

ECO- TOURISM IN ASSAM --- A SWOT ANALYSIS.

Mrs. Dipanjali Haloi

Assistant Professor, Pandu College

Guwahat-12

haloi.dipanjali2010@gmail.com

+919864228343 (M)

Rajesh Deb Barman

Research Scholar, Dept. of Commerce

Gauhati University, Guwahati-14

rajeshdeb.solutions@gmail.com

+919954207986 (M)

Introduction

The need of human beings to seek pleasure, leisure and a variety of associated activities has resulted in growth of tourism as a major industry. The advancement in means of travel and telecommunication has resulted in opening of many so far unexplored areas to the traveler worldwide. Tourism in general has already become the most important civil industry in the world.

Tourism is a basic and most desirable human activity deserving the praise and encouragement of all people and all Government. Tourism's contribution to the world economy is second only to that of oil. Many countries in the world are concentrating on the tourism sector to boost up their economies. This "smoke-less" industry acts as a catalyst for socio-economic development and also encourages mutual understanding by bringing into its fold a large variety of activities.

Over the last three decades, there has been growing debate on tourism in developing countries and its problematic implications for local communities and the environment. The search for less or non destructive forms of tourism began long before the concept of sustainable development arrived on the agenda in the late 1980s and ecotourism became popular from early nineties. With the increase in demand for new environmentally feasible forms of tourism, ecotourism is the way forward. It is said to be rising at a rate of more than 10%(WTO).

Many definitions of ecotourism have emerged since the coin was termed in 1987. In 1991, The Ecotourism Society (TES) developed the following definition of ecotourism: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people" (Epler Wood 1996). The World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines ecotourism as: "... Is environmentally responsible travel and visitation 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 visitor impact, and provides for

beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.” [IUCN, Tourism, Ecotourism and Protected Areas, Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996]

According to the World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO] tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects [both of the past and the present] found in these areas is defined as ecotourism.

Due to the growing popularity of environmentally related and adventure travel, various types of trips are now being classified as ecotourism. Most of these are not truly ecotourism however because they do not emphasize conservation, education, low impact travel, and social and cultural participation in the locations being visited. According to the International Ecotourism Society to be considered ecotourism, a trip must meet the following principles.

- Minimize the impact of visiting the location (i.e.- the use of roads).
- Build respect and awareness for the environment and cultural practices .
- Ensure that the tourism provides positive experiences for both the visitors and the hosts.
- Provide direct financial aid for conservation.
- Provide financial aid, empowerment and other benefits for local peoples.
- Raise the traveler's awareness of the host country's political, environmental and social climate.

Assam is a paradise for tourists. It is a region where nature herself has painted the vibrant landscape, hillocks, woods , brooks and streams, flora and fauna, countless species of wild animals and plants, mysterious clouds, melodious folk music, thrilling dances and festivals, variety of many delicious dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and above all its green landscape used to attract people from different parts of the world since time immemorial. An abode of one horned rhino, blue rivers and red mountains, aromatic tea gardens make Tourism in Assam a special experience. Assam bears a testimony of rich cultural heritage through its temples, monuments, and torrential Brahmaputra River. It is legendary state in terms of traditions and civilization. .

The Nameri National Park, Dibru-Saikhowa and Bhalukpong in Sonitpur district are famous for Eco- Tourism and very popular with the nature lovers, where there are opportunities galore for the lovers of adventure and water sports. Majuli, on the lap of Brahmaputra, is considered to be the largest river island measuring about 2860 Sq. Km. and is a major centre of Pilgrimage, propagation of Vaisnavism of Hindu Religion, Heritage and , Eco-tourism. The Joypur Rain Forest and Dihing-Patkai and Dibru-Saikhowa etc are very rich sources for the growth of Wild life tourism in Assam. The hills and plains of Assam is famous for bio-diversity and huge numbers of medicinal, ornamental and valuable timbers, bamboos and canes etc. are available in the hills and forests of Assam.

Objective of the study :

This paper will make an Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the Eco tourism in Assam. The main objectives of this study are -----

- To know the strength of eco tourism in Assam i.e., availability of tourist spot in Assam.
- To find out the weaknesses of the development of the eco tourism in Assam.
- To explore the opportunities provided by the eco tourism in Assam.
- To find out the threats facing by the tourist industry in Assam.

Methodology

Since this paper will make an analytical study of the eco- tourism in Assam it will make an indepth 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.

Findings:

1) Strength:

In order to know the strengths of eco-tourism in Assam, we have to know the existing places of tourist attraction in this region. The different places of tourist attraction can be grouped together under four categories: (a) nature-related, (b) historical, (c) religious and (d) others.

- a. Nature related :** Assam offers basically nature-centric tourism with its dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wild life sanctuaries and many rare species of animals. The state offers to the tourists so many places of natural beauty with wide variety of wildlife that very few places in the world can compete with it. Nature tourism understood in terms of wildlife sanctuaries constitutes the core of tourism in Assam. Important nature related tourist places available in Assam are listed in the following table.



Places in alphabetic order	Distance from Guwahati in km	Speciality
1. Bhairabkunda	137	A beautiful place at the border of Arunachal Pradesh
2. Bhalukpong	205	A beautiful place by the side of river Jia Bhoroli, famous for angling and water sports
3. Chandubi	64	A natural lagoon, beautiful picnic spot
4. Dibru-Chaikhowa	490	70 km from Dibrugarh, national park, the habitat of elephants, buffaloes, famous for wild horses
5. Haflong	355	One of the hill stations in Assam with unsurpassed sylvan beauty
6. Jatinga	364	Near Haflong, North Cachar district, a beautiful hilly place, where birds behave in a mysterious way, the local people call that the birds commit suicide here on certain specific days
7. Kaziranga	217	Internationally famous national park, the home of great Indian one-horn rhinoceros, tigers, elephants, buffaloes, deer, wild ducks and geese, breeding place of pelicans, habitat of reptiles and monkeys more particularly golden langurs and host of other species
8. Manas	176	Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, one of the magnificent national parks in the country, the Manas river flows through it, famous for the tiger project, a habitat for various wild animals
9. Orang	150	A wild life sanctuary, known as a miniature Kaziranga
10. Pabitara	65	A wild life sanctuary
11. Potasoli	173	38 km from historic town of Tezpur, near the picturesque river Jia Bhoroli, famous for eco-camp set up jointly by the Department of Forest and Assam Anglers Association

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

An attractive feature of the Assam's forestry is its colourful wildlife. Assam is famous for as the home of one-horned rhinoceros. Some of the endangered species found in the state are hollock gibbon, the stamp tailed macaque, the capped langur, the golden langur, the pigmy hog, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white winged wood-duck, and the like. All these can make Assam as one of the best destination of the tourists. There are five National Parks and eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries for protection and preservation of wildlife in the state. The five National Parks – Kaziranga, Manas, Nameri, Orang and Dibru-Saikhowa covers an area of 1561.14 sq km. The total area covered by eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries is 492.97 sq km.

(b) Religious: Assam has many ancient temples and shrines, some of



Kamakhya Temple

which like Kamakhya date back to pre-historic time. Kamakhya is one of the most revered religious places in the country.

It becomes a centre of attraction in the month of June when it celebrates the Ambubachi mela.

There are other religious places



Ambubachi Mela

where visitors often come from different parts of the country. These places are listed in the following table.

Places in alphabetic order	Distance from Guwahati in km	Speciality
1. Barpeta	137	Famous for a Vaishnava monastery
2. Batadrawa	134	Birth place of Shri Sankardeva, the Vaishnava reformer, saint and a great literary figure
3. Hajo	35	Sacred place for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists
4. Kamakhya		An important religious place of the Hindus within the city of Guwahati, on the top of Nilachal hill, attracts thousands of devotees and other tourists every day by its natural grandeur
5. Madan Kamdev	35	Vast archeological ruins of fine erotic sculpture
6. Majuli	326	The largest river island in the world, centre of Vaishnava culture, seat of many satras which are known as the centres of Assamese art, dance, drama, music, a safe heaven for various migratory birds
7. Surya Pahar	162	Situated on a hill surrounded by innumerable statues of Durga Devi, Ganesha, Surya, Chandra, Buddha

(c) Historical: The base of Assam's history can be found in Tantric literature, Buddhist literature, Assamese folklore and Vedic literature. Different historical places are available in different parts of this region. Tezpur - 'City of Eternal Romance' Situated on the northern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra, is a serene quite town, famous for its beautiful parks, ancient Hindu temples and archaeological ruins steeped in mythology, legend and folklore.



Mahabhairab Temple

Places in alphabetic order	Distance from Guwahati in km	Specialty
1. Digboi	523	Famous for the first oil refinery in Asia, war

		cemetery of World War II
2. Sibsagar	369	Seat of the Ahom rule, famous for royal palaces, monuments, temples and massive ponds
3. Tezpur	137	Ruins of an ancient capital of the Mahabharata time, famous for the love story of Usha-Anirudha

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

Another important place is Digboi. Assam is the first state in the country where in 1889 oil was struck at Digboi. Assam can boast of having the oldest oil refinery in the country. This refinery set up at Digboi, in Tinsukia district, started commercial production in 1901.

Sibsagar is also an important historical place in Assam. It was the seat of Ahom rule, famous for royal palaces like Rang ghar, Gargaon palace; temples, massive ponds like Joy Sagar, Rudra Sagar etc.

Guwahati situated on the bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra is the gateway to the North-East India. The places of worth visiting are the famous Shakti temple Kamakhya on the Nilachal hills, the ancient Siva temple Umananda situated on the Peacock island in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, the Navagraha temple, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Balaji temple, Science Museum, Vaisisthashram, the State Museum, the State Zoo-cum-Botanical garden, the Saraighat Bridge, the Lachit Barphukan Park etc.



Madan Kamdev

Madan Kamdev, 40 kms. away from the sprawling metropolis Guwahati, on N.H. 52 is an enigma, a mystery, a marvel and in the words of Omar Khayam, "a veil past which I could not see". Very little is known about the origin of this magnificent archaeological ruins. Written history



is almost silent on it, leaving wide room for conjectures and hypothesis.

Sualkushi, 32 km from Guwahati, known as the silk town of Assam, it is famous for Assamese silk, muga (golden thread) and other varieties of silk.

(d) Other:

Tea : Assam is also famous for tea. The plants used to grow naturally in the Upper Brahmaputra valley. Robert Bruce, an official of the British empire, who is credited with the discovery of tea in Assam in 1823, gave publicity of the existence of the plant, the leaves of which were boiled to prepare the tea.

tea is grown both in the Brahmaputra and Barak plains. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon and Sonitpur are the districts where tea gardens are mostly found. Assam

produces 51% of the tea produced in India and about 1/6th of the tea produced in the world.



There are as many as 30 air strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. These facilities can form into an attractive package for tourism. The road communication to most of the tea gardens is fairly well maintained, and the rest houses and bungalows with modern facilities located there are generally kept ready for visitors and guests. Therefore, coordination with the management of the tea gardens can effectively do a lot in promoting tea tourism in the state. It may be noted that tea

tourism is a recent concept, its potentiality, remains unexplored.

Cultur:

Most of the festivals celebrated in Assam have their roots in the diverse faith and belief of her inhabitants, but a spirit of accommodation and togetherness characterizes the celebration of all festivals.

The major festivals celebrated in Assam are Bihu, Baishagu, Ali-Ai-Ligang, Baikho, Rongker, Rajini Gabra Harni Gabra, Bohaggiyo Bishu, Ambubashi Mela and Jonbill Mela and so on.

The people of Assam also celebrate Holi, Durga Puja, Diwali, Swaraswati Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Idd, Muharram, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, the birth and death anniversaries of Vaishnava Saints Srimanta Sankardev and Madhabdev. The tribals of Assam have their own colourful festivals like the Kherai Puja of the Bodos, the Baikhu and Pharkantis of the Rabhas, Ali-ai-ligang and Parag of the Mishing tribe, the Sagra-misawa wansawa and laghun of the Tiwas. The Ahoms of Tai origin celebrate Me-Dum-



Bagarumba dance

Me-Phi on the 31st of January annually. The Ojapali dances of non-Vaishnavite origin are usually associated with the Serpent Goddess Manasa.

Bathow festival is celebrated by the Kacharis through sacrifice of goats and chickens. The Dimasas celebrate Ranggi Gobra and Harni Gobra at the start of the cropping cycle for prosperity to ward off calamities. The Deoris observe Bohagiya visu- the Spring time festival. Bihu is the most important festival of Assam. It is celebrated with joy and abundance by all assamese



Karbi dance

people.

Tribal groups like the

Mishings,

the Deoris, and the Morans celebrate "Bihu" with dances of their own distinctive style.



Bihu Dance

Adventure

The enchanting blue hills and speedy rivers of Assam provide an enormous scope for the development of adventure tourism. Recently, some of the adventure sports activities like rock-climbing, trekking, para-sailing, water sports, river rafting and angling are promoted by the Department of Tourism.

Arts and Craft

The people of Assam have traditionally been craftsmen from time immemorial. Though Assam is mostly known for its exquisite silks and the bamboo and caneproducts, several other crafts are also made here. Different regions of Assam are known for their different forms of art and handicrafts.

Jaapi



Traditional sun-shade

The Jappi, the traditional sunshade continues to be the most prestigious of bamboo items of the state, and it has been in use since the days when the great Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang came to Assam that visitors are welcomed with a jaapi.

2) Weakness

Despite the fact that Assam has the potentiality of developing eco-tourism in a big way, but the development scenario is not at all satisfactory due to various known and unknown problems. There are a number of constraints which need to be addressed properly before targeting ecotourism as a prospective industry for the region.

a. Absence of a Tourism Policy

Assam has a policy on tourism prepared in November 1987. Unfortunately, it is not available in any of the offices connected with tourism. It appears that there was an attempt in November 1987 to formulate a tourism policy and then in December 1992 an exercise was done to frame certain rules on tourism. It appears that these steps did not bring forth any concrete result. The media, in the recent time has been giving adequate publicity highlighting the importance of tourism in the economic development of the state. Most of the newspapers in both English and Assamese, have been publishing a good number articles in frequent intervals highlighting various aspects of tourism and its potentiality in the sustainable development of Assam.

b. Restricted Area Permit (RAP)

The RAP 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 procedure of obtaining permission from the Home Ministry. With RAP in force till May 18, 1999 it was an uphill task for any foreign tourist to visit Assam and other places in the North-East. Unfortunately, the ghost of RAP still continues to loom large and the efforts to disabuse the false apprehension in the mind of the foreign tourists are minimal.

c. Insurgency

Assam has been experiencing violent movement for a long time. The foreign and the domestic tourists consider it risky to visit this part of the country, in view of the prevailing law and order situation. The general impression has been that any foreign or domestic tourist could be a soft target of the insurgents. Therefore, they are reluctant to undertake an adventurous journey to Assam. The general impression about the deteriorating law and order situation is enough to ward off any tourist. On the top of this, Manas sanctuary, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful natural parks in the country has been virtually under the control of the Bodo militants for which it is still not considered to safe to visit the place. Recently, Manas has been opened for the tourists, but it will take time to ward off the long-standing impression of the tourists about the sanctuary.

d. Lack of Infrastructure

Ecotourism requires dissemination of information, infrastructural facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, clean and hygienic food and accommodation, availability of water sports equipment, and the like. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the side of the national highways, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good inflow of the tourist. It appears that the potentialities for developing tourism to a stable source of revenue are not matched by proper policy and strategy.

e. Lack of Coordinated Efforts

In Assam, there is virtually no coordination between various public industries and private sectors like tea industry, oil and coal on one hand, and the Department of Tourism or Assam Tourist Development Corporation (ATDC), on the other, in the efforts towards developing eco and tea tourism. Similarly, there is no tangible and effective coordination between the twin bodies of Assam tourism, that is, the Directorate of Tourism and ATDC on one hand, and road and river transport system run by both Government and private sectors on the other. Therefore, stagnation has been the striking mark of the status of tourism in Assam.

f. Absence of Tourist Guides

Assam virtually does not have any trained guides placed in important places of tourist attraction. Consequently, as the tourists arrive at such a place there is hardly anyone to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the tourists. The Department of Tourism initiated a programme to train tourist guides. The effort did not yield good result as most of the trainees left the job. Some of them found other means of livelihood while others found it to be less paying because of the poor inflow of the tourists to the state. It is a chicken-and-egg syndrome which can be resolved by the state government by adopting a two-front strategy – (i) tourist guide training programme for a very limited number of youths, and (ii) setting a target of inflow of the tourists.

g. Lack of Market Related Research

In Assam, research for the development of ecotourism is limited. Since there is enough scope for employment generation in this industry, effort should be undertaken for market related research from govt. and non govt. Organisation.

3) Opportunity

Among the types of tourism, ecotourism have grown recently. Ecotourism entails the sustainable preservation of a naturally endowed area or region. This is becoming more and more significant for the ecological development of all regions of the state that have tourist value.

As nature-based and ecologically sustainable, eco-tourism provides appropriate returns to the local community by long-term conservation of resources. A main motivation of the eco-tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in the natural areas. For this local community can form small groups to offer full benefits of such programmes. They can get alternative employment from this and can raise their standard of living.

Eco-tourism is already the largest source of foreign exchange in countries like Costa Rica, Belize and Guatemala. There is significant increase of the gross domestic product and other economic activities in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya, Madagascar and Antarctica. In Assam also, this tourism has enormous potential to earn huge foreign exchange. As it also attracts tourists from different parts of the country, Govt. has the opportunities to increase revenue from this sector and can generate employment of local people to solve the problems of unemployment and raising per capita income of the people.

4) Threats

Eco-tourism in Assam is facing various challenges mainly due to lack of infrastructural facilities such as roads and accommodation, strategic business plans, well-trained nature guides, methods of gaining community consensus and awareness programmes to the local people etc. To most of the eco-tourists visiting Assam, facilities such as roads and accommodation are average or poor. It is therefore necessary to develop infrastructure facilities to attract more eco-tourists to this region.

The eco-tourists do not need five star hotel facilities in the interior and remote areas. They prefer to stay in the camps made of locally available material such as bamboo, cane, ekra, thatching grass (ulu kher) having adequate sanitary facilities. Cleanliness in the camps is a pre-requisite. Such camps are eco-friendly and there is no chance of environmental damage. To attract eco-tourists, many terms such as nature tourism, green tourism and bio-tourism etc., are used in the name of eco-tourism although they are not synonymous with eco-tourism. For such green washing, eco-tourists are misled and real purpose not served. Such programmes are environmentally destructive, economically exploitative and culturally insensitive.

Conclusion

From the above findings, it is cleared that we have lots of strength to attract the tourists toward eco-tourism in our state. But due to various weaknesses and threats as discussed above, the rate of development of eco-tourism is not satisfactory. These problems can be overcome though proper planning, implementation and management of the programmes to tackle the hurdles of eco-tourism by the Govt. with full cooperation from Govt. Organisation, Non Govt. Organisation and local people. Eco-tourism can be made successful only when there is consent and active participation of the local people in the planning and management of eco-tourism programmes. Without full cooperation of the local people, success of eco-tourism programmes are very remote.

It is heartening to note that some local people inhabiting outside the Kaziranga National Park have set up some eco-clubs under the guidance of the State Forest Department. This type of venture has been highly appreciated by both domestic and foreign eco-tourists.

As citizens of India, we have a great responsibility towards protection of environment, including forest and wildlife. So we need to develop a sense of values that lead us to protect them, i.e., whatever is left. Apart from this, we must also value and respect the existing human culture. In order to minimise the negative aspects of conventional tourism, it is necessary to bring about some changes in tourism programmes. This change will definitely help a great deal in tourist perceptions in increasing environmental awareness and in exploring the natural environment.

Bibliography

1. Bora Dr. Bhaskarjyoti, Gogoi Jayanta (2010) 'Eco-Tourism in Kaziranga National Park—A Retrospect'. (page- 112-118), An Approach for Sustainable Development in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development by K. C. Das Commerce College 2010
2. Dutta Utpal (2010) 'Ecotourism in North-East of India: A case for applying the 'Precautionary principle' (page- 97-106), An Approach for Sustainable Development in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development by K. C. Das Commerce College 2010
3. Goswami Namrata (July 2010) 'India's Northeast 2020: Four Alternative Futures' Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.
4. Hazaria Sanjoy (2000) 'Strangers of the Mist: Teles of War and Peace for India's North East' Penguin, New Delhi.
5. Khan Mizan R and Haque Mahfuzul (May 2007) 'BIMSTEC-Japan Cooperation in Tourism and Environment: Bangladesh Perspective' CSIRD Discussion Paper #27
6. Mitra Amitava, Lama Maila (2010) 'Ecotourism in Arunachal Pradesh : Opportunities and Challenges'.(page- 49-61), An Approach for Sustainable Development in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development by K. C. Das Commerce College
7. "North Eastern Region Vision 2020", Ministry Development of North Eastern Region And North Eastern Council , Agartala, May 2008.
8. Rishi Saurabh & Giridhar Dr B. Sai 'Himachal Tourism : A Swot Analysis' International Marketing Conference on Marketing & Society, 8-10 April, 2007, IIMK
9. Singha R. K P.G, Verma Rahul (2010) 'Eco- Tourism in North East India' An Approach for Sustainable Development in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development by K. C. Das Commerce College (page- 174-189)

.....