

Impact of Tourism on Kashmir Valley in India during COVID-19: A Sustainable Approach

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected global tourism, and the Kashmir Valley in India, renowned for its breathtaking landscapes and cultural richness, was no exception to the disruptions caused by the crisis. This abstract aims to present a sustainable approach to understanding the impact of tourism on the Kashmir Valley during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study begins by examining the pre-pandemic tourism landscape in the region, highlighting the significance of the industry to the local economy and livelihoods. Subsequently, the adverse effects of the pandemic on tourism, including travel restrictions, lockdowns, and reduced visitor inflows, are analyzed. To address the challenges posed by the pandemic, a sustainable approach to tourism in the Kashmir Valley is proposed. This approach emphasizes the need to strike a delicate balance between revitalizing the tourism sector and preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage. Sustainable tourism practices, such as promoting community-based tourism initiatives, encouraging eco-friendly accommodations, and supporting local artisans, are crucial components of this proposed approach. Furthermore, the study explores the potential of digital technologies and online platforms to support the revival of tourism in the region by promoting virtual experiences and responsible travel practices. Additionally, collaborations between the government, local communities, and tourism stakeholders are advocated to ensure a coordinated and inclusive response to the crisis. The findings underscore the importance of adopting sustainable practices as the Kashmir Valley emerges from the pandemic's impact on its tourism sector. A sustainable approach to tourism not only aids in rebuilding the region's economy but also safeguards its natural environment and cultural heritage, creating a resilient and responsible tourism ecosystem for the future. By embracing sustainability principles, the region can mitigate the pandemic's adverse effects on tourism while fostering long-term growth that respects the delicate balance between economic development and environmental and cultural conservation.

Keywords: COVID-19, Tourism, Jammu & Kashmir, Environment, Sustainability

1. Introduction

The Kashmir valley's economy was thriving, and one of its mainstays was the tourism industry. However, starting in 1989, factors related to law and order, rising spending, deteriorating infrastructure, and other factors caused the State income to stagnate. It is important to note that the financial effects of the conflict cannot be confined to a single sector or collection of investment possibilities. The tourist, horticultural, and handicraft industries—three key sources of revenue for the local population—had also been impacted. Additionally, almost all Kashmiri traders were

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compelled to move their trading hubs from Srinagar to other cities in India as a result of unrest. Conflict and development are closely related, and this relationship is reciprocal—conflict exacerbates development failures and vice versa. In its policy statement and guidelines on conflict, peace, and development from 1997, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also makes the case that sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace and stability and that peace and security cannot be possible without addressing the basic needs of the populace. Recently, tourism has played a vital role in economic growth across the globe. It has emerged as one of the industries with the fastest rate of growth, producing around 8.7% of all jobs globally and almost 9% of all GDP.

The Kashmir Valley, nestled amidst the majestic Himalayas in India, has long been hailed as the "Paradise on Earth" for its breath-taking natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and serene landscapes. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a period of unprecedented challenges, particularly for the tourism sector, which serves as a vital economic lifeline for the region. This essay delves into the multifaceted impact of tourism on the Kashmir Valley during the tumultuous times of the pandemic, while exploring the imperative need for a sustainable approach to revive and foster the tourism industry. The profound disruptions caused by the pandemic unveiled both the vulnerabilities and resilience of Kashmir's tourism, prompting a reevaluation of strategies and a shift towards sustainability to ensure the preservation of its natural splendour, cultural authenticity, and economic stability. Before the pandemic, the Kashmir Valley was a thriving hub of tourism, attracting travelers from across the globe with its picturesque landscapes, charming houseboats on Dal Lake, verdant meadows, and historical monuments steeped in centuries-old heritage. The tourism industry served as a primary source of livelihood for thousands of locals, offering employment opportunities, fostering cultural exchanges, and contributing significantly to the region's economy. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 brought about a sudden and severe downturn, bringing the bustling tourism sector to an abrupt standstill. The imposition of travel restrictions, lockdowns, and safety concerns led to a drastic decline in tourist arrivals, resulting in widespread job losses, financial hardships, and a staggering blow to the local economy.

The impact of the pandemic reverberated throughout the tourism value chain, affecting not only tour operators, hoteliers, and souvenir vendors but also artisans, transport providers, and individuals engaged in various tourism-related activities. The closure of tourist sites, cancellation of bookings, and the absence of visitors left many grappling with economic uncertainty, highlighting the sector's over-reliance on seasonal tourism and the need for diversification and resilience. Moreover, the sudden cessation of human activity brought an unexpected silver lining—the environment witnessed a respite from the pressures of mass tourism, allowing nature to rejuvenate, skies to clear, and ecosystems to restore their balance, offering a glimpse of what a sustainable approach could achieve.

Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, there emerged a growing realization of the imperative to adopt a sustainable approach to revive and safeguard Kashmir's tourism industry. This paradigm shift involves striking a delicate balance between economic recovery and environmental conservation, embracing community engagement, and promoting responsible tourism practices. Sustainable tourism entails fostering initiatives that prioritize environmental integrity, cultural authenticity, and socio-economic benefits for local communities. It involves investing in eco-friendly infrastructure, promoting eco-tourism, supporting local artisans and craftsmen, preserving indigenous traditions, and empowering communities to actively participate in tourism development while safeguarding their natural resources.

India has the unique distinction of embodying spiritual havens all across the world. As a result, the number of foreign tourists arriving in India climbed by 10% in 2016 from 80.3 lakh in 2015 to 88.9 lakh visitors. According to the most recent data, the Indian government's Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) in 2016 was a staggering Rs. 1,55,650 crore, increasing by 15.1% (Annual report provided by MoT Govt. of India, 2016-17). The Kashmir Valley, which is in the far north, makes a significant contribution to this total. An effort has been made in the current study to look at how the unrest has

impacted Kashmiri tourism and the businesses that support it. The highs and lows of Kashmir's instability and issues relating to tourism have received more attention. Information has also been acquired from houseboat owners, shikharas owners, and hotel owners using interview schedules. Our findings show that the turmoil has had a negative impact on the tourism-related industries. The rise of tourism has been impeded, and the majority of visitors have been discouraged by the State's turmoil, particularly over the previous two decades. The COVID-19 crisis served as a wake-up call, prompting stakeholders in the Kashmir Valley to reevaluate existing tourism models and embrace sustainability as the cornerstone of recovery and future growth. A sustainable approach not only mitigates the adverse impact of tourism but also ensures long-term resilience, socio-economic inclusivity, and the preservation of Kashmir's unparalleled natural beauty for generations to come. This essay aims to delve deeper into the multifaceted dimensions of this shift towards sustainability in Kashmir's tourism industry, examining its challenges, opportunities, and the path forward to build a more resilient and responsible tourism ecosystem.

2. Objectives of the Study

To find out the impact of Covid-19 in Kashmir Valley and its effects as mentioned below –

2.1 Economic Impact:

The tourism industry in Kashmir Valley suffered a severe blow during the COVID-19 outbreak, as travel restrictions and lockdown measures led to a drastic decline in tourist arrivals. This downturn had significant economic ramifications, affecting the livelihoods of local communities heavily reliant on tourism-related businesses. To ensure a sustainable recovery, it is crucial to implement responsible strategies that balance economic revival with environmental and social considerations.

2.2 Environmental Implications:

The decline in tourism during the pandemic provided a much-needed respite to the fragile ecosystems in Kashmir Valley. Reduced human activity allowed nature to recuperate, resulting in improved air quality, reduced noise pollution, and a resurgence of wildlife. Embracing a sustainable approach post-pandemic entails promoting eco-friendly tourism practices, minimizing carbon footprints, and conserving natural resources to preserve the Valley's pristine beauty for future generations.

2.3 Social and Cultural Aspects:

Tourism plays a vital role in preserving and promoting the unique cultural heritage of Kashmir Valley. However, mass tourism can sometimes lead to cultural commodification and erosion of local traditions. As the region plans its recovery, it is essential to adopt community-based tourism models that empower local residents and celebrate their cultural identity. This inclusive approach ensures that tourism benefits are shared equitably among the community while fostering pride in their heritage.

2.4 Responsible Tourism Practices:

A sustainable revival of tourism in Kashmir Valley necessitates the promotion of responsible tourism practices. Encouraging tourists to be mindful of their impact on the environment and local communities can significantly contribute to long-term sustainability. This can be achieved through initiatives such as waste management, responsible trekking, and support for local artisans and businesses.

2.5 Diversification of Tourism Offerings:

To reduce the vulnerability of the tourism sector to future crises, diversifying the range of offerings is imperative. Beyond the scenic landscapes, the Valley boasts opportunities for adventure tourism, cultural experiences, and wellness retreats. By promoting diverse tourism options, the region can attract a broader visitor base and mitigate the impact of external shocks.

2.6 Supporting Local Businesses and Communities:

The pandemic highlighted the importance of supporting local businesses during challenging times. Encouraging tourists to buy locally produced goods and engage in community-based tourism experiences can bolster the resilience of the Valley's economy. Additionally, investing in skill development and capacity-building initiatives for local communities can empower them to actively participate in the tourism value chain.

3. Review of Literature

Many Kashmir valley residents, including houseboat owners, shikhara owners, artisans, craftsmen, etc., suddenly found themselves without a job and no means of support when the enormous tourism industry experienced a blow in 1989 (Soundarajan 2006). The total amount spent by tourists in 1987, 1988, and 1989 was 15252, 15322, and 12399 lacs, respectively. However, due to a decline in visitor numbers in 1990, 1991, and 1992, this amount plummeted to 324, 247, and 435 lacs. As a result, visitor spending decreased by 97.66% during the years when unrest was at its worst. The inhabitants of Kashmir suffered greatly as a result of the limited money flow, which led to an increase in poverty. Additionally, shopping centers, leisure, and transportation facilities frequently became the target of unrest; some hotels are either occupied by security forces or have been burned by militant groups.

In addition to other factors, poverty and lack of development are fundamental drivers of violence. Jammu and Kashmir's development situation has been impacted by violence, which not only discouraged private investment but also made it more difficult to carry out public policy initiatives for development. Regarding the increase of Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) at current prices, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has lagged behind the majority of the states in the union of India. According to the Planning Commission of India (2006), the average annual growth of the Net State Domestic Product at current prices from 1980–1981 to 1999–2000 was 12.45% for J&K compared to 15.01%, 14.28%, 13.83%, and 14.3% for Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, and Kerala, respectively. According to a poll by the Finance and Planning Commission, the state's per capita income in 2007 was only 17174 rupees, which is less than two-thirds of the national average of 25907 rupees in India. The State's economy grew by 5.5% annually over the first four years of the tenth five-year plan, compared to a national average of 7%.

The atmosphere of armed conflict in Kashmir throughout the 1990s can be blamed for the State of J&K's poor economic development. The unrest that engulfed the entire valley made the already weak industrial growth and bad investments much worse. Furthermore, poor fiscal management and poor governance contributed to the State's poor economic growth. According to a Reuters report, "Kashmir has lost more than 1500 working days (more than four years) as a result of separatists' calls for a shutdown over the course of the past 20 years, dealing a serious hit to its faltering economy.

Every day when businesses are closed, the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry estimates that the area loses 100 million rupees. In 1989, a setback to Kashmir's enormous tourism economy directly contributed to rising unemployment. Our state relies largely on the tourism industry because it has a nonindustrial economy and a lack of natural resources. Nearly 1094 houseboats on Dal Lake, Nigeen Lake, the Jhelum River, as well as all other houseboats reliant on tourism, were rendered essentially inactive. In this and other lakes, in 2000, "Shikara wallas" met a similar death. Hotels and guest homes that once enjoyed brisk business were suddenly without visitors, and their fortunes plummeted to the point of insolvency. In the past years, the bad political scenario in Kashmir has had a negative impact on the tourism sector, with suicide bombings, attacks by militant groups, and open fire by security forces being the main reasons. This has caused a decline in tourist arrivals, as people choose holiday destinations according to the most benefits and least costs. Despite this, the numbers have risen, leading to an increase in tourist arrivals despite the increase in conflicts. It is unclear if

the place was marketed properly what kind of effect this would have on the tourist scenario, with the answer being that it would increase manifold.

4. Methodology

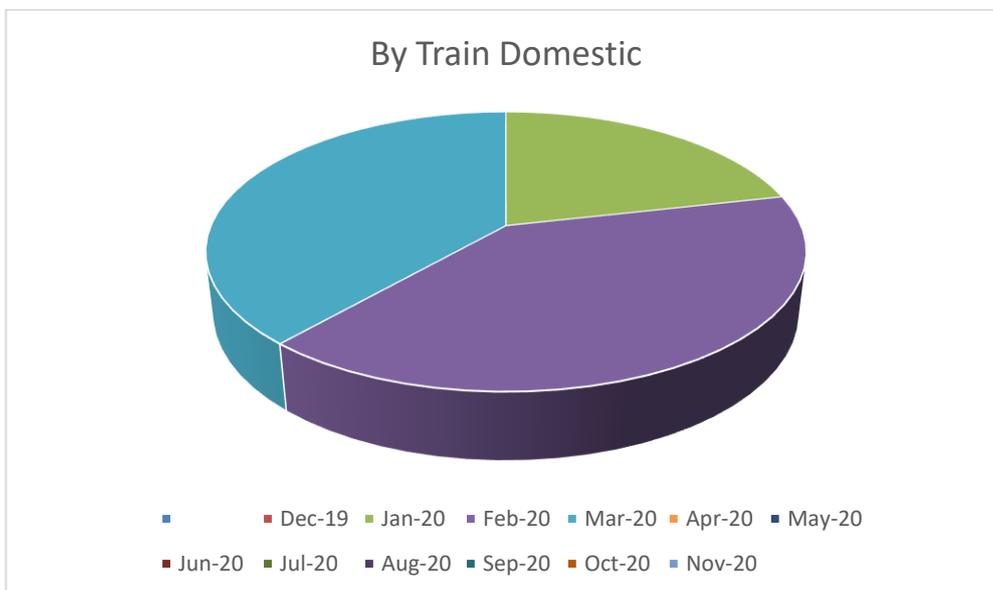
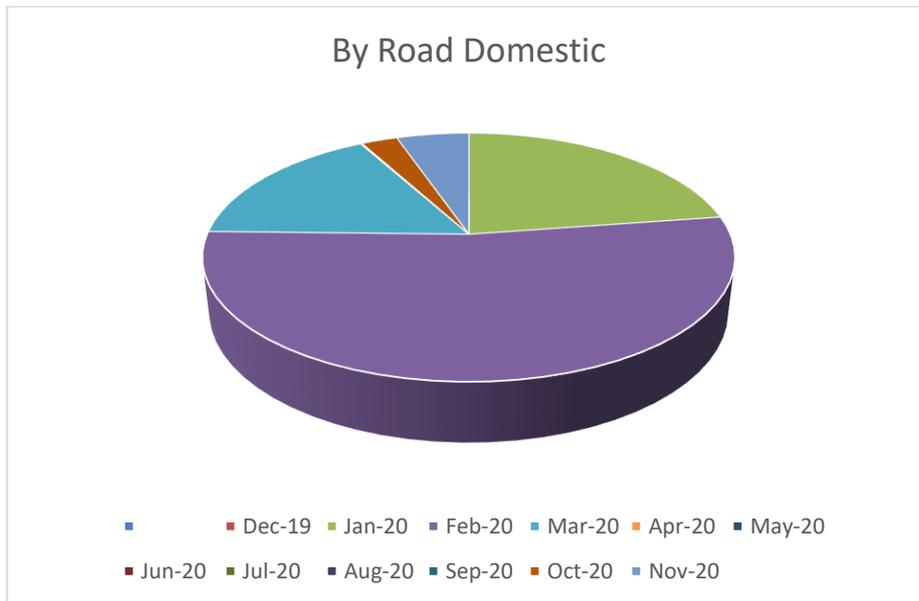
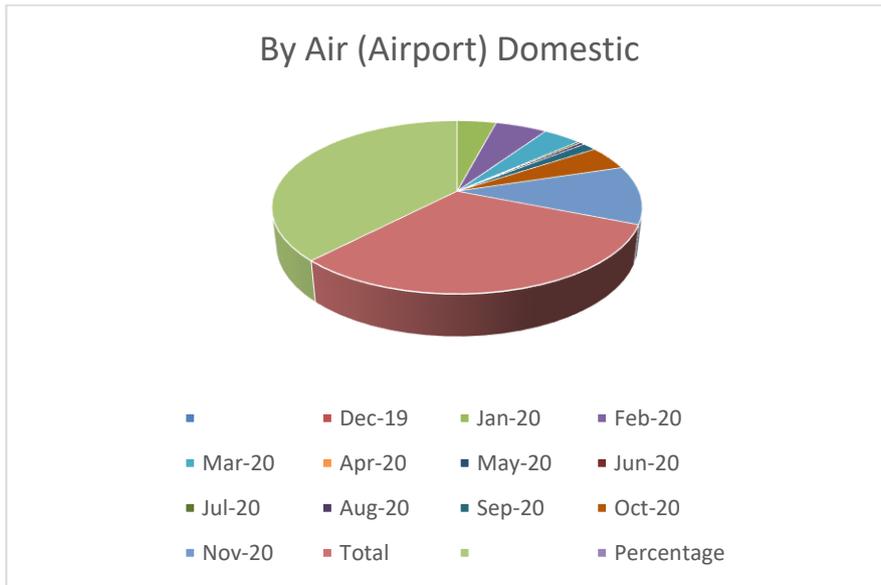
The data used in the research paper is secondary, collected from Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Development, Corporation and Directorate of Tourism (Jammu and Kashmir), and other reliable journals and research articles. The data used in the research paper is recent, ranging from December 2019 to November 2020.

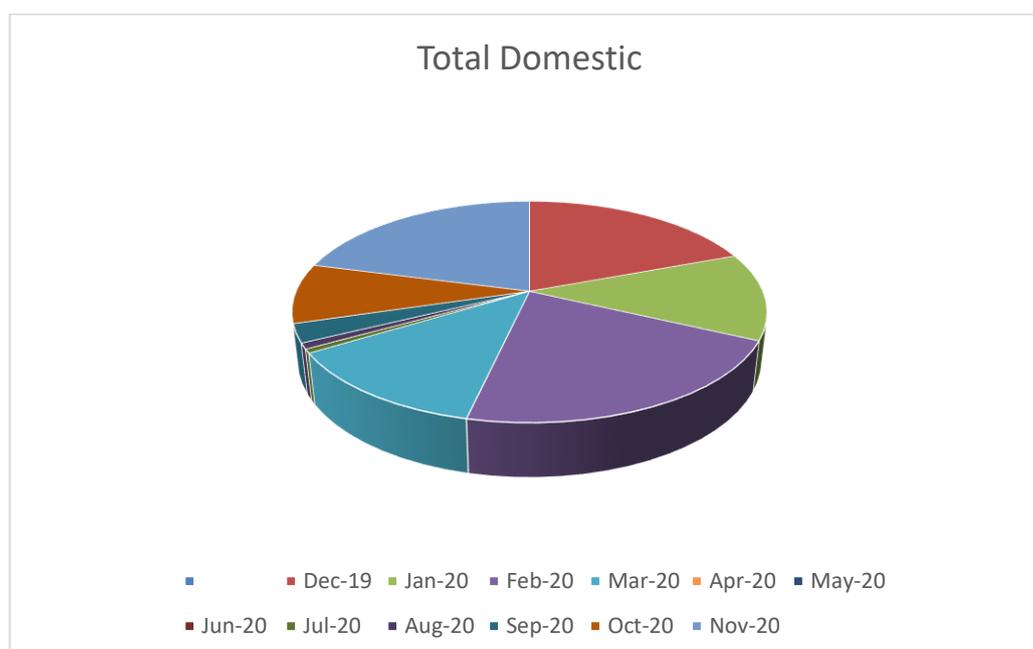
5. Results and Discussions

The flow of tourists to the Kashmir valley does not follow a specific trend. However, it can be predominantly dependent on law and order situations prevailing at that specific point in time. The tourist numbers in the valley saw gradual fluctuations till 2016, when the law and order situation went sour; the tourist flow witnessed a sudden sharp dip. Table 1 gives an insight into how the tourist arrival numbers (domestic as well as foreign) have varied from 1988 to 2016. The aim of all the stakeholders has been to stabilize a high influx, which comes as a boon to the economy for the state as well as employment opportunities for the local population.

Table: 1 JK Tourist Police Wind, Month-wise Mode of Arrival (Domestic/Foreign) to Kashmir Valley during Covid-19 the year 2020

Month/Route	By Air (Airport)		By Road		By Train		Total		Cumulative total
	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	
Dec-2019							5780	1174	
Jan-2020	2247	1002	1142	8	441	17	3830	1027	4857
Feb-2020	2966	1699	2659	7	824	23	6453	1729	13039
March-2020	2174	831	839	5	794	0	3807	836	17682
April-2020	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17682
May-2020	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17682
June-2020	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17682
July-2020	175	0	0	0	0	0	175	11	17868
August-2020	251	0	0	0	0	0	251	33	18152
September-2020	806	6	6	2	0	0	812	36	19000
October-2020	2488	35	132	4	0	0	2620	39	21659
November-2020	6006	56	265	0	0	0	6271	56	27986
Total	17113	3701	5043	26	2063	40	24219	3767	27986
	20814		5069		2103				
Percentage	74.37%		18.11%		7.51%				





The graphical representation of the number of travelers to Kashmir Valley in India for each month from December 2019 to November 2020 is given above. The data is further categorized into domestic and foreign travelers and is shown separately for different modes of transportation, i.e., air, road, and train. Additionally, the total number of travelers and cumulative totals for each category are also provided.

According to the given data, several interpretations can be made, which are mentioned below-

- By Air: - The number of domestic travelers by air in December 2019 was 2247, and it gradually increased to 6006 in November 2020.
- The number of foreign travelers by air was 1002 in January 2020, and it slightly increased to 56 in November 2020.
- Overall, the total number of travelers by air (domestic and foreign) increased from 3249 in January 2020 to 6062 in November 2020.
- By Road: - The number of domestic travelers by road in January 2020 was 1142, and it reached its peak at 2659 in February 2020 before gradually decreasing to 265 in November 2020.
- There were only 8 foreign travelers by road in January 2020, and this number remained low throughout the rest of the months.
- Overall, the total number of travelers by road (domestic and foreign) fluctuated, with the highest count at 2659 in February 2020.
- By Train:- The number of domestic travelers by train was 441 in January 2020, and it increased to 6006 in November 2020.
- There were no foreign travelers by train during the entire period.
- Overall, the total number of travelers by train increased from 441 in January 2020 to 2063 in November 2020.
- Total Travellers: - The total number of domestic travelers (by air, road, and train) increased from 5043 in January 2020 to 2103 in November 2020.
- The total number of foreign travelers remained relatively stable at 26 in most of the months.
- Cumulative Total:- The cumulative total of all travelers (domestic and foreign) increased from 24219 in January 2020 to 27986 in November 2020.
- Percentage:- The percentage of domestic travelers was the highest, accounting for 74.37% to 18.11% of the total number of travelers.
- Foreign travelers constituted the smallest percentage, ranging from 7.51% to as low as 0.20%.

Overall, the data indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on tourism in Kashmir Valley, resulting in reduced traveler numbers, particularly for foreign visitors. However,

domestic travel showed more resilience, contributing significantly to the overall tourism numbers in the region.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a rare opportunity for introspection and reevaluation of the tourism industry's impact on Kashmir Valley. Embracing a sustainable approach to tourism not only ensures the region's economic recovery but also safeguards its natural beauty and cultural heritage for generations to come. By prioritizing responsible tourism practices, diversifying offerings, and supporting local communities, the Valley can emerge as a model destination for sustainable tourism in India. A harmonious balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and cultural integrity will pave the way for a resilient and thriving tourism sector in Kashmir Valley.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no competing interests.

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