I have been trying to raise.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Everyone considers it their right to earn a livelihood, and rightly so—especially our local communities, who are our own brothers and sisters.

Our concern is whether it is possible to meet their economic needs while discouraging practices that damage the environment. For example, many people are constructing concrete hotels and guesthouses simply to make quick money. As I was mentioning earlier, Skardu today is no longer the same beautiful town that it was twenty or thirty years ago. Unfortunately, it is gradually becoming visually unattractive because of unplanned construction which does not blend with the natural beauty of this area. Multi-storey hotels are appearing everywhere without any planning or coordination.

What can be done about this? How can the local community continue to improve its economic condition while also understanding that money can be earned in better and more sustainable ways?

Arif Aslam Khan:

The difficulty is that our religious scholars also have an important role to play. We try to engage with them because they have considerable influence in the community. People listen to them. For example, Sheikh Jafri Sahib [at the local central mosque in Skardu] is someone I know well. I regularly offer him suggestions and encourage him. Sometimes he addresses these issues in his sermons.

However, there are still a few people who oppose such development altogether. That is a separate matter. It is part of their own politics. Even the administration often finds it difficult to deal with such situations. In my view, the religious leadership has a much greater role to play. Their role is extremely important.

Dr Jawad Syed:

So, Mr Arif, if I have understood you correctly, what you are saying is that if respected religious scholars such as Sheikh Jafri Sahib, and other senior scholars whom people listen to, were to speak a few words during Friday sermons or religious gatherings, encouraging people to pursue development while ensuring that their lakes, mountains, and natural beauty are protected, it could have a significant impact.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Yes, absolutely. You have understood me correctly. That is exactly what I have been working on. I have already started meeting with the religious scholars and explaining these issues to them. Almost every day, one religious gathering or another takes place among the senior scholars here. People can certainly be educated through those gatherings.

As you know, we regularly participate in community and religious activities by sending *tabarruk* and *niyaz*. That is our responsibility as members of this community. But no one has yet started educating people about environmental protection and responsible tourism.

This has to begin. It is also possible that the religious scholars themselves may need some orientation on these issues because this is not their area of expertise. Their field is entirely different. Their attention naturally focuses on religious matters, especially during Muharram gatherings. However, if these issues are explained to them respectfully, they can certainly understand that protecting this region is also a responsibility in which the religious institutions can play an important role.

Dr Jawad Syed:

What about the tourism-related government departments? Are they actively working on these issues, or are they simply sitting back?

Arif Aslam Khan:

Only recently—about six months ago, I think—new departments were established. Their purpose is to regulate hotel construction. They introduced a system whereby no building can be constructed without obtaining permission and a No Objection Certificate (NOC). They have started checking building plans and approving designs. Unfortunately, many Deputy Commissioners who come here simply fill their pockets and leave.

Dr Jawad Syed:

That is often the problem. Whenever bureaucratic requirements such as NOCs increase, the unofficial costs [including bribery] also increase.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Exactly. What we really need is an honest institution that firmly says: "No building may be constructed here unless it complies with our rules and regulations."

Some areas should not permit construction at all. There are many serious issues. Waste collection is a major problem. Drainage is another problem. There are so many issues that once you begin addressing them, it seems endless.

I continue trying because I care. Unfortunately, very few others seem genuinely interested. Many people entering the hotel business have no experience whatsoever.

They simply think: "If I build ten rooms and charge Rs. 3,000 per night, I will recover my investment." That is the extent of their planning.

Dr Jawad Syed:

The local people naturally aspire to improve their quality of life. Someone says, "I also want to own a vehicle. I also want a refrigerator. I also want a television."

Many of them have come from remote mountain villages where they have lived under very difficult conditions. Economic progress is their right, and rightly so. The question is: What can the government, the religious leadership, tourism associations, and people like yourself do to guide them? How can we show them that they can certainly earn money—but not at the cost of destroying the local environment?

Economic development should remain aligned with the protection of the region. For example, I would like to say something on camera about Shangrila Resort.

People may have different views regarding the local community and Shangrila's role.

However, my personal observation is that because Shangrila exists, this particular area, the lake, and its surroundings have remained protected. If someone asked me to compare Lower Kachura Lake with Saif-ul-Malook, I would say that, unfortunately, Saif-ul-Malook has been badly damaged by both tourists and local activities. In contrast, this lake has remained protected.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Absolutely. In fact, we want even stronger protection. We do not want any further construction around this lake. I regularly meet senior Army officials regarding this matter.

Section 144 has repeatedly been imposed for two months at a time to stop illegal construction, and then renewed whenever necessary. Small shops are acceptable.

But we strongly oppose new hotels—especially high-rise buildings. They simply do not blend with the character of this area. Buildings should be designed in harmony with the local environment.

For example, the pagoda-style architecture you see here blends reasonably well with the landscape and even reflects influences from Central Asian architecture.

However, the huge concrete structures now being built are completely out of character. They look very unattractive. This year I have been pushing the administration much more directly. I tell them: "If you do not know how to regulate tourism properly, then learn. Bring proper controls into place."

Because unless effective controls are introduced, the situation will continue to deteriorate.

Dr Jawad Syed:

As faculty members at LUMS, together with colleagues at Karakoram International University and the University of Baltistan, what small contribution can we make? In your opinion, what practical role could universities play in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism? I am not referring only to educating tourists. I also mean creating awareness within the local community. Is there something meaningful that we can do?

Arif Aslam Khan:

Yes. You and your colleagues could come here and deliver lectures. Professors who specialise in tourism and related subjects could visit the universities here and explain these issues to students.

At least the students studying at university would understand. People outside the universities are much more difficult to reach because they simply do not have this awareness. I personally visit guest houses myself and advise their owners: "Maintain cleanliness."

"Why is there garbage lying here?" "Why isn't the waste being collected?"

Sadly, Fairy Meadows—a place that was once among the most beautiful in Pakistan—has already been badly damaged. Its natural views have been ruined. Trees are being cut down. It genuinely pains us. It hurts because this is our country. This beauty is a trust from Almighty Allah, and it is our responsibility to protect it.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Absolutely. There are very few places in the world as beautiful as this. I have travelled to sixty or seventy countries, and I can honestly say that the beauty Allah has bestowed upon this region is truly exceptional. Protecting it is our collective responsibility.

There is one more thing I would like to mention. In October, one of my colleagues and I will be coming here again. We are planning to organize a university-level programme in Skardu.

If you think it would be appropriate, perhaps we could arrange a panel discussion for an hour or two. You could participate yourself, and we could also invite representatives from the government, the tourism association, and the hotel association. In this way, LUMS could also make a small contribution by bringing everyone together for a constructive conversation.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Insha'Allah, I can arrange that. Just let me know the dates in advance. At the moment, however, we ourselves are facing many challenges.

Tourist numbers have increased so much that we simply do not have enough space. There are no proper parking facilities or other supporting infrastructure. The government has developed a few public facilities, but everyone wants to come here to see Shangrila.

There is an entry ticket, yet the pressure keeps increasing. All kinds of visitors are arriving. At the same time, we also have our hotel guests and families staying here. Many people simply

arrive without staying at the resort. Sometimes thousands of visitors come just to see the lake. It has become very difficult to manage. I am even considering increasing the ticket price and restricting entry to families only. No groups of men alone. Families only. We are also considering allocating certain hours exclusively for families. These are some of the ideas we are discussing.

Dr Jawad Syed:

I recently visited Fort Munro, near Dera Ghazi Khan. When we were children, my elder brother worked there as the medical superintendent of the hospital, and we used to visit frequently.

It was once an incredibly peaceful place. This time, however, I visited with my family after many years to relive those memories. Unfortunately, I left feeling that I would not want to return again. Natural beauty of mountains and lakes had almost vanished and the ugly concrete structures had overshadowed them. Everywhere we looked there were crowds of men, while families felt uncomfortable. Families were being stared at as though they were unusual visitors.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Yes. I know friends who are working there and trying to improve the situation. But these problems can only be solved through a collective effort. No single individual can solve them. The government alone cannot solve them either.

Dr Jawad Syed:

I would even go so far as to suggest something that may sound rather radical. Perhaps you and the local community may or may not agree with it. My suggestion would be that the local administration and the community could entrust the management of places such as Upper Kachura to organisations like yours. Not necessarily because of commercial interests—I am sure that is not your primary objective—but perhaps such places could be managed primarily for the benefit of the local community. If something like this were done, at least some of these beautiful places could still be preserved.

Similarly, if areas such as Basho Valley were entrusted to responsible local management, much of the damage could perhaps be prevented. I visited Basho Valley only yesterday. To be honest, I did not enjoy the experience as much as I had expected. Development is taking place in a completely unplanned manner.

Commercial activity has even spread into the streams and riverbeds. The river stream itself is being affected. There are inadequate toilet facilities. Wastewater is flowing into the streams. Unfortunately, we have already seen similar destruction in places like Kalam.

May Allah bring improvement. I sincerely appreciate the efforts that you are making to preserve lower Kachura. We, too, are trying to contribute in our own modest way. The reality is that flights will continue increasing. More tourists will continue arriving.

The tourists themselves cannot really be blamed for wanting to visit such beautiful places. They simply come here to enjoy the scenery. The greater responsibility now lies with the local community and the local administration.

When I first started this project a few years ago, I believed that tourists were primarily responsible for environmental degradation. Today, however, I have reached a different conclusion. I now believe that the greater responsibility lies with the local community itself. Much of the destruction we are witnessing is being driven by local greed and the desire for quick profits.

Arif Aslam Khan:

Yes. I completely agree.

Dr Jawad Syed:

Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to share with us, our students, or our researchers?

Arif Aslam Khan:

Yes. I would recommend that your senior students—especially those studying tourism, ecotourism, environmental management, and related subjects—form teams and visit Gilgit-Baltistan once or twice each year.

They should spend time here. They should interact with the local community. They should deliver lectures and awareness sessions. They should experience these places firsthand. I believe it would make a real difference. People here would begin to understand why someone has travelled all the way from Lahore simply to educate them about these issues.

Perhaps then they would start taking these concerns more seriously. I continue trying to create awareness in my own way, but much more needs to be done.