



Community Based Eco-Tourism: An Underpinning Element for Sustainable Tourism Development

KEYWORDS

Eco-Tourism, Community, Development

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ABSTRACT

The article draws some valid standpoints regarding Community Based Eco-Tourism and its generous involvement towards community development. The state of Assam has numerous options to convert the region as a full fledged Eco-Tourism destination for the tourists of the different parts of the world. The article narrates through putting emphasis the potentialities lies to transform Tinsukia District of the state along these lines.

PRELUDE:

Tourism as an industry is the largest in terms of revenue generation as well as an employer in the world. It is a multi-dimensional activity with versatile socio-economic positive impact. The economic impact of tourism is manifold due to its high multiplier effects and strong inter-sectarian linkages with agriculture, manufacturing, construction etc. Today many nations of the World under the auspices of the UNO and the WTO have adopted Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) with letting effects about the impact of tourism. The recent data collected through various researches show a growth of 1.6% in tourism receipts as compared to growth in the world's GDP. The creation of employment is also 1.5% faster than the world average. The future projection by the WTO is also very impressive. It is observed, the present incidence of travelling is only 8% of the people having such competence. Until 1960 tourism as a profitable economic activity was hardly conspicuous. During 1969-70, the global tourism scenario started following a consistently rising trend (two and half times the last decade) in terms of arrivals and receipts. The number registered a tenfold increase during 1970-200 as compared to 1960-70. The improved safety protection, changes in geo-political situations in the World order like breaking up of the soviet union, emergence of Eastern Europe, disarming of borders, formation of the European Union etc. and above all, the technological up gradation in the civil aviation sector are attributable to the persistent growth in the world tourism scenario.

Tourism is a travel for recreational, leisure or business purposes. At present tourism has turned into a popular global leisure activity. In 2010, there were over 940 million international tourist arrivals worldwide, representing a growth of 6.6% compared to 2009. Eco-Tourism is a type of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas, intended as a low impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial tourism. Eco-Tourism, a relatively new word was first used in Central America and Hector Ceballos Lascarain (1983), has defined it as the "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio economic involvement of local population". The International Eco-Tourism Society (TIES) regards it as the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people. Recognizing its global importance the United Nations designated the year 2002 as the "International Year of Eco-Tourism" (IYE).

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT & ECOTOURISM:

Eco-Tourism is a field of human activity where conservation and development can wisely and effectively be blended to achieve a mutual goal to the benefit of the people in the

community. This kind of tourism should be sensitive to the local communities; their land rights, traditions, cultures and way of life. It can be developed effectively only when there is consent and active involvement of the local people, who should become partners in this process.

Community based Ecotourism (CBET) has become a popular tool for biodiversity conservation, based on the principle that biodiversity must pay for itself by generating economic benefits, particularly for local people. There are many examples of projects that produce revenues for local communities and improve local attitudes towards conservation, but the contribution of CBET to conservation and local economic development is limited by factors such as the small areas and few people involved, limited earnings, weak linkages between biodiversity gains and commercial success, and the competitive and specialized nature of the tourism industry. Many CBET projects cited as success stories actually involve little change in existing local land and resource-use practices, provide only a modest supplement to local livelihoods, and remain dependent on external support for long periods, if not indefinitely. Investment in CBET might be justified in cases where such small changes and benefits can yield significant conservation and social benefits, although it must still be recognized as requiring a long term funding commitment.

Tourism in Assam is essentially based on nature and biodiversity. Therefore, National parks, Wild life sanctuaries, Biosphere reserves, Botanical gardens, rivers, lakes, hot water springs, thick wooded forest and wildlife are the major components of tourist attractions in Assam. It is counted as one of the prime Eco-Tourism destinations in India. Eco-Tourism in Assam attracts a large number of nature and animal lovers who love to see colourful wildlife in their natural habitat. There are five National Parks and eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries for in-situ conservation of biodiversity in Assam. Kaziranga, for instance, has been receiving a steady flow of nature tourists for years and areas like Manas and Dibru-Saikhowa are increasingly toured as excellent destinations for bird watchers and nature treks. However what is required is expanding the Eco-Tourism market that includes destinations other than the popular Wildlife Sanctuaries, and innovative strategies to capitalize on this new trend. Referring to a Tai-Phake community of Phaneng village near Lekhapani, a nondescript tribal village at Tinsukia District of Assam under Dehing Patkai belt has been doing a noble work for the upliftment of Eco-Tourism sector in the State. With a great vision, the small community without taking any help from the Government agencies transformed the remote and jungle village into a spot of tourist attraction for home and foreign tourists. Tourists from Japan, Thailand, Australia, Zimbabwe, and UK had already visited Phaneng to share the noble works done by the small tribe of that village. Not only in Phaneng but in the places like Inthem, Guijan, and Saikhowa of Tinsukia District of Assam. It has been seen that Eco-Tourism

activities are developing. Thus it gives an indication that Community Based Eco-Tourism is very much supportive in promoting tourism in the Tinsukia District of Assam.

Dehing Patkai, an International Eco-Festival which being organized at Lekhapani, at Tinsukia District of Assam since 2003 is yet another platform where different groups exhibit their culture, food habits, traditional costumes and dwelling styles. For those (Visitors) who can come for only a short stay should not miss the chance to come and enjoy the splendid moment in the festival days with the beautiful landscapes all around in this foot hills of Patkai Range and River Dehing. Dehing Patkai Festival which is planned to celebrate first quarter of every year is a nice attempt to generate publicity of this neglected part in the Indian tourism map. The different communities as well as the visitors to this festival get the wonderful opportunity to exchange their views and get first hand experience about this place. Areas in the Tinsukia District of Assam, enriched with different communities, older Oil and Coal fields with histories to explore, Second World War monuments, etc., Eco-Tourism has good prospects. Eco-Tourism is possibly one of the meaningful sources of economic development and job creation and cross-country evidence demonstrates that Eco-Tourism is labour intensive and offers a great variety of small-scale opportunities creating jobs for the poor, jobs for women and young people and to the whole community at large. So it can be considered that Community-Based Eco-Tourism is the best option in such areas which is owned and managed by a community and takes care of their natural resources in order to gain income through operating a tourism enterprise and using that income to better their lives. It involves conservation, business enterprise and community development and will be direct and indirect participants and direct and indirect beneficiaries. The community will run all the activities including: lodging, food, guiding and would have a certain level of involvement and benefit.

An Eco-Tourist always loves to get the first hand experience by staying in the rural areas and closer to the nature, so that there is every possibility of getting a chance to know the life of the people in the community, their culture and food habit. To help tourist to know more and more about a place and community within a short period of time it can provide a comfortable stay and this regard community guesthouse can be constructed in the style of the local buildings with the Eco-Friendly components. Communities can also arrange traditional dance and music of the entertainment of the tourists. Facilities for showing the traditional cooking procedures to the guests and serving traditional food to the guest will be more attractive to the tourist. The local youth can serve as the tour guide with proper knowledge of the village areas, the history of the concerned tribe and about the available local resources. In all most all communities women weave their clothes and their handicrafts are worth mentioning. Encouraging women's craft center in the village where tourist or visitors can buy their local handicrafts as souvenir will certainly help the economic upliftment of the women. In addition, the community has to maintain a local natural area, perhaps a forest area or river valley where they can bring visitors. This way the natural resources which other wise is destroyed by the people can be conserved. The forest department has enough scopes to encourage this in the local area. This relationship between conservation of natural area and job opportunities from tourism to the natural area is what Community-Based Eco-Tourism is all about. Local youths from different communities should be encouraged, trained up to undertake tours for the tourists. Such groups can take the tourists for a guided walk around the villages, Watching local crafts-people at work, boat trip on the river, visit to forest reserve or park, a ride on an elephant, a visit to a tea-garden, Cultural events (local music / dance) help in promoting local crafts. Adequate safety should also be provided to the tourist which is a most important aspect in encouraging such activity.

Margherita, a smaller Sub-Division at Tinsukia District of Assam has beautiful landscapes with bountiful hills, rivers, lush green tea gardens covering hectares of land, colourful fes-

tivals of different tribes with their history; landmark has immense potentiality of serving as a place for tourist destination. Tourist that comes for the adventure tourism can go to the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park which is only 13 km from the Tinsukia Town. The best time to visit the park for any visitors is from November to April for pleasant view of the flora and fauna. It is worldwide famous for the endangered species River dolphin. These dolphins are immense fast swimmers. They are blind and perform locomotion by ecolocation. The wild buffalo, elephants, the hornbills, gibbons, semi wild horse, white winged wood ducks are some of the wild life existing in the park. Tiger project at Namdapha National Park, Miao in Arunachal Pradesh is only a few kilometers reach from Margherita, with facilities to stay over night in the park itself. Tourists can even go for trekking in the Patkai Range of hills which are not to far from there. The mysterious 'Lake of no return', Stilwell road constructed during the World War II that connects Kunming Province in China, Burma border linked with Pangsau Pass are worth looking tourist spot for taking adventure trip as well as for enjoying the wilderness. Beside these an effort to be made to mention the cultures and festivals of some of the communities which can help the visitors in taking decision to be an Eco-Tourist in this Dehing River Valley.

Bihu, the main festival of Assamese community is celebrated in the months of 'Bohaag' to welcome the Assamese new year in the middle of April, 'Kaati' ('Kartik', the middle of October) and 'Maagh' (the middle of January). Tourists can come and enjoy the festival staying with the community itself. It is the most important non-religious festival of the Assamese people. Magh bihu which is celebrated just after the harvest of paddy is also known as 'Bhogali Bihu', derived from the word 'Bhoga' -meaning eating or enjoyment. This Bihu which is celebrated first half of January each year is one of the best occasions for the interested tourist to come and enjoy the "Uruka" -the feast on the bihu eve and also participate in the "Meji" -a sacred fire which is lit up on the day of Magh bihu.

One of the most significant tribal community of Tinsukia District is the Singpho community celebrate the dance festival on 14th February every year as: "Shapawang Yawng Manau Poi", in order to get blessings of their father Shapawang Yawng and the creator of the world "Mathum Matha" celebrated the first Manau Poi as praising of Gods (Bhikan Gundan Poi). This festival later came to be known as "Shapawang Yawng Manau Poi" in the memory of their ancestor "Shapawang Yawng". This colourful festival is started by putting up SHADUNG which is regarded as the symbol of the festival. "SHADUNG GIDHING GUMDIN MANAU" the dance of unity is performed to proclaim praise, unity and prosperity. At the end of the dance, "PADENG MANAU" the war winning dance, "SHUT MANAU" the celebration dance, "KUMRAN MANAU", the farewell dance etc. are performed. One can come and is a part of this dance festival and enjoy the Singpho tribal food, enjoy the home stay and should not miss the chance of enjoying a cup of hand processed Singpho tea called 'Phalap'.

The Sema Nagas which is another tribe dwelling in the valley celebrates "Tuluni" as the most important festival on 8th of July every year, when the paddy seeds develop inside the stem. It is observed for healthy growth of the crop. On the festival day, all men and women wear traditional attire, colourful shawls, ornaments, ivory, scarlet hair and horn bill's feathers. Men and women sing and dance in groups. Animals are slaughtered for the feast and it is believed to promote unity and brotherhood.

Another tribal community the Tai Phake community celebrates festivals like 'Poi Sangken', the celebrations to bathe Lord Buddha's image and also 'Mai Ko Sum Fai', the festival to give farewell to winter. It is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of January or February as per the Tai Phake calendar. On the bank of sandy river villagers gather together and offer flowers, candles near the Meji (a sacred fire which is lit up has belief to end the sufferings and agony). This Meji

is constructed with fire woods in triangular or pentagonal shape. Community feast is also organized, after due offerings to god.

One should come and explore the natural beauty of the area surrounding the tribal villages and can learn to live with nature. Various tribes and ethnic groups have their own colourful festivals which will definitely be interesting to the tourists. They only need to organize these communities and to make them aware about the Community Based Eco-Tourism where no resort is necessarily be established but requires active involvement of the community.

The Tea tribes are another important tribe giving colour to the cultural richness in the area. The "Jhumur" dance along with beats of the "Madal" – a playing instrument will definitely compel any one to dance to the beat. These tribes are serving as the backbone of the tea industry and are involved right from planting of the tea plant to make it ready for a cup.

Digboi a historical place, which has the first and oldest oil well in Asia, is only 13 km away from Margherita Town and still preserved as a monument. Tourists can visit the museum to have some ideas of its past. Besides this, one can also visit the war cemeteries, for those who play golf will not be deprived too as the town has a 18 hole golf course developed by the Scottish pioneers. Besides many 8 hole golf course in its vicinity.

Holidaying in the community as an Eco-Tourist and undertaking adventurous trip in the wilderness will definitely be fun in this wonderful place where one can learn different aspects with all first hand information. So there is the need to create mass awareness, by producing about the CBET initiative though out the areas, consisting of the interviews with community leaders about tourism activities in their areas, giving emphasis to community roles about their culture. This can also be sent for wide publicity in the national televisions and at conferences, tourisms trade shows and should also be given to the National and International Tour Operators who bring tourists. Proper information regarding transportation, accommodation, sight seeing should also be in the Internet website along with the descriptions of the areas, so that it can create interest in the minds of the Eco-Tourists and in this regard below given points will be useful:

- Providing coordination between such projects with other related projects in the region;

- Providing technical assistance through established Government departments such as the department of the environment, forest departments, social services or cooperatives, etc.;
- Can provide market research and promotional assistance through the tourism bureau;
- In some instances, Government can provide financial support for CBET enterprises;
- Reducing, deferring or exempting tax payments from the community; and
- Finally, Government can play a big role in developing and implementing policies, which will allow the flexible development of CBET enterprises.

The State Government of Assam is giving lots of emphasis upon the development of tourism sector of the State; organizing different tourism festivals in the state and time has come up to work upon these issues:

- Elaborate methodology for regional Eco-Tourism planning;
- Formulate an Eco-Tourism market study;
- Organize conferences on Eco-Tourism development and management;
- Prepare a guide for Eco-Tourism management in the conflict areas; and
- Define regulations and quality standards for Eco-Tourism activities.

EPILOGUE:

It can be summarized that Eco-Tourism perhaps more than any other tourism segment needs particular solution and infrastructure that reflect the uniqueness of each destinations, its natural environment and its culture in context with WTO objectives- "we are to generate awareness among the public authorities, private sector, the civil society and consumers regarding eco tourism, capacity in enhancing conservation of natural and cultural heritage, improving the local community standards of living in rural areas act, in encouraging a better knowledge of and respect for natural resources, indigenous cultural and their diversity". In one hand there is increased concerns that sustain our lives, on the other hand poverty, disease are casting over the world. In such situation, Eco-Tourism can be a solution which is not only a sector with greater potential for economic development especially in remote areas where only few other possibilities exist but also a powerful tool for conservation for the national environment if it is properly planned and managed.

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