



Creating Entrepreneurial Environment through Eco-Tourism for Women Entrepreneurs: A Strategic Framework

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship, Eco-Tourism, Women Entrepreneurs.

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ABSTRACT *We all know that Entrepreneurship plays an important role in developing and contributing to the economy of our country. Entrepreneurship development has always been a strategy in our country for achieving the twin objectives i.e., promoting Entrepreneurship and also speeding up rapid industrialization on the other hand. Tourism as we all knows is currently the world largest industry and Eco-Tourism represents the fastest growing sector of this market. Entrepreneurial activities in Eco-Tourism products have tremendous opportunity for the entrepreneurs of Assam and in the other North Eastern states of India. Considering this the paper seeks to propose and articulate a strategic framework for the development of Eco-Tourism enterprises as an entrepreneurial option for Women in Assam.*

PRELUDE:

By and large, it is widely admitted that Tourism is one of the few sectors that can bring about a real growth to the economy without creating significant regional or economic disparity. Tourism is also recognized as the most promising industry globally, which possesses tremendous capacity for growth and revenue generation. This industry has made inroad into the mainstream of the economy quietly but firmly. Throughout last few decades Tourism has been generating receipts, which was larger than the world trade. Worldwide, Eco-Tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of Tourism today. More and more destinations are becoming interested in green Tourism, cultural Tourism and eco-tours, and are considering Eco-Tourism as part of their Tourism strategy. For Eco-Tourism to develop effectively in a planned and controlled manner, there first needs to be a general understanding of the meaning of the term.

Generally, Eco-Tourism is "any Tourism taking place in a natural environment."

More specifically, it has been defined by a variety of organizations as:

"Environmentally responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative impacts, and provides beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. It is a concept of development that respects tradition, protects and preserves the environment, and educates and welcomes visitors. It also includes culture where it is part of the local environment, and advocates an extension of the role of local communities from being mere beneficiaries to key players, having an active and direct role in the Eco Tourism venture."

The above definition depicts an activity that is environmentally friendly and sustainable. It also assumes certain type of traveler, one that is committed to the outdoors and nature conservation. Studies have shown that nature tourists are often wealthier, better educated, more mature and more environmentally focused in comparison to other tourists. They take longer trips and spend more money per day than travellers with less of an interest in nature. Compared to other and less sustainable economic options, Eco-Tourism can be a viable means of public/private sector job creation that preserves both the local environment and culture. Most importantly, sound Eco-Tourism policies can accomplish more than providing the jobs needed to build a private sector-based economy –they also can and should support and maintain desired traditional practices, which visitors come to see. The benefits of Eco-Tourism have clearly been observed by governments in both developing and developed nations.

Belize, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Kenya are models of successful and sustainable Eco-Tourism. These destinations offer unique environments and wildlife, and earn much-needed foreign exchange through Eco-Tourism. Other countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada are vigorously investing in and promoting Eco-Tourism to diversify their Tourism bases. However, there are several impediments that seriously threaten the sustainability of Eco Tourism and Eco-Tourism products. Among them are unrestricted logging and building activities for commercial purposes, causing environmental degradation and depletion of resources. This is detrimental to the sustainability of Eco-Tourism in an already fragile environment. The very nature of Eco Tourism is that it relies heavily on the natural environment. Since it is essentially resource-based, the sector is in danger of undermining its very existence if the social and ecological implications of the activities are ignored and not addressed in a comprehensive policy package.

At present women constitute almost half of the population in the world. But their representation in gainful employment is comparatively low. But the global evidences buttress that women have been performing exceedingly well in different spheres of activities like academics, politics, administration, social work and so on and now they have started plunging into industry also and running their enterprises successfully. Indian women business owners are changing the face of businesses of today, both literally and figuratively. The dynamic growth and expansion of women-owned businesses is one of the defining trends of the past decade, and all indications are that it will continue unabated. For more than a decade, the number of women-owned businesses has grown at one-and-a-half to two times the rate of all businesses. Even more important, the expansion in revenues and employment has far exceeded the growth in numbers. The result of these trends is that women-owned businesses span the entire range of business life cycle and business success, whether the measuring sticks is revenue, employment or longevity. This strengthens the view that all governmental programs and policies should target at strengthening women's Entrepreneurship in their native lands. This paper is a humble attempt to articulate a strategic framework for the development of Eco-Tourism enterprises as an entrepreneurial option for Women in Assam.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are to highlights:

1. A strategic framework for the development of sustainable Eco-Tourism enterprises as an entrepreneurial option for Women in Assam.
2. To propose some key recommendation that needs to be implemented for strengthening the proposed framework.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA-BASE:

The paper is purely based upon secondary data's available in the context of Eco-Tourism Development and Promotion of Women Entrepreneurship and sources of procurement of these data's includes Journals, Magazines, Periodicals, Books, Published Research Articles and website sources.

ECO-TOURISM AND ASSAM:

Eco-Tourism is not new to Assam, Kaziranga, for instance, has been receiving a steady flow of nature tourists for years. Other areas, such as Manas, are increasingly touted as excellent destinations for bird watchers and nature treks. What is new; however, is an expanding Eco-Tourism market that includes destinations other than the popular wildlife sanctuaries, and innovative strategies to capitalize on this new trend. Within the entire Assam region and beyond, much of the potential for Tourism development falls within the scope of Eco-Tourism. Possible activities include nature treks, village stays, tribal festivals, and visits to smaller wildlife parks which provide entrepreneurial possibilities for women to exploit these opportunities. Throughout the area, there are numerous natural resources that are unique and relatively unspoiled and by far its main attraction. However, many of the natural and cultural resources are currently underdeveloped to cater to Eco Tourism.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP, ECO-TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Women entrepreneurs may be defined as the women or a group who initiate, organize and operate business enterprises. During the last two decades, Indian women have entered the field of Entrepreneurship in greatly increasing numbers. With the emergence and growth of their businesses, they have contributed to the global economy and to their surrounding communities.

The upcoming discussion aim to propose a framework of a generalize view for the sustainable Eco-Tourism project and at the same time to provide sets of specific guidelines for the potential women entrepreneurs in Assam to would like to establish sustainable Eco-Tourism enterprises.

Eco-Tourism is a form of Tourism that can provide a means of economically sustainable growth while protecting and enhancing the environment and local culture, and educating both visitors and residents about the appropriate use of resources. Accordingly, any sound Eco-Tourism development policy must incorporate the following key elements which should be well known by all potential entrepreneurs particularly the women entrepreneurs for development of sustainable Eco-Tourism projects.

- Protections of the environment - in many economies, loss of resources are caused by population growth, weather, and extractive industries like mining. Eco-Tourism can provide sustainable economic support for the protection of the environment.
- Economic sustainability – Eco-Tourism can provide a ready means of income, including foreign exchange. It must also benefit local residents by ensuring sufficient financial returns and an equitable distribution of costs and benefits.
- Cultural integrity and enhancement – the word 'ecology' in Eco-Tourism implies a two-way relationship between visitors and residents involving cultural exchange, but also mutual respect and reciprocity. If these elements are missing at a tourist destination, the warm welcomes could soon turn into resentment.
- Educational value – awareness in and appreciation of both the natural environment and the unique local cultures must be created in visitors and residents and also passed down to the next generation.

ECO-TOURISM GUIDELINES:

It is recommended that each destination in the state has a set of specific guidelines to regulate Eco-Tourism planning and management. Guidelines also can create awareness and understanding of what is expected from both visitors and resident. Some examples are guidelines for legislation, codes

for development and structures, codes for the community for on-site activities, and conduct codes for tourists and industry operator behavior and activities. These guidelines should be towards a model code for environmentally responsible Tourism:

Any code for environmentally responsible Tourism must reflect the necessity to ensure a sustainable future, meet the needs of the Tourism industry today, and not compromise the ability of future generations to conserve the environment. To that end, it must call for an environmental ethics that enhances:

- Long-term profitability;
- Product sustainability; and
- Equity from one generation to the next.

Furthermore, it should:

- Recognize the impact upon the environment of all aspects of Tourism;
- Accept that Tourism should be environmentally responsible;
- Accept that both Tourism and conservation can be valid and complementary uses of the environment;
- Recognize that every part of the environment has limits beyond which development should not take place; and
- Recognize the need to foster a greater understanding of the interrelationship between Tourism and the environment.

For establishing Eco-Tourism enterprises, the potential women entrepreneurs should have proper ideas on the above mentioned points.

MODEL ECO-TOURISM IMPLEMENTATION PLAN:

The following is a Public Sector guide for a model Eco-Tourism implementation plan that includes the full range of elements which to be considered during implementing an Eco-Tourism policy. The potential women entrepreneurs should have better ideas to these under mentioned elements.

Development Objectives:

- Establish Eco-Tourism objectives that reflect all economic, environmental and socio-cultural concerns. These need to be decided in consultation with communities and NGOs.
- Designate Eco Tourism areas and activities to streamline the development process. Individuals and villages need to identify their interest in providers of Eco Tourism businesses and activities.

Inventories:

- Survey and analyze relevant characteristics of the region, including its environment, history, culture, social, economy, resources, land used and tenure;
- Inventory and evaluate the existing and potential Eco-Tourism attractions and activities;

Infrastructure and Facilities:

- Provide the appropriate infrastructure and facilities for Eco-Tourism development. If foreign capital is required, make sure adequate impact fees and government revenues are negotiated;
- Establish mechanisms to assist the private sector in developing Eco-Tourism enterprises and find ways to help them conform to new environmental standards.

Market:

- Analyze present and future international and domestic Eco-Tourism markets, establish market goals, and correlate accommodations and other tourist facilities and service needs;
- Know the market so that realistic expectations and goals can be met. The market must be accessible through adequate communication and transportation networks;

Development:

- Establish a regional Eco-Tourism development policy, giving consideration to balanced economic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors;

- Form a development plan for the structure of Eco-Tourism in the region, including major Eco-Tourism attractions and activity areas, Eco-Tourism development areas, and transportation access and linkages;

Economic:

- Conduct an economic analysis of present levels, and forecast future levels, of Eco-Tourism development in the state;
- Consider ways to enhance economic benefits;

Environmental:

- Evaluate the environmental impact of Eco-Tourism: find ways to reduce or prevent negative impact, and reinforce positive outcomes;
- Link Eco-Tourism with resource conservation efforts, including the establishment of protected areas; management of parks, watersheds, energy, water, waste, soil, and agricultural zones; natural disaster loss reduction; and protection of fisheries and prime agricultural and forestry lands.

Cultural:

- Evaluate the socio-cultural impact of Eco-Tourism, promote ways to reduce or prevent negative impact, and reinforce positive outcomes;
- Empower locals to become stakeholders in Eco-Tourism projects and to use management techniques that are consistent with local values;

Standards:

- Design and enforce quality standards for accommodation and other nature tourist facilities.
- Facilitate the adherence to standards by providing financial or tax incentives and access to specialists.

Human Resource:

- Plan for necessary human resource requirements by promoting local job creating and Entrepreneurship in Eco-Tourism;
- Provide adequate education and training for Eco-Tourism providers, including certification and training programs, community awareness programs, and facilitation of technological and skills transfer;

Organizational:

- Establish a working relationship between public and private organizations, to effectively coordinate certain Tourism functions such as marketing.

Investments:

- Establish investment incentives to encourage private sector investment in the development of Eco-Tourism facilities and services. The incentives should aim to Promote sustainable economic growth;

Indigenous Accommodations:

By utilizing and supplementing existing traditional accommodations, Eco-Tourism can ensure that cultural authenticity and integrity are maintained while providing a positive and quality experience for both visitors and residents. This will help indigenous communities to:

- Generate income and employment expansion with relatively little change and capital;
- Sustain activities that use local materials;

THE FINANCIAL AND FISCAL VIABILITY OF ECO TOURISM:

To establish viable Eco-Tourism enterprises the potential women entrepreneurs should have a proper knowledge on the under mentioned points.

Social Cost-Benefit Analysis:

Methods to determine financial viability are through feasibility studies or cost-benefit studies. Feasibility studies use projections to determine whether the project should be under-

taken on the basis of returns on investment, while financial analysis predicts whether the project would be worthwhile on the basis of positive net benefits. When more than one alternative produces positive benefits over costs, the one with the highest net benefit is chosen. The difficulty of relying solely on these types of valuation is that many of the benefits of Eco-Tourism are difficult to measure. When assessing the financial viability and feasibility of Eco-Tourism, care should be taken to assess and value other and often excluded benefits of Eco-Tourism.

Business Finance:

Like other small-scale entrepreneurs, Eco Tourism operator's (potential women entrepreneurs in this case) may have difficulty in obtaining funds through formal banking institutions. Banks reduce risk by lending to well-established operations with proven track records. It is also more cost effective for lenders to process a small number of large loans. Furthermore, large borrowers have the knowledge and resources to prepare comprehensive business plans, give suitable guarantees, and demonstrate commercial viability. As a result, small indigenous businesses have had limited success in obtaining financing from the formal sector and have had to rely on informal sources of money from savings, friends and relatives, salaries from another job, profit from other businesses, or grants. Although the failure rate is high, it is probably not any higher than in other places. Studies have shown that the causes for failure are the same as elsewhere: lack of management skills and business experience, lack of capital, the impact of government policies, and the inability to control personal relations or communal commitments. Additional problems were a lack of information, uncertain market factor, and inappropriate training and advice.

Provision of Infrastructure:

The government should provide basic infrastructure, such as transportation, power, and education. While provision of infrastructure is crucial for the success of Eco Tourism, ways to stimulate greater private participation should be found. This could prove to be more efficient by reducing the fiscal and administrative burden on the public sector, as well as stimulating Entrepreneurship.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES:

Eco-Tourism is based upon maintaining the integrity of unique natural environments. Changing the use of natural and cultural resources from traditional ways to new Tourism uses will sometimes require creativity in managing the environment within the policy and planning process.

Possible Negative Environmental Impacts of Eco-Tourism:

Even though the goals of Eco-Tourism is to protect natural environments, negative environmental impacts may result if the rate of Eco-Tourism development is too rapid and if sound planning practices, regulations and monitoring system are not in place. For example, unchecked visits by nature tourist could result in:

- Destructive changes in animal and plant composition;
- Pollution;
- Erosion; or
- Deletion or destruction of natural resources and scenery.

As in other parts of the world, insensitive or excessive tourist visitation could result in the destruction of the natural environment of Assam. Unwise construction of Tourism projects disrupts the ecology of forests and animal habitats. An understanding on environmental impact, both positive and negative, is essential for the sound development of Eco-Tourism policy. Appropriate techniques need to be used to assess the positive and negative impact of Eco-Tourism in developing an Eco-Tourism policy. Such a policy for the development and management of environmental resources in Assam must also have significant support from all parties involved. Finally, policies must identify who is responsible for specific actions within the legal and political framework, so that they can be properly implemented.

TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES:

To develop Eco-Tourism successfully the under mentioned elements will be very important:

- Air Transportation – this is critical for the development of Eco-Tourism. Because of extensive geographic distances from major markets, adequate air service is necessary for travel to any parts of a country. However, the reality is limited air service that is too far removed from many Eco-Tourism locations. This lack of accessibility has provided limits to Tourism development in Assam. Nature tourists are more flexible and more willing to adapt, but accessible transportation can do much to contribute to a positive Eco-Tourism experience. The government should consider eliminating barriers to building or upgrading small regional airfields and airports.
- Ground transportation – adequate ground transportation and roads must be available to accommodate nature tourists. Motor vehicle traffic in tourist regions frequently leads to congestion, air pollution and noise. Eco-Tourism can be the means by which the expense of providing improved roads can be justified.
- Communication – the physical isolation of some areas of Upper Assam makes communication difficult and expensive. However, some reliable form of communications, like mobile telephone and computer networks services, are necessary.

More importantly the role of travel agencies will be vital to meet any requirements in form of transportation and communication issues.

ECO-TOURISM ACCOMMODATIONS:

The potential women entrepreneurs can think for the under-mentioned Eco-Tourism Accommodations:

- Hotels – they need to be designed as functional, yet with enough consideration given to integrating them into the natural environment, resulting in culturally and environmentally appropriate structures. Rather than wanting to stay in standard western hotel rooms, nature tourists prefer to stay in accommodation that capture the charm, maintain the scale, and embrace local architectural styles. Eco-Tourism accommodation should also be built with the natural surroundings in mind and without making excessive demands on the available resources.

- Tribal village accommodation – village stays are a very appropriate means of promoting Eco-Tourism where are focus is on the indigenous culture. Even short visits can provide nature tourists with a meaningful experience that maximizes their participation with the local culture.
- Private homes – accommodation for nature tourists in private homes are very desirable for Eco Tourism. Bed and breakfast type hotels provide income and job opportunities for local entrepreneurs. Staying in the home of a local family offers a way for residents to share their way of life with nature tourists, as well as to benefit directly from tourist income. This affords greater authenticity to the nature tourist, but requires involvement and commitment of the entire family or village for it to succeed.
- Safety and health care facilities – safety and health are the primary concerns of any tourist, including nature tourists. Adequate health services and medicine must be available and accessible. Nature tourists often engage in strenuous and sometimes high-risk physical activities. Safety precautions are advisable and treatment must be available in the event of accident or illness.

EPILOGUE:

The purpose of the above framework is to provide some basic strategic guidelines that would support the sustainable development of Eco-Tourism and thereby promotes women Entrepreneurship in Assam. Most of the recommendations are not novel and have been applied in other parts of the world. They aim to assist local and policy makers in Assam in creating a sound Eco-Tourism strategy that would be both economically viable and ecologically sound and promotes Eco-Tourism based enterprises for the women in Assam. Some additional regulatory analysis and planning is clearly needed in order to accomplish the goals of protecting the environment, achieving economic sustainability, maintaining culture integrity, and providing educational value for locals and visitors. Mass Tourism is sometimes opposed because of the perception that it does not benefit local people. By contrast, Eco-Tourism perceived to be a positive force in the community. However, it must be endorsed and supported by everyone. The government should take the lead in coordinating the development of Eco Tourism, but the control and management of resources should involve the entire community where such enterprises will be set up. Eco-Tourism should sustain the natural resources, but it should also serve the social, cultural and economic needs to the people. As such, it can be best incorporated into the community through the community-based economic development strategy.

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