



## Study of Ecotourism: A Special Reference to Assam

### KEYWORDS

Ecotourism, Environment, Conservation, Bio-diversity, livelihood

**Iftikhar Hussain**

Assistant Professor Lanka Mahavidyalaya, Lanka, Dist Nagaon (Assam)

**Dr. Daisy Das**

Assistant Professor North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya

**ABSTRACT** Assam has tremendous strength and potentials to develop ecotourism, whereas government of Assam and the department of tourism have not introduced any ecotourism policy. Its cultural variety, ethnic mixture and diverse flora and fauna make the state ecotourism hot spot. In the second objective of tourism policy of Assam- 2008, though the word 'ecotourism' is not mentioned but emphasis has been given to harness the tourism potentials of the state in such a manner that it become environmentally sustainable, socio-culturally enriching and economically beneficial to the people. Mainstream tourism is geared towards tourist satisfaction and ecotourism on the other hand, has conservation (of nature and culture) and livelihoods (economic and educational benefits) as essential constituents. This paper examines the ecotourism and tourism policy of government of India and Assam and also explains the ecotourism destinations in the state of Assam, India.

### I. Introduction

Ecotourism perhaps is the most over-used and mis-used word in the travel industry. A walk through the rainforest is not ecotourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environment and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water reuse, and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism. Linderberg et al. (1996) has observed that ecotourism achieved the objectives of generating economic benefits to local and also good instrument for generating of local support for conservation of nature. Matthews (2002) asserts that ecotourism can integrate conservation of biodiversity with livelihood benefits of local communities when planned properly. Thmpi (2005) has found that ecotourism decrease their dependence on forest resource and increasing their commitment to keeping the forest intact. According to Ameer and Fathima (2008) the vast geographical diversity of India offers great scope for the development of ecotourism and this is the right practice to reduce forest dependence. Stronza and Gordillo (2008) explained that how ecotourism has change the life of different communities of Amazon by providing livelihood to indigenous people. This has not only minimized environmental impacts but also generating income for the local communities (Gurung and Seeland, 2008, Mbaowa et al., (2011). Raju has (2009) observed that the local community must be involved to get livelihood and other tangible benefits (portable water, roads, health clinics etc.) from the conservation area and available tourist facilities.

So far Assam is concerned, Gogoi et al. (2011) has found that Kaziranga National Park (KNP) with its rich bio-diversity resources is the favored destination of both domestic and foreign tourists. But emphasis has been given on developing of ecotourism in Kaziranga since it enabled community participation, minimizes pollution and reduces man-animal conflicts (Baruah, 2010 and Khound 2011). Development of ecotourism is the need of the hour for conservation of biodiversity and promoting rural livelihood in KNP. Therefore, this paper tries to explore the issue and the main objectives of the paper are to-

- To review the ecotourism policies of government of India

and government of Assam and

- To evaluate the potential of ecotourism in the state of Assam

### II. Ecotourism policy of government of India and government of Assam-

The only document available with regard to ecotourism policy at national level is the ecotourism policy and guidelines 1998, which identifies key players in ecotourism as-government, development operators and suppliers, visitors, host community, NGOs and research institutions (Eco-Tourism Policy-Draft, GOI-2006). It also prescribes operational guide lines for these key players. The policy defines and approaches ecotourism with a clear conservation bias. Though there is an ecotourism policy but it is seen that ecotourism policies often conflict with policies of the tourism sector. Except in Kerala, there has been no attempt to craft a nodal agency for ecotourism, where the roles of different government departments are specified in any policy documents.

The ecotourism policy lacks proper guidelines and administrative instructions to involve local community in the ecotourism venture. Even in cases where local community is projected as beneficiaries, benefits mostly confine to employment of a few locals as guides and cooks. Other forms of benefits sharing measures are mostly absent. Objectives of ecotourism cannot be met without a focused and concentrated approach. The National policies and guidelines should be drawn for the proposed components of ecotourism, within the purview of international environmental treaties and related Indian legislation (Eco-Tourism Policy-Draft, GOI-2006). Extensive decision making powers of Panchayati Raj institutions under schedule XI of Indian constitution could be made use of to ensure realization of all aspects of ecotourism- nature and culture conservation, livelihood opportunities, local participation and regular monitoring.

In Assam, Ecotourism is included in the tourism policy 2008 but there is no separate ecotourism policy for the state. Whereas Assam has tremendous strength and potentials to develop ecotourism, Government of Assam and the Department of Tourism have not introduced any ecotourism policy. Its cultural variety, ethnic mixture and diverse flora and fauna make the state ecotourism hot spot. In the second objective of tourism policy of Assam- 2008, though the word 'ecotourism' is not mentioned but emphasis has been given to harness the tourism potentials of the state in such a manner that it become environmentally sustainable, socio-culturally enriching and economically beneficial to the people. Main-

stream tourism is geared towards tourist satisfaction and ecotourism on the other hand, has conservation (of nature and culture) and livelihoods (economic and educational benefits) as essential constituents. Any tourism venture with a potentially large impact or dependence on local ecology and/or culture could be regarded as Eco-tourism (Eco-Tourism Policy, Draft, GOI-2006).

In a state like Assam where more than 80% population of the state depends on subsistence farming, the concept of ecotourism or the community based ecotourism (CBT) would go a long way in providing better income generation options to the rural people. Ecotourism not only generate income but it will help in conservation of local traditions, culture, flora and fauna and environment. Tourism policy of Assam 2008 has mentioned about the wild life tourism, river tourism/ adventure tourism, tea and golf tourism, religious tourism, cultural and heritage tourism, rural tourism etc. but nothing is mentioned about the development of ecotourism in the state. Ecotourism not only give emphasis in the generation of income and employment but it also gives more emphasis on the conservation and local participation. Economic sustainability is a core aspect of all development initiatives. Ecotourism ultimately seeks to contribute to the wellbeing of the community both directly and indirectly. The benefits of community based ecotourism particularly in rural areas providing income to communities, discouraging migration to urban areas, and maintaining biodiversity, are widely acclaimed (Vinodan & Manalel, 2011).

### III. Ecotourism in Assam:

Assam is the second largest state in north eastern part of India. It is dominated by rivers like the Brahmaputra and the Barak. Though Assam has been hospitable to visitors from an ancient era, yet tourism started flourishing only after the establishment of the Directorate of Tourism of Assam in 1959. Over the years, since 1959, this department has made considerable progress in this sector. The total number of tourists that Assam has been receiving since 1995 and the revenue generated is shown in Table I.

**Table I: Tourist Inflow and Revenue Collection from Tourism in Assam**

YEAR	NO. OF TOURISTS	REVENUE (IN Rs.)	% CHANGE IN REVENUE
1996-97	7,43,545	36,87,458.00	
1997-98	8,79,110	34,72,396.00	-5.48
1998-99	7,75,889	40,56,888.00	+16.03
1999-2000	9,88,329	31,72,666.00	-21.79
2000-01	9,68,444	35,87,224.00	+13.06
2001-02	16,95,882	38,88,841.00	+8.40
2002-03	20,09,483	41,03,051.00	+5.50
2003-04	20,36,952	60,44,642.00	+47.37
2004-05	21,95,605	69,02,443.00	+14.19
2005-06	25,94,737	87,11,185.00	+26.20
2006-07	34,93,527	81,29,651.00	-6.67
2007-08	35,03,613	94,99,820.00	+16.85
2008-09	37,13,239	1,03,91,516.00	+ 9.38
2009-10	39,10,224	1,31,63,299.00	+26.67
2010-11	41,43,080	1,43,60,969.00	+9.09

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam.

The Table I indicates that there is some sort of fluctuation, both in the number of tourists and the revenue collected there from. As can be seen, in 1998-99, there was a decrease in the number of tourists; but there was an increase of 16.03% in the revenue collected. On the other hand, in 2006-07, there was an increase in the number of tourists, but it led to a decrease of 6.67% in the revenue collection. However, since 2007-09, Assam has been witnessing an increase, both in the number of tourists and the revenue collected. Of course, the rise in revenue collection does not have much gradual tendency, yet it can be termed encouraging.

Though the state has sufficient resources, only six places are identified as ecotourism destinations. These are the Ka-

ziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Orang National Park, Nameri National Park, Halflong and Majuli. But Assam, the most prominent state of North East India is said to be the hotspot for tourists for its natural beauty and favourable climate. Assam is rich in natural resources. There are five national parks, seventeen wildlife and bird sanctuaries and 2 biosphere reserves. A brief review of the five national parks and other ecotourism destinations of Assam are given in the next few lines:

#### (i) Kaziranga National Park (K.N.P):

The Kaziranga National Park enjoys the limelight in Assam. It is situated in the Nagaon and Golaghat districts of central Assam, on the southern part of the Brahmaputra and at the foot of the Karbi Anglong hills. It occupies an important place in the world ecosystem. The whole park has a large number of water bodies, hilly terrains, marshes and plains where dwell many species of unique flora and fauna, starting right from the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros to tiny turtles and where one can gather an exhilarating experience of adventure sports and an evergreen memory of the awe-inspiring nature.

#### (ii) Manas National Park:

Manas National Park, a world heritage site and an important tiger project of India, is located in the northern part of the BARPETA district on the bank of the Manas River. About 157 km away from the state capital Guwahati, the park has a core area of 360 km. It is a place famous for the golden langur, pigmy hog, hispid hare, wild buffalo, leopard etc. Occasional dwellers i.e. migratory birds like river chats, fork-tails, cormorants etc are often spotted here. All in all, Manas is a forest of endangered and rare flora and fauna and provides rafting and angling facilities to tourists.

#### (iii) Nameri National Park:

Nameri National Park, the third national park of Assam is 216 km from Guwahati. Besides flora and fauna viewing, the main tourist attractions of Nameri are-trekking, bird watching, angling on the Jiabharali etc. It may be worth mentioning that angling for the golden mahseer has been the trademark of Nameri right from British Raj. The Tourism Department of the Assam Government has developed an ecotourism resort at Bhalukpong, which is about 21 km from the park. There is also an eco camp at Potalali which provides both accommodation and food, making the tourists awe-stricken by nature. (Bora and Gogoi, 2008)

#### (iv) Orang National Park:

Orang National Park is situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. Covering an area of 78.81 sq km, the park is the home to many endangered species of wildlife like the rhinoceros, spot billed pelican and greater adjutant stork etc. There is a possibility of water sports in the Brahmaputra and Dhansiri near the park with ample scope of cycling and trekking in the countryside too. Thus, it is seen that the Orang National Park is filled with ecotourism potentials. But the accessibility to this park is limited. Due to the lack of publicity and required facility, the area is yet to gain popularity among foreign tourists.

(v) Majuli: Majuli is a large river island in the Brahmaputra river in Assam with a total area of 1,250 square kilometers (483 sq mi), but having lost significantly to erosion, it now has an area of only 421.65 square kilometers. Majuli has been the cultural capital and the cradle of Assamese civilization for the past five hundred years. The satras' set up there, preserve antiques like weapons, utensils, jewellery and other items of cultural significance. Pottery is done in Majuli from beaten clay and burnt in driftwood fired kilns in the same mode as carried out by the people of the ancient Harrappan Civilization. Sociologists have stressed on the preservation of these unique people, whose culture and dance forms are untouched by modernism. The handloom work of these tribes

is also internationally famous. The satras have also honed certain art and craft traditions, which can now be found only here.

**(vi) Haflong:**

Haflong is a town and the headquarters of Dima Hasao district in Assam. It is about 325 km from Guwahati and is well connected by NF railway and ASTC buses from Guwahati. It is adorably known as the 'Switzerland of the East'. Haflong is a quaint hill station, breathtakingly beautiful. It is garlanded by hills and is an unending saga of gently flowing streams and waterfalls. The hills are hidden by rolling mists and clouds that float within one's fingertips. Places that attract tourists in Haflong are: Jatinga: Jatinga is just 9 km from Haflong and world famous for bird mystery (Birds Harakiri). The migratory birds come during the months August to November and commit suicide, hence making it the ornithologist's attraction. Some other tourists attraction are Maibang, Umrango and Panimoor:

**(vii) Chandubi Lake:**

The Chandubi Lake is situated at a distance of 64 kilometers from the city of Guwahati in Assam. Chandubi Lake is a popular destination for ecotourism. The lake holds the rich floral system. It is the home to a large number of aquatic plants. The lake also holds exotic wildlife. It is the breeding ground of both the residential and migratory birds. The lake offers its visitors the opportunity to go for fishing in the water of the lake.

**(viii) Rani Reserved Forest:**

Rani Reserve Forest, an undisturbed corridor of rainforest that connects Assam with Myanmar and the rest of Far East, is about 20 km from Guwahati. Featured by breath-taking view, hilly terrains and cultural diversity, Rani contains a rich faunal miscellany. Prominent among them are: the elephant, barking deer, sambar, capped langur, leopard and several varieties of reptiles. Rani hosts an extensive network of fisheries with 23 acres under aqua cultivation including cultivation of ornamental and edible fishes. It also hosts a dairy farm and a piggery (Government of Assam). Rani, dotted with sal, is however facing an unbridled commercial exploitation of time. According to the Assam Tribune of 13 March, 2010, the required protection of the area by the government is missing. But even with many problems and restrictions, Rani still doesn't fail to be an ecotourism destination of Guwahati.

**(ix) Hajo:**

Hajo is about 30 km from Guwahati. It contains vast areas of wetlands where people can enjoy fishing. The hills and forest areas of Hajo have wide scopes of developing eco friendly adventure sports like trekking, mountaineering, rock climbing etc. It is a pilgrim centre of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and is thus, very popular among tourists.

**(x) Darranga:**

Darranga is at a distance of 45 km, north of Rangia, on the Assam-Bhutan border of the Nalbari district. Darranga is well known for the annual fair called 'Darranga Mela'. The Mela starts in autumn and continues upto the spring season. This is a meeting point of the people from the plains and hills. The life style and culture of its people is very interesting for tourists. The place is rich in natural beauty and ideal for cycling. Besides, tourists are attracted to the textile and Bhutanese products noticed especially during the Darranga Mela.

**(xi) Mayong:**

It is located in the Morigaon district at about 35 km from the outskirts of Guwahati. Mayong is the melting point of different tribes and communities of Assam, where each lives in harmony. The people of Mayong lead a very obsolete life. Black magic and witchcraft are the identities of Mayong.

**(xii) Bardowa:**

Bardowa is situated 16km away from Nagaon. It is a holy place for the Assamese community as the Vaishnava Saint Sri Sri Sankardev was born in 1449 in Alipukhuri near Bardowa. SriSankardev built the foundation of Assamese culture and enriched its literature in Bardowa and hence, this place is famous for the Satriya dance and Bhaona (folk drama).

**(xiii) Bhairabkunda:**

Bhairabkunda is a popular picnic spot in Udalguri District in the State of Assam, India. It is situated on the Border of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, near the Bhutanese town Daifam. It is considered an ideal ecotourism destination as there are plenty of scopes for trekking along the Jia Dhansiri that flows by this place.

Apart from the places mentioned above, there are many other places that are yet to be explored and developed from tourism perspectives. Thus it is obvious that the state has a bright future with respect to the tourism industry as a whole and the ecotourism segment in particular. In fact, the large biodiversity, rolling hills, green valleys, virgin forests, the mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries, numerous beels and other wetlands etc-all can make the state a major centre for tourism and ecotourism. In fact, Assam forms a part of global bio-diversity hot spot, with a variety of flora and fauna (Mayers, 1991).

**IV. Conclusion**

Ecotourism has positive and significant effects on the local and state economy as it increases the livelihood opportunities for the local community. Ecotourism is a poverty reduction strategy because it supports and improves local community economically and socially. Participation of local communities in ecotourism is essential to maximize the potential benefits of this sector, eliminate poverty and conserve nature. It is to be mentioned that possible positive socio-economic and environmental benefit of ecotourism could be direct, indirect or induced. But overall, such activities improve human well being by providing opportunities to earn income. In the age of growing automation and consumption, it is very much difficult for a region to preserve its unique folk culture and craftsmanship that exist among the indigenous people. This can only be preserved, when one rediscovers their importance and commercial demand. Ecotourism is a major way by which local art and craft can be re-evaluated and used gainfully. Besides, ecotourism activities may be used to reduce the pressure of mass tourism in the core area.

For the development of ecotourism in the state, different government and local bodies must work together. The government should introduce a new department as "Department of Ecotourism" and this body will look after the development of ecotourism activity in different areas. The NGOs, local bodies, clubs should come forward for provide training to local people for developing their skills. The government and the local bodies must come forward to raise the awareness among the people for flora and fauna.

## REFERENCE

- Ameer, S. & Fathima, P.Y. (2008). Tourism growth in India and ecotourism-Impact on rural development, UGC-SERO Sponsored National Seminar, Guntur: Andhra Christian College | Barua, M. and Sharma, P. (1999). Birds of Kaziranga National Park, India, Forktail 15, 47-60. | Bhattacharya, A.K. & Dubey, Y. Ecotourism-livelihood –security-biodiversity conservation | Baruah, D. (2010, March 19). Experts for controlled eco-tourism in kaziranga, The Assam Tribune. | Bhattacharya, A.K. & Dubey, Y. Ecotourism-livelihood –security-biodiversity conservation Integration-A holistic approach: mpecotourism.org/Research%5cll. (Visited on 21-05-11). | Das, N. (2008). Potential analysis of ecotourism destination in Nameri national park, Assam, Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, 32.2, 63-74. | Devi, M.K., (2012). Ecotourism in Assam: A Promising Opportunity for development, South Asian Journal of Tourism and Heritage, 5(1), 179-192. | Gogoi, J. & Bora, B. (2011). Biodiversity conservation and sustainable ecotourism- case study of Kaziranga national park, a world heritage site in Assam, India. | Gurung, D.B. & Seeland, K. (2008). Ecotourism in Bhutan: Extending its benefits to rural communities, Annals of Tourism Research, 35(2), 489-508. | Heinen, J.T. & Shrivastava, R.J. (2009). An analysis of conservation attitude and awareness around Kaziranga national park, Assam, India: Implications for conservation and development, Population Environment, 30, 261-274. | Honey, Martha. (1999). Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who Own Paradise, Washington, D.Cs: Island Press. | Kaziranga National Park, IUCNCategoryII:[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kaziranga\\_National\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kaziranga_National_Park), (visited on 22-6-2011). | Kaziranga National Park, world heritage site. (2011). Government of Assam, <http://www.assamforest.in>, (visited on 21-05-2011). | Khound. M.(Ed.). (2011). Tourism in north-east India, Guwahati, Purbanchal Prakash. 12. | Lindberg, K., Enriquez, J. & Sproule, K. (1996). Ecotourism questioned: case studies from Belize, Annals of Tourism Research, 23(3),543-562. | Matthews, E. J. (2002). Ecotourism: Are current practices delivering desired outcomes, a comparative case study analysis, Paper submitted for master of urban and regional planning in Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia. | Mayers, N. (1991). The biodiversity challenge, expanded hotspots analysis, Environmentalist, 10 (4). | Mbaiwa, J.E., Thakadu, O.T. & Darkoh, M.B.K. (2011) Indigenous knowledge and ecotourism based livelihoods in the Okavango delta in Botswana. <http://does.google.com/viewer> | Raju, Dr. G.P. (2009). Ecotourism guidance for tour operator, Delhi: Mangalam Publication. | Stronza, A, & Gordillo, J. (2008). Community views of ecotourism, Annals of Tourism Research. 35(2), 448-468 | (doi: 10.1016/j-j-annals.2008.01.002) | Thampi, S.P. (2005). Ecotourism in Kerala, India: Lessons from the eco-development project in Periyar Tiger Reserve, Eco-club.com E-paper, 13. | Tourism Policy of Assam-2008, <http://www.aicldt.com/pdf/tourism.pdf> (Visited on 17-4-2013) | Vinodan, A. & Manalel, J. (2011). Local economic benefits of ecotourism: a case study on parambikulam tiger reserve in Kerala, India, South Asian Journal of Tourism and Heritage, 4(2), 93-109. | White Paper on Eco-Tourism Policy (Draft). (2006) Center for Conservation Governance and Policy Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). | <http://torc.linkbc.ca/tore/downs1/white%20ecotourism%20india.pdf> |