
ECOTOURISM AS A SUSTAINABLE MODE OF TRAVEL IN MANIPUR: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Being endowed with awe-inspiring natural scenic landscapes, there is growing popularity of tourism in the North Eastern state of Manipur. At the same time, it is important to consider the potential threat of traditional tourism on the fragile environment of the state. Various researchers and academicians are of the view that it is ecotourism that will serve the purpose of travel on one hand and conserving and preserving the flora, fauna and the environment on the other. Ecotourism offers a more sustainable mode of travel than traditional tourism provided there is proper implementation and planning. This paper reviews and critically analyzes the current trend of ecotourism based on existing scholarly e-journals, books, articles and websites and finally examines the prospects of ecotourism in Manipur. It concludes that further in-depth study may be carried out in future to analyze and study the prospects and challenges of ecotourism in Manipur.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Conventional Tourism, Sustainable Development, Sustainable Tourism, Wildlife, Vegetation

Introduction

Tourism, which may be defined in layman language as travel for recreational, leisure, educational or business purpose, is emerging as a booming industry. Its impact can be seen in varied areas of economy, cultural exchange, employment creation, environment and travel related services among others. As such, tourism has become one of the largest foreign exchange earners of a country as it boosts economic growth and development and large scale employment generation.

According to Statista, a German online portal for statistics, “tourism is defined as when people travel and stay in places outside of their usual environment for less than one consecutive year for leisure, business, health, or other reasons”. Further, the portal writes that the travel and tourism sector had made a contribution of approximately 5.8 billion U.S. dollars to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021 with Japan, The United States and Spain leading the Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI).

Tourism in India

India is a very vibrant country of unity in diversity not only in terms of caste, creed, languages, culture and race but also in terms geographical landscape with varied forms of flora, fauna and diverse wildlife including biological hotspots and scenic nature. Such rich diversity puts India in the forefront as one of the must-visit tourist destinations amongst both national and international travellers.

As per the Ministry of Tourism report, tourism can become a significant factor of economic growth through employment creation and alleviation of poverty without compromising the sustainability aspects of environment. In order to develop the tourism infrastructure of India, the Ministry had launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme in 2014-15 to develop various Tourists Circuits.

Among the most visited tourist spots of the year 2021-22 in India, the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort and the Qutub Minar top the list as per the Indian Tourism Statistics 2022. The report further revealed that the states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu recorded the maximum number of foreign tourists in 2021.

Table 1
Monthly Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEE) from Tourism (US\$ in Billion) in India during 2020 and 2021

| Month | FEE (US\$ in Billion) | | Percentage Change |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| | 2020 | 2021 | |
| | | | 2021/20 |
| January | 2.833 | 0.645 | -77.2 |
| February | 2.551 | 0.752 | -70.5 |
| March | 0.784 | 0.911 | 16.2 |
| April | 0.009 | 0.934 | 10277.8 |
| May | 0.012 | 0.235 | 1858.3 |
| June | 0.027 | 0.428 | 1458.3 |
| July | 0.041 | 0.554 | 1251.2 |
| August | 0.064 | 0.709 | 1007.8 |
| September | 0.093 | 0.884 | 850.5 |
| October | 0.113 | 0.68 | 501.8 |
| November | 0.190 | 0.937 | 393.2 |
| December | 0.241 | 1.128 | 368.2 |
| Total | 6.958 | 8.797 | 26.4 |

(Source: Extracted from the Foreign Exchange Earnings table of Indian Tourism Statistics Report 2022)

As seen in the above table, the foreign exchange earnings (FEE) of India's tourism sector, with a value of US\$ 8.797 billion, had shown a rise of 26.4% in 2021 from that of 2020.

Impacts of tourism

Globally, tourism has emerged as an important sector contributing as high as 10% to global GDP, 7% to global exports and 1 out of every 10 jobs is provided by this sector (United Nations Environment Programme).

Though there may be positive economic impact on one hand, conventional tourism may cause, on the other hand, severe negative impacts in terms of environmental degradation, community disharmony and cultural dislocation.

According to Fennell (2003), tourism can bring heavy damaging impacts to the environment further resulting to huge disturbance to both flora and fauna.

It is estimated that there would be 154% rise in energy consumption, 131% rise in Green House Gas emissions, 152% increase in water consumption and 251% rise in solid waste disposal by 2050 due to tourism sector (United Nations Environment Programme).

Hence there is need for timely measures to reap the best out of tourism and to minimize its damaging impacts. We need to look at other forms of tourism for this.

Alternative forms of tourism

Though used interchangeably the two terms sustainable tourism and eco tourism are not same. It might be interesting to understand these concepts.

Sustainable Tourism

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sustainable tourism as tourism that takes into account both the present and the future environmental and socio-economic impact.

As per UNWTO, for a guaranteed long-term sustainability of tourism development, the economic, social and environmental dimensions of all forms of tourism need to be well balanced. Further it reiterates that “sustainable tourism is a continuous process” requiring impact assessment and necessary corrective measures from time to time.

The origin and Importance of Eco tourism

The very concept of ecotourism, which may be considered a subset of sustainable tourism, arose around the 1970s and 1980s when the environmental movement began across the globe. Following the declaration of 2002 as the Year of Ecotourism by United Nations, the popularity of this form of tourism is increasing in recent time.

The term ‘ecotourism’ was coined for the first time by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1990). Ecotourism has been defined as travelling to unexplored areas in order to study and enjoy their scenic beauty and to understand the flora and fauna along with the socio-cultural dimension.

TIES (2015) defines ecotourism as travelling to natural areas with a sense of conserving the environment, improving the life of local community and involving the concept of education.

Vijayakumar (1995) states that ecotourism is to enjoy nature and to understand the cultural and historical aspects of the environment. In addition, he emphasizes that ecotourism is all about conserving the eco-system.

According to Honey (1999), ecotourism is defined as travel to protected areas and destinations and acts as a way to provide education and a source of fund for conserving nature. It also acts as a means of empowering local people, respecting the local culture and promoting human rights and democratic values.

Tiwari and Abrol (2015) argued that ecotourism preserves the nature and the cultural values of the local people. Ecotourism can boost economic growth of the local community and preserve cultural values. If not properly managed, ecotourism could be a threat to biodiversity and result to social disharmony and environmental degradation including the very issue of solid waste management. North East India, the Himalayas and the Inlands of India form major ecotourism destinations. Ecotourism should be implemented in a sustainable way through “careful planning, implementation and monitoring” based on proper guidelines.

Manipur as a tourist destination

Manipur serves as a gateway to South East Asia. Due to its geostrategic location, it is at the core of the framework of India’s Act East Policy and Neighborhood First Policy, through which the state is assumed to achieve better economic growth. While the physical connectivity improves in the state and adjoining areas, Manipur which is culturally rich and is naturally endowed with diverse flora and fauna and lush green picturesque natural landscapes, could be showcased as a tourism hub to both domestic and international tourists.

Jayanti (2018)’s study of tourism potentiality in Manipur emphasised that by overcoming the existing barriers such as security issues and lack of physical connectivity, tourism can boost growth and development in terms of economic, social and environmental aspects of the state. The government should look into the matter of security issues that may be prevailing in the state. To further attract tourists to this tiny hilly state our infrastructure and physical connectivity need to be improved.



Tourism sector of Manipur has great potential and can be a major engine of economic growth (Tourism Policy 2014 Manipur, 2014). With India’s Act East Policy, Trans Asian Highways and the Railways infrastructure being developed under the Bay Of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation Master Plan, the Government of Manipur plans to promote the “Brand of Manipur Tourism as Gateway to SE Asiain SE Asia akin to its SE Asian neighbours.” The policy of 2014 further stresses that as Manipur has less scope of industrial development, tourism can become a potential platform for employment and poverty alleviation.

On the other hand, as per Manipur Tourism Policy – 2022, there is tremendous scope for health care tourism and pilgrimage tourism in Manipur due to its strategic location with respect to South

East Asian countries. The policy advocates that revenue out of tourism and its allied sub-sectors may account for 5% of the state's GDP by 2030 if the state follows the guiding principles of sustainable, responsible and inclusive tourism.

Table 2

Some Important Tourist Destinations of Manipur

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| <p>The freshwater mystical Loktak Lake of Bishnupur district is famed for the one and only floating National Park of the world known as the Keibul Lamjao. It is home to the endemic brow antlered deer called Sangai which is the state animal of Manipur.</p> |  |
| <p>Shirui hills of Ukhrul district have some of the rarest birds and wildlife. The Shirui Hills are specially famous for the endemic Shirui lilies which bloom during the month of May and June.</p> |  |
| <p>The must visit Yangkhullen village of Senapati District is home to the primitive Zeme tribe.</p> |  |

The Khongjom War Memorial of Thoubal District is one of the most important historical sites of Manipur



(Source: Extracted from the homepage of the Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur)

According to Hall and Boyd (2003), ecotourism can bring economic growth, development and empowerment of local community and the creation of employment opportunities. So for an under developed state like Manipur which has limited opportunities for industrialization, ecotourism can be seen as panacea for overall improvement on socio-cultural and economic front. This is because there are considerable potential impacts of tourism on environment despite its growth as one of the fastest industries in the world (Fennel (2003).

Conclusion

Anitha and Muraleedharan (2006) find that sustainable development initiatives ensure the livelihood security of the local people thereby resulting to achievement of the goals of conservation of natural resources and improving the life of the local households.

Manipur with its fragile environment and being a part of the biodiversity hotspot through the Indo-Myanmar area, there is need for paradigm shift from conventional tourism to more sustainable form of tourism. Ecotourism would be more suitable approach to conserve the natural resources and to create opportunities for the local community for active participation and involvement. Future study may be done in this area to involve all the stakeholders and create more awareness so that there is holistic approach towards bringing inclusive and sustainable tourism for overall economic growth and development of the “Jewel of India”.

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