

The opportunities and challenges of ecotourism development with special reference to Assam.

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a new form of tourism based on the idea of sustainability. The concept of ecotourism came into prominence in the late 80s as a strategy for reconciling conservation with development in ecologically rich areas. The concept of ecotourism has become popular probably due to the wide spread and growing interests in the natural environment and the corresponding recognition of the importance of conserving natural environmental quality. Characteristically, ecotourism involves a kind of tourist activity that has a minimal impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment. It helps contribute directly to conservation and is especially instrumental in protecting precious diversity of species in biodiversity rich areas. Conservation of natural resources prevents environmental degradation. That is why; this form of tourism has received global importance. It is currently recognized as the fastest growing segment of the tourism market. Assam- the gateway to the North East India is a hotspot for tourists due to its natural beauty and favourable climate. This paper is an attempt to introduce the major eco-tourism prospects of Assam and their role in conserving the environment.

KEYWORDS: Ecotourism, sustainability, conservation, environment, biodiversity

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism (also called sustainable tourism) came into prominence in the late eighties as a strategy for reconciling conservation with development in ecologically rich areas. (Bharti and Jain, 2002). Ecotourism in simple words means management of tourism and conservation of nature in a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirements of tourism and ecology on one hand and the needs of the local community of Jobs-new skills, income generation employment and a better status for women on the other. (Bande, 2002). Ecotourism also popularly known as Nature tourism consists of travel to a particular site

largely for amenity and recreational purposes and is emerging world over as the most focused area of interest for the tourists and consequently for the private investors.(Panigrahi, 2003). The concept of ecotourism has become popular due to the widespread and growing interest in the natural environment and the corresponding recognition of the importance of conserving natural environment quality. (Singh, 2004).

The concept of ecotourism has been defined in various ways. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has defined it as tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery, its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural aspect found in the areas.

The International Ecotourism Society (IES) defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of the local people.

Characteristically, ecotourism involves a kind of tourist activity that has a minimal impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment. Tourism is currently the world's largest industry (\$3.4 Trillion annually) and ecotourism represents the fastest growing sector of this market. (Yadav, 2002). The World Ecotourism Summit, held in Quebec City, Canada, from 19th to 22nd May, 2002, declared the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism. Such declarations highlight the relevance and recognition of ecotourism, both locally and globally. Presently, ecotourism comprises 15-20% of international tourism. The growth rate of ecotourism and nature based activities is higher than most of the other tourism segments (Kandari and Chandra, 2004). Its market is now growing at an annual rate of 30% (Whelan, 1991). From this, the significance of ecotourism can be very easily evaluated.

The government of India has also formulated certain policy guidelines for ecotourism known as 'Policy Guideline 1998'. In our country, Kerela represents a unique picture of ecotourism. Besides that Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Sikkim have also attained success to some extent. The government of India has identified six ecotourism circuits in the country and North East is one of them, which includes places like Guwahati, Kaziranga, Majuli, Tezpur, Sibsagar and Bhalukpong etc in Assam, Shillong and Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, Kohima in Nagaland and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The Government of India has rightly recognized that Assam has sufficient potentialities to develop this world famous sub sector of the tourism industry.

This paper makes an attempt to highlight the present status of tourism in Assam. It also tries to identify the resource base of Assam to promote ecotourism and emphasizes the constraints relating to the development of ecotourism and finally, suggests some measures for attaining the desired development of ecotourism in the state.

The objectives of the paper would be -

- To discuss the present status of eco-tourism in Assam
- To analyse the sources and sites of eco-tourism in Assam.
- To discuss the problems associated with eco-tourism industry in Assam.

METHODOLOGY

Since this paper will make an analytical study of the ecotourism in Assam, it will make an in-depth study of the secondary data which includes published and unpublished documents of the Department of Forest and Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam, Newspapers, Books, Various Journals etc.

ECO-TOURISM IN ASSAM

Assam- the gateway to the North East India is a hotspot for tourists due to its natural beauty and favourable climate. It is a region where nature herself has painted the vibrant landscape, hillocks, brooks and streams, flora and fauna and above all the affectionate people. Crafted with much special care, Assam cast a spell on the travellers exploring the treasures of pleasure. It is a legendary state in terms of traditions and civilization. The state is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Assam also shares its border with Bhutan and Bangladesh. The state is spread across an area of 78,438 sq km which represents 2.39% of Indian landmass. (Economic Survey, Assam 2010-11). The whole state is divided into two distinct natural regions, the plain and the hills. The plain region comprises of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valley. On the other hand, the hill region consists of two hills namely the Karbi-Anglong and the North-Cachar hills. The state is allied to India by a narrow strip in West Bengal called the Siliguri corridor or the Chicken Neck of India. Thus, Assam is in isolation from the rest of the country, yet is famous for her unique physiological beauty with flora and fauna, historical monuments, pilgrim centres, tea gardens and the colourful cultural festivals

which are considered as tourism resources. This state is rich in its natural resources as about 35% of the state is covered with forests.

Due to the unique presence of wildlife and climatic condition, Assam has a very good scope of Ecotourism. The national parks, birds and wildlife sanctuaries of Assam are good examples of wildlife tourism. About 180 species of mammals, 195 species of reptiles and more than 800 species of birds are found in these places which have a significant importance than most other states of India. Besides that, one horned Rhino is the major wildlife species of Assam. Among other species which inhabits in Assam are pigmy hog, elephant, wild buffalo, tiger and many more. Besides these, various kinds of ornamental fishes, rare medicinal plants, various types of herbs and orchids are also found in the state.

Assam has 7 National Parks, 19 Wildlife Sanctuaries including two proposed ones, Reserve Forests, Bird sanctuaries etc. to attract tourists. The major eco-tourism prospects of Assam and their speciality can be introduced with the help of following table.

Table No 1: List of National Parks and their speciality

Name	Area (Sq.Km)	District	Speciality
Dibru-Saikhowa	340	Dibrugarh and Tinsukia	Feral Horse, Wood Duck, Elephant
Manas	500	Chirang, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Darrang and Baksa	Golden Langur, Pigmy Hog, Hispid Hare, Elephant and Tiger, Assam Roofed Turtle, Water Buffalo
Kaziranga	858.98	Golaghat, Nagaon and Sonitpur, Karbi-Anglong	One Horned Rhino, Swamp Deer, Elephant, Tiger, Bengal Flocan Buffallo
Orang	78.81	Darrang and Sonitpur	Rhino, Elephant, Leopard, Green Pigeon, Barking Deer
Nameri	200	Sonitpur	Wood Duck, Hornbill, Langure Capped
Dehing	231.65	Dibrugarh and Tinsukia	Chinese pangolin, flying

Patkai (Lowland rain forests in India)			fox,slow loris,white winged wood duck,elephant
Raimona	422	Kokrajhar	Golden Langur

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam (<https://assam.gov.in/about-us/402>)

Table 2: List of Wildlife Sanctuaries and their speciality

Name	Area(Sq.Km)	District	Speciality
Pobitora	38.80	Morigaon	One horned rhino,Leopard,Tiger
Pabho	49	Lakhimpur	Wild Water,Buffalo
Laokhowa	70.13	Nagaon	Wild Buffalo,Swamp Deer,Duck,Cormorant,Rhino
Bherjan- Borajan Podumoni	7.22	Tinsukia	Hoolock,Pigtailed Macaque,Stump Tailes Macaque
Chakrashila	45.56	Dhubri and Kokrajhar	Golden Langur,Aquatic Birs
Sonai rupai	220	Sonitpur	Tiger,Elephant,Hornbill
Garampani	6.05	Golaghat	Elephant,Hollock Gibbon,Bids
Nambor	325.25	Karbi-Anglong and Golaghat	Elephant and Hollock Gibbon
Burha sapor	44.06	Sonitpur	Water Buffalo,Aquatic Birds,Bengal Florican,Rhino
Barnadi	26.22	Udalguri	Pigmy Hog,Elephant, Hornbill,Hispid Hare
Gibbon	20.98	Jorhat	Hollock Gibbon,Birds
Amcheng	78.64	Kamrup	Vulture,Python,Cobra,Butterflies
Borail	326.26	Cachar	Himalayan Black Deer,Horn Bill,Clouded Leopard
Morat Logri	451	Karbi-Anglong	Wild Pig,Woodland Bird,Rock Python
Panidehing	33.93	Sibsagar	Migratory Birds

Hollongpar	20.98	Jorhat	Hollock Gibbon, Reptiles
East Karbi Anglong	221.81	Karbi Anglong	Barking Deer, Rhesus macaque, wild pigs, lesser cats
Deepor Beel	4.14	Guwahati	170 species of birds, reptiles, amphibians

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam (<https://assam.gov.in/about-us/402>)

Besides these, there are also several places where natural beauty is tremendously available and there is a huge potentiality for the development of ecotourism industry. In this regard, we can highlight the following places with prospects for ecotourism.

Table 3: List of places where ecotourism industry can be developed

Name	District	Speciality
Bhalukpong	Sonitpur	Evergreen forests, mystic blue hills and bank of river Jia Bhoroli
Chandubi	Nagaon	Chandubi lake, tea garden, deep forests
Haflong	North Cachar Hills	Haflong lake, hill station
Jatinga	North Cachar Hills	Famous Bird Mystery (Suicide zone of migratory bird)
Majuli	Jorhat	World's biggest river Island, Rare migratory birds like pelican, water sports etc
Digboi	Tinsukia	Garden city
Sasoni Merbill	Dibrugarh	Biggest lake in Assam
Koyakhuji	Bongaigaon	Koyakuji Lake
Diphu	Karbi-Anglong	Botanical Garden
Umranshu	North Cachar Hills	Hills and greenery view
Joypur	Dibrugarh and Tinsukia	Rain forests
Gerukamukh	Dhemaji	Hills and scenic beauty of river Subansiri
Pancharatna	Goalpara	Reserved forests
Maibong	North Cachar Hills	Hill Station
Panimoor	North Cachar Hills	Thrilling waterfall of Kopili river
Rani	Kamrup (Metro)	Reserved rain forests, hilly terrain

Hajo	Kamrup(Rural)	Vast wetland area, one can enjoy fishing. The hills and forests have wide scopes of developing eco friendly adventure sports like trekking, mountaineering, rock climbing etc
Bhairabkunda	Udalguri	Plenty of scope for trekking, canoeing and angling besides the river Jia Dhansiri

These are also some of the places which can be recognized as a potential destination for ecotourism due to its unique ecological and conservation significance. The Molai forest, located near Jorhat in the Indian state of Assam, was single-handedly planted and nurtured by Jadav Payeng, a local environmental activist, over several decades. As an ecotourism destination, the Molai Forests can offer visitors the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the area, observe wildlife, and learn about the conservation efforts of Jadav Payeng also known as “Forests Man of India” who single-handedly planted and tended to the forests over the course of several decades.

Ecotourism in the Molai Forests could be designed to be sustainable and responsible, taking into account the protection of the environment and the well-being of the local community. It could be organized in a way that supports the local economy by providing employment opportunities, promoting local culture, and traditions and utilizing locally sourced materials and services. Visitors to the Molai Forests could participate in guided tours, nature walks, bird watching and other activities that promote conservation and education. These activities could be designed to create awareness about the importance of forests conservation, the role of indigenous knowledge and practices and the impact of human activities on the environment.

In spite of these, some more places are yet to be discovered from the tourists’ perspective. It is obvious that the state has a bright future in respect to the tourism industry as a whole and the ecotourism segment in particular. Most of the places of the state are attractive to tourists- being it natural beauty or wildlife, religious or cultural reasons, history or archaeological studies and so on. In fact, the large biodiversity, rolling hills, green valleys, virgin forests, the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries, numerous beels or wet-lands can make the state a major center of ecotourism. The tea gardens of Assam also have large potentiality to generate

ecotourism. The tea gardens of Assam are a huge reservoir of natural beauty and biodiversity.

PROBLEMS OF ECOTOURISM IN ASSAM

According to the definition of International Ecotourism Society – Ecotourism industry may develop with the concept of conserving the environment and improves the welfare of local people. But, most of the recent studies show that ecotourism is growing at the cost of degradation of ecosystem which actually claims to preserve. Ecotourism in reality is a perversion of the real thing which endangering the lives of wild animals and unfair use of local resources to meet the demand of the tourists.

Some of the major problems noticed in this sector are summarized as follows---

1. **Absence of Proper Eco- Tourism Policy:** Assam has initiated only two projects on Eco tourism i.e. Majuli and Chandhubi Lake. But there are many such destinations where Government can take necessary initiatives to prosper the growth of Eco Tourism. There is no Reservation of land for Eco-Friendly Practices such as Gardening, Harvesting etc.

2. **Restricted Area Permit:** The Restricted Area Permit to the North-Eastern region was enforced in 1955 in the backdrop of alleged missionary involvement in the Naga rebellion. Under this a foreigner intending to visit North-East including Assam had to undergo a long arduous procedure of obtaining permission from the Home Ministry.

3. **Insurgency Problem:** Assam has been experiencing violent movements, extortion, theft, kidnapping, and murder. Therefore, Domestic and Foreign Tourist consider visiting this place risky. Deteriorating law and order, political disturbances have created a negative impression about the state in the minds of tourist.

4. **Lack of Infrastructural Facilities:** Certain Tourist Destination lacks infrastructure such as Cottages, Resorts, Home-stays, Rest Rooms, Hotels and Restaurants which are easily accessible and affordable. Guwahati is the only prominent place, where luxurious hotels are located. Proper fooding and logging, clean environment are the infrastructural requirements for domestic and foreign tourists.

5. **Lack of Transportation facilities in Remote Areas:** Adequate transportation facilities are lacking in certain destinations of Assam. Certain destinations are not well connected with

nearby railway stations or airports. Conditions of roads are also not proper due to heavy flash floods. Affordable cab services are challenge for domestic and foreign tourists.

6. Lack of Communication facilities: Adequate communication facilities are also not available. Many of the remote areas like Chandubhi where Assam Government has taken the initiative of establishing eco projects suffer from the problem of Mobile Network congestion. Domestic and foreign tourists are suffering from this issue. Even ATM's are not available in certain tourist destination which has the potential to be developed as world famous sites. Tourist suffers from the problem of transferring, depositing, withdrawing & exchanging the currency notes. And If ATM's are available, it doesn't operate properly and shows issues like link failure, non availability of cash.

7. Lack of Private- Public Partnership: There is lack of willingness from various departments associated with tourism sector. Public and Private Partnership or collaboration between many players are lacking which is creating a barrier in the growth of tourism.

8. Ignorance of Local People: Many people living in remote areas of Assam are educationally backward and are apprehensive about the concept of tourism and its benefits towards the economy of the place, state and country. Because of their Ignorance, they are not fully aware about the various segments of tourism and their own participatory role which is important for the growth and development of the tourist destinations.

9. Heavy Floods: Assam suffers from the problem of heavy flash floods during the months of April to July. Heavy floods washes away the homes, paddy fields, gardens, livestock's of local people living nearby certain tourist destinations. Majuli, the River Island which is a world heritage site always suffer from the problems of heavy floods.

10. Lack of trained Tourist Guides: Assam does not have well trained tourist guides who can communicate well with the domestic and foreign tourists. They also do not have good command over foreign Languages and ideas to handle tourists. The State has innumerable young bunch of youths whom can be trained well and can be employed as specialized guides.

11. Frequent Power Cuts: Lack of power & electricity is also a challenge for the state's tourism Sector. Electricity is not available for 24*7. Certain Tourist destinations are still bereft of adequate power supply.

CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is a particularly important aspect of tourism that focuses on visiting natural areas with minimal impact on the environment. It provides an opportunity to explore and appreciate the beauty of pristine and fragile ecosystems while supporting their conservation. Assam, with its diverse natural resources, is indeed a potential hub for ecotourism. It is needless to mention that Assam has several ecotourism resources. It is a centre of nature based tourism; a large biodiversity, rolling hills, green valleys, virgin forests, the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries, numerous beels or other wetlands etc-all make the state a major centre for tourism and ecotourism. As such, it is an obligation of each and every citizen to preserve this ecologically fragile state and conserve its rich biodiversities. However, adequate measures initiated by the government and cooperation can contribute sustainability towards the comprehensive development of the state.

Preserving Assam's ecological fragility and conserving its rich biodiversity is not solely the responsibility of the government. It is a collective obligation of each citizen to contribute to the sustainable development of the state. This can be achieved through awareness, responsible behaviour, and active participation in conservation efforts. Collaboration between the government, local communities, private enterprises, and tourists themselves is crucial in ensuring the long-term preservation of Assam's ecotourism resources. In fact, tourism is a multi-dimensional activity and has strong inter-related linkages. So, proper care to develop all the links and sectors involved in the promotion of the tourism sector is of prime consideration. The government also plays a crucial role in providing infrastructure, policies, and regulations that support the tourism industry. However, private initiatives, including businesses and individuals, are essential for promoting tourism and creating attractive offerings for visitors.

Overall, the comprehensive development of Assam's tourism sector, including ecotourism, requires a balanced approach that combines government support, private initiatives, and active engagement from citizens. With proper care and preservation efforts, Assam can continue to be a major centre for tourism and ecotourism, attracting visitors while safeguarding its unique natural heritage.

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