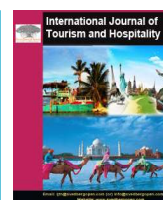




# International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

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## Ecotourism in Northeast India: An Approach for Sustainable Development

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### Article Info

Volume 4, Issue 2, July 2024

Received : 05 April 2024

Accepted : 17 June 2024

Published : 05 July 2024

doi: [10.51483/IJTH.4.1.2024.1-7](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJTH.4.1.2024.1-7)

### Abstract

Ecotourism has become a buzzword nowadays not only in India but also in Northeast India. Ecotourism in simple words means management of tourism and conservation of nature in such a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirement of tourism and ecology on one hand and the need of the local communities for jobs, income generating employment and a better status for the women on the other. Northeast has enough potential for the growth ecotourism and has been expanding fast in recent years due to the heroic effort of various state government of this region. The northeast India is a unique destination for eco-tourism as the region represents the Indian ethos of 'unity in diversity' and 'diversity in unity.' The region is a mixed package of linguistic, racial, and religious streams. The region is not only well endowed with natural resources of diverse range of mountains ecosystems rich in pristine natural forests occupied by varieties of flora and fauna but also an abode of a variety of ethnic groups popularly known as ecosystem people who largely depend on their surrounding environment for sustenance of livelihood particularly in hill areas. All these factors provide the foundation for a potentiality robust ecotourism industry in the region. Though various adventure and nature tours had been in practice in northeast India for a long time, the concept of ecotourism is relatively very recent development. Various Non-Governmental Organizations have been acting positively to involve the local people to facilitate forest developments and improve eco-tourism. At this juncture, it is very crucial to discuss the status of ecotourism in northeast India. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight on various ecotourism resources, prospects of eco-tourism, problems, and suggestion to develop ecotourism in northeast India. All the information has been gathered through various sources, personal communication, and literature survey.

**Keywords:** *Ecotourism, Conservation, Northeast India*

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism is gaining momentum not only in develop countries but also in developing country like India. Tourism plays a very crucial role in economic development of a country. It provides employment to the millions of unemployed youths and contributes a major share of foreign exchange earnings of our country. Tourism being a service oriented industry the performance in the recent past has been quite encouraging. According to the WTTC report, tourism industry supports 9.3 million direct jobs in India. By 2010, it is expected to provide 28.0 million jobs *i.e.*, 6.8% of the total employment. In

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India, in case of tourism, however, we have emerged a way below our true potential and whatever progress is being witnessed is without a conscious direction of policy. The country's diverse people, vast geographical area with uniqueness in northeast frontiers holds immense promise for this industry to grow in future. In the view of the globalization, it is essential for India's tourism planning to integrate with the global trends.

## 2. Objectives

1. To examine the importance of ecotourism in the present context.
2. To identify the ecotourism resources in north-east India.
3. To examine the constraints of ecotourism development.
4. To pinpoint for the promotion of ecotourism in the region.

## 3. World Tourism Organization's Vision 2020

The World Tourism Organization, the apex body of tourism few years back, predicted that USD 2000 billion will be generated by the industry within the year 2020 (Bezbaruwa, 1999). It has analyzed the emerging trends and factors, which will influence the future growth pattern of the industry. Some of the important observations of World Tourism Organization are summarized below:

- By 2020, there will be 1.6 billion international tourist arrivals and tourism receipts will rise to a staggering USD 2000 billion globally.
- There will be sustained average annual growth rate of 4.3% (for arrivals) and 6.7% (for receipts) In spite of this growth only 7% of the world's population will become potential tourists. Thus, according to World Tourism Organization, the industry would be still in infancy even in the year 2020.
- The top 10 tourist receiving countries would undergo major changes and China would be receiving maximum number of tourists (estimated to be 137.1 million with a market share of 8.6%) by 2020. France the traditional market leader, would come down to the third position. China will have an average growth rate of 8.0% in tourist arrivals during the period 1995-2020.
- There will be changes in the top tourist originating countries. Japan, China, and Russian Federation will emerge as the new major outbound tourist countries.
- Though Europe will remain the largest tourist-receiving region, its share will come down to 45% from the present 59%.
- South Asia will grow at a rate of 6.1% per annum during the period but its share will grow only up to 1.2% from the present 0.7%.

## 4. Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism in simple words means management of tourism and conservation of nature in such a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirement of tourism and ecology on one hand and the needs of the local communities for jobs, income generating employment and a better status for the women on the other. There is no unanimous definition on ecotourism. According to the proceedings of international seminar on ecotourism for forest conservation and community development, held during January 1997 at Chiang Mai, Thailand, Ecotourism is defined as "purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make conservation of natural resources beneficial to the local people". The World Conservation Union (IUCN, 1996) defines ecotourism as "Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features; both past and present) that provide for beneficially active socio-economic development of local people". According to the International Ecotourism Society (IES) "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of the local people". The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines ecotourism as "tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring, and enjoying nature and its wild plants and animals, as well as existing cultural aspects [both of the past and the presents] found in these areas .

Ecotourism has all the elements of nature tourism (Healy, 1988) but is also unique in that its promoters travel to relatively undisturbed areas, sensitive areas (with environment and cultural), conservation of developmental activities

of this participation and involvement of local people. Ecotourism thus is distinguished from mass tourism or resort tourism by having a lower impact on environment and by requiring less infrastructure development. Being environment friendly activity, ecotourism aims at promoting environmental values and ethics and preserving nature in its uninterrupted form, thus benefiting wildlife and nature by contributing towards ecological integrity, besides ensuring a better status and easier life for the local people through their active participation.

## 5. Tourism Resources In North-East India

- 1. Natural Beauty of Immense Variety:** Dense forests, uneven topography, numerous flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wildlife sanctuaries, and many rare species of animals, India's north-east is known for its biographic richness.
- 2. Religious Heritage:** North-east India has a very rich religious heritage. Numerous mythological folk-lore links Assam to the great epic, Mahabharata. There are various spots for the Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians that may act as important tourist attractions.
- 3. Forests:** About 65.17% of the total geographical area of the north-eastern region is covered by forests, of which only one-third is covered by reserve forest. Besides valuable trees, bamboo, cane and valuable medicinal plants, these forests abound in a variety of birds and animals, some of which are rare animal specimens like one-horned rhino.
- 4. Cultural Diversity:** The north-east is a colorful mosaic of culture of numerous tribes and groups each having distinct language, festivals, music, and dances, making it an unique place for tourists (anthropological) adventures.
- 5. Hills, Rivers, and Lakes:** The hills and valleys, the mighty Brahmaputra River with its innumerable tributaries is ideal for some adventure sports activities like rock climbing, rafting, angling, etc.
- 6. Tea Gardens:** With discovery of tea in Assam in 1823, tea has become an integral part of the economy of north-east India, especially Assam. Each tea garden (Assam has about 1000 tea gardens) is a treasure house of exotic natural beauty with colorful people and their enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows and excellent residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens have polo fields and golf courses. There are as many as thirty air strips and helipads maintained by tea garden management in Assam (Goswami and Goswami, 2003).

## 6. Present Scenario

The region has potentiality to become the most favorite tourism destination, as it enjoys pollution free, moderate, and pleasant weather through out the year. Among the north-eastern states, Assam attracts the largest number of tourists, mainly because of famous Kamakhya temple and Kaziranga National Park. Besides Assam, Meghalaya and Sikkim also

**Table.1: Fund Sanctioned by Centre for Tourism Procects in Northeast India**

State	2006		2005		2004	
	Amount (Rs in lakh)	No. of Projects	Amount (Rs in lakh)	No. of Projects	Amount (Rs in lakh)	No. of Projects
Arunachal Pradesh	1887.80	12	2240.16	10	1325.50	9
Assam	2453.39	9	2140.00	10	986.03	8
Manipur	939.35	9	49.80	2	—	—
Meghalaya	1435.29	6	5.00	1	963.30	2
Mizoram	2613.38	9	2273.41	10	1086.35	6
Nagaland	2340.32	8	2528.97	9	2250.69	7
Sikkim	2609.42	13	2844.56	14	660.81	8
Tripura	291.27	4	716.26	3	20.00	1

Sources: The Mizoram Post, 2007

attract tourists. There is a need to develop tourism sector in the region to attract more foreign and domestic tourists. The Central Government has initiated in this direction by providing funds for development of tourism projects in northeastern India. Table 1 depicts the funds sanctioned for tourism projects during the last three years in this region. If these projects are implemented in time the face of tourism in the north-east will give a fresh look.

Table 2 shows the various tourist circuits, tourist destination and fairs and festivals available/celebrated in the North-eastern India which can be explored by the tourists in this part of the country. Among the eight states Arunachal Pradesh has 07 tourist circuits, Meghalaya 04 tourist circuits, Assam, Manipur & Tripura has 02 tourist circuits each and Mizoram and Nagaland have 01 tourist circuits each. Likewise, various tourist spots available in this region are also shown in this table. Regarding accommodation for the tourists in terms of hotels, lodges and others are also presented. Assam has gotten highest rank consisting of 41 units and followed by Tripura and Mizoram being 22 units and 18 units. In this table various fairs and festivals which are major attraction for the tourists are also disclosed and each has its unique special message to the travelers as he passes from one state to another.

<b>Table 2: Tourist Destinations in Northeastern India</b>				
<b>State</b>	<b>Recommendes Tourist Circuits</b>	<b>Tourist Spots</b>	<b>Fairs and Festivals</b>	<b>ITDC Hotels</b>
Arunachal Pradesh	1. Bhalukpong-Bomdila-Tawang 2. Itanagar-Ziro-Daporijo-Palghat 3. Tinsukhia-Paruram kund 4. Miao-Namdapha 5. Dibrugarh-Roing-Anini 6. Dibrugarh-Tezu-Hayuliang 7. Pasighat-Yinkiong	1. Itanagar 2. Tejpur 3. Bomdila 4. Tawang 5. Ziro 6. Pasighat 7. Namdapha Wildlife Sanctuary 8. Parsuram Kund	1. Loser 2. Torgya 3. Saka Dawa 4. Dupka Tseshi 5. Lhabab Duechen 6. Ganden Ngamchoe 7. Nyukom 8. Mopin 9. Sofung 10. Reh 11. Oriah 12. Dree 13. Moh-mol 14. Buddha Mahotsava 15. Brahmaputra Darshan 16. Yulow	05
Assam	1. Guwahati-Phulbari-Jakhalbandha-Kajiranaga-Sibsagar 2. Guwahati-Barpeta-Baroma-Manas	1. Kamakhya Temple 2. Bashishth Ashram 3. Nabagrah Temple 4. Ugratara Temple 5. Dirgheshwari Temple 6. Ashwakdanta Temple 7. Brahmaputra River Cruise 8. Sualkhuchi 9. Hajo 10. Tejpur 11. Bhalukpong 12. Sibsaagar 13. Haflong 14. Majuli Island 15. Kajiranga National Park 16. Manas National Park 17. Nameri National Park 18. Orang National Park 19. Pabitora Sanctuary	1. Bihu 2. Baishagu 3. Ali-ai ligang 4. Rongkher 5. Rajini garba & Harini garba 6. Baikho 7. Bohaggiyo Bishu 8. Ambubashi mela 9. Tea festival	07

<b>Table 2 (Cont.)</b>				
<b>State</b>	<b>Recommendes Tourist Circuits</b>	<b>Tourist Spots</b>	<b>Fairs and Festivals</b>	<b>ITDC Hotels</b>
Manipur	1. Imphal-Moirang-Loktak Lake-Keibul Lamzo National Park 2. Imphal-Ukhrul	1. Imphal 2. Sri Govindji Temple 3. Khwarambandh Bazar 4. Shaheed Meenar 5. War cemeteries 6. Langthabali 7. Kangchup 8. Waithou 9. Kaina Khongjom 10. Tengnopai 11. Moirang 12. Loktak Lake 13. Sendra Island 14. Bishnupur 15. Ukhrul 16. Central Khonghpat Orchidarium 17. Manipur Zoological Park	1. Ras Leela 2. Lai Haroba 3. Yaosang 4. Heikru Hindogba 5. Cheiraoba 6. Ningol Chak Kauba 7. Gan-Ngai 8. Rath Yatra 9. Kwak Yatra 10. Chumpha	05
Meghalaya	1. Kaziranga-Shillong-Cherrapunjee 2. Shillong- Mawphlang-Weilloi-Mawsynram 3. Shillong-Smit -Nartiang-Thadlaskein-Jowai-Thlu-Umwi 4. Guwahati-Dudnai-Bajengdoba-Anoggre- Tura-Barengpara-Baghmara-Siju- Balpakram-Shillong	2. Lady Hydari Park 3. Lewduh Market 4. Sohpetbeng Peak 5. Spread Eagle Park 6. Sweet Falls 7. Bishop Falls 8. Beadon Falls 9. Elephant Falls 10. All Saint Church 11. Cherrapunjee 12. Umiam Lake 13. Mawsynram 14. Mawphlang 15. Ranikor 16. Tura 17. Nartiang 18. Thadalskein Lake 19. More than a dozen caves	1. Nongkrem Dance 2. Shad Sukmynsiem 3. Beh Deinkhalem 4. Wangala Dance	08
Mizoram	1. Aizawl and excursions around 2. Saiha-Phangpui (Blue Mountain) 3. Champai-Rihdil	1. Aizawl 2. Durtlang 3. Bung 4. Paikhai 5. Hmuiphang	1. Chap Charkut 2. Mim Kut 3. Pawl Kut 4. Thalfawang Kut	06
Sikkim	1. Gangtok, Pelling, Yuksom, Namchi, Ravangla, Aritar, Mangan and Lachen. 4. Buddhist Circuit tour in Sikkim is Gangtok, Pelling, Yuksom, Namchi, Ravangla, Aritar, Mangan and Lachen.	1. Gangtok 2. Rumtek Monastery 3. Nathu La 4. Tashiding Monastery 5. Khecheopalri Lake 6. Penayantse Monastery 8. Chungthang 9. Rabdentse Ruins 10. Namchi 11. Lachung Yarlang	1. Losoong, 2. Drupka Teshi, Bumchu, 3. Saga Dawa, 4. Dassin 5. Phang Lhabsol.	09
<i>Sources: Bhuyan, A. (2006), Das (1995), Kabra and Singh (2004), Singh (2005), Nixon (2008), Singha and Sahoo (2003), Sood (2007) and Manorama Yearbook (2006)</i>				

## 7. Constraints for Ecotourism Development

Ecotourism is gaining popularity not only in India but also in north-east India. But the development scenario is 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.

1. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Ecotourism requires the basic infrastructure facilities such as good roads, easy transportation, power, improved telecommunication systems, post and telegraphs, good banking services, business centers, financing, civic facilities, training institutes, etc. which are restricted only to few places.
2. **Lack of Entrepreneurship:** In most of the north-eastern states, people have less interest in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship as a career is mostly chosen by chance or under some compulsion but not by choice. Many of north-east states due special status given by central government do not pay tax thus they hardly realize the benefits of setting up enterprises. In now situation is changing and youths are coming in the field of business, industry, and trade in this part of the country.
3. **Lack of Market Related Research:** There is still lack of research in the field of ecotourism in this part of the country. It is the need of the hour to do lot of research as ecotourism provide lots of employment opportunities directly and indirectly to the young generation.
4. **Lack of People Participation:** The ecotourism development activities related to tourism development in this region at present is mostly undertaken by the states Environment and forests department without involving the people in real sense. This can be linked to the failure and less acceptability of such programs.

## 8. Suggestion For Ecotourism Development

Tourism in north-east is in its infancy, and the concept of ecotourism development too is new. Therefore, the strategies adopted should properly addressed to the local needs. The following points may be considered important for the ecotourism development in the states of northeast.

1. Awareness of ecotourism is very crucial at the present juncture to develop ecotourism in the northeast. Thus, course of travel and tourism may be introduced in the academic institutions. Provision of excursion should be provided in the schools and colleges and students and teachers are to be encouraged to visit the important places of various tourist destinations (Mayuri Sharma *et al.*, 2003).
2. Ecotourism efforts should be directed in utilizing more of the natural landscape making an attempt to combine the cultural attributes of this region. Examples of this kind of effort are seen in various places such as that of the terracing of Himalayan foothills and the hot springs at Tatopani, Sikkim.
3. Cultural aspects being very important aspect in ecotourism, ideal tourist villages be set up at places in the natural habitat or some biodiversity conservation centers be created at the fringe areas of the protected area which would offer the tourists the prospects of viewing the unique flora and fauna in their original habitat.
4. Publicity is one of the powerful devices for the promotion of any kind of tourism at present and in the era of globalization. Publicity in ecotourism is still lacking and education regarding the meaning and principles of ecotourism are inadequate in this part of the country. Government should give proper publicity at the regional, national, and international level.
5. Although there is a clear legislation on the protected area which states that no activities such as land settlement, mining, collection of forest produce etc., be allowed, these practices are still going on. Mining activities which are on rise must immediately be stopped and accordingly, the Mining and Mineral Act be suitably amended to make these ecologically and culturally be sensitive areas free from disturbance.
6. There is complete lack of research on various aspects of ecotourism which otherwise would contribute to the better understanding on the need, tourist satisfaction, marketing, revenue collection and on ecosystem sustainability and/or carrying capacity and above all on the conservation of biological diversity.
7. After globalization in India the role of private sector in the economy is gaining momentum. Thus, the role of private sector is also important in promoting ecotourism and ensuring the quality of tours. The state government should arrange some conferences to promote tourism where they can be invited to take active parts discuss and suggest various means to improve tourism.
8. Some incentives may be given to the people and society engaged in ecotourism. The incentive may include proving pioneer status, *investment tax allowance*, reduction of professional tax, etc. as has been in practice elsewhere in India and abroad.
9. To make the eco-tourists enjoy their stay in the region, proper attention be given to improve tourist accommodation in the areas zoned for tourism development. Similarly, ecotourism tour guides must be properly trained so that they bare familiar with all subjects related to ecotourism destination.



## 9. Conclusion

It is a clear fact that northeast India is bestowed with the beauty of natural resources. It is land of rare and exotic flora and fauna, historical monuments, archeological ruins documenting a glorious past and rich and diverse cultural heritage of her colourful people. But unfortunately, northeast India could not get her proper place in the tourism map of India. There are a number of set steps which need to be taken for promotion, whether domestic or foreign. The crucial step is to identify the various places which are likely to cater to the fancy of tourists, for their scenic panorama, richness in flora and fauna, colourful tradition of art and culture and various sports like rowing, rafting, angling, trekking etc., In northeast India, development of tourism industry would bring improvement in the social economic condition, would ensure peoples' participation in conservation, would create employment opportunities and in the process would help restore peace and improve law and order situation. It is high time for the government, social organizations, and academicians to contribute what ever possible to develop the tourism sector to bring a change in the new millennium in this region.

## Acknowledgment

I, hereby express my heartfelt and tearful acknowledgement to Late. Professor R.K.P.G. Singha. He was my co-author in several papers including this article. Professor Singha worked with me for a period of 11 years (from 2006-2017) in Pachhunga University College, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram, India. Unfortunately, he left me alone in this mortal world in 2018 after a prolonged sickness, to rest peacefully in heaven. His contribution towards the development in northeast India is unmeasurable. He also edited a book titled "Development Perspective of Northeast India: Micro and Macro Industries" in 2014, in which I contributed a chapter titled "Mineral Based Industries in Mizoram: An Appraisal". Publication of this article would be immaterial without thanking him and I trust he has kindly accepted my acknowledgement from the other world.

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**Cite this article as:** Rahul Verma (2024). Ecotourism in Northeast India: An Approach for Sustainable Development. *International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality*. 4(2), 1-7. doi: 10.51483/IJTH.4.2.2024.1-7.