

“Community-Based Ecotourism and Community Development, East Khasi Hills District Meghalaya”

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Abstract

This paper seeks to provide a glimpse of the practice of community-based ecotourism in few selected ecotourism destinations in East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. Ecotourism development in the villages of North East India has been driven by a combination of socio-economic, environmental, and strategic factors. The region's rich biodiversity and scenic landscapes, have made it a prime location for ecotourism. Tourism in Meghalaya has a very long history and can be dated back to the colonial period when the colonial rulers made Shillong a hill station capital as a retreat from the scorching heat and humid summers. Meghalaya is blessed with rich flora-fauna and biodiversity that has a potential of being one of the hotspots of ecotourism in the northeast India. The findings revealed that, in the context of Meghalaya, ecotourism has been initiated through a community-based initiative emphasising on the active participation and contribution of members of the host communities in its growth and progress. Community-based ecotourism in the selected villages has brought about social and economic benefits to the households and to the community as well. The practice of community-based approach to ecotourism management ensures active participation of the members of the host communities in the process of conservation and sharing of benefits.

Key Words: Ecotourism, Community, Participation, Development.

Introduction

Ecotourism as an alternative tourism is practiced in a more ecofriendly manner for environmental sustainability. Ecotourism as one of the branches of the tourism industry has played an important role in contributing to the rural livelihood and in the process of protecting and conserving of natural resources of the rural community. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 1990), defined that “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”

Community-based ecotourism has been one of the approaches adopted by rural communities where ecotourism destinations are located. Remote areas are often blessed with the natural riches and adorable scenic beauty that attracts and pulls nature lovers. It is here where tourism activities offer wide range of opportunities that are capable in bringing about and contribute to social and economic development in the rural communities.

Pimbert & Pretty (1997) as found in Mary (2019), stated that the practice of community-based tourism, conservation and participation has been given more attention and considered as an important by national and international conservation organisations. According to the WWF (2001) as found in Mary (2019), community-based ecotourism is “a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community.”

Community-based ecotourism can be an effective approach to rural development and conservation. Susan (2011), attempted at assessing on the role of ecotourism in the conservation of biodiversity, livelihood, and contribution towards development of the community. Facilitating community involvement is instrumental in ecotourism management and conservation activities. Bahaduria (2016) expressed the need for community-based ecotourism by fostering harmony between people, environment, conservation, and development.

The active participation and engagement of the host communities in ecotourism programmes reflects the potential of ecotourism to bring about both economic and non-economic benefits that contributes towards livelihood promotion and overall development of the community in various aspects. The presence of ecotourism activities has provided people with alternative means for livelihood reducing the excessive use of forest products for their subsistence. The collective efforts of the host communities and the authorities have also paved way for adopting sustainable approaches that would contribute towards conservation of natural and cultural resources for enhanced well-being of the host communities (Manalel and Vinodan, 2011).

Wuleka et al., (2013), the presence of ecotourism has brought about both social and economic benefits to the host community. Ecotourism has provided an opportunity to the host community to enhance their livelihood through diversification of livelihood activities. It has brought about social cohesion among the locals and paved way for collaborative and cooperative community efforts in conservation of natural resources for sustainable tourism. Ecotourism activities also promote the economy of the local community and adjacent communities by making available unique artifacts and handicrafts representing their culture. Ecotourism not only that it brings about economic benefits at the individual and household level but also fostered development to the entire community. Different types of community development activities are being implemented through benefits gained from ecotourism practices in the community.

The practice of community based natural resource management has also contributed very much towards tourism development and sustainable tourism (Mbawia, 2008). Community-based ecotourism approach and strategies were adopted as a mechanism to revive the village economy agricultural subsistence farming and thus the need to incorporate and reflect social and cultural authenticity of the host communities (Tang, 2016).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: ECOTOURISM IN MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya, one of the most beautiful State in the country. Nature has blessed the state of Meghalaya with abundant rainfall, sun-shine, virgin forests, high plateaus, tumbling waterfalls, crystal clear rivers, meandering streamlets and above all, hospitable people. Meghalaya is one of the seven states located in north east India that is known by many as the abode of clouds and Scotland of the east. The onset of tourism and particularly ecotourism development in Meghalaya is very recent. While tourism as a leisure or recreational activity was long practised by the domestic populace in Meghalaya its transformation from leisure activity to source of livelihood for the rural communities is very recent. The take-off stage for ecotourism development and livelihood practices can be traced to the start of the millennium in the 2000's when tourism activities were associated with commercial transaction. However, the spread of ecotourism development was seen in the years 2005 – 2007 with Mawlynnong being recognised as one of the cleanest villages in Asia by Discover India Magazine in 2003. This recognition made the Mawlynnong village a hotspot for ecotourism and a centre for tourist attraction for tourists within the country and for international tourists. The following years have led to the realization of ecotourism potentials in various villages and witnessed a new era in the development of ecotourism destinations across many villages in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The paper seeks to explore the community-based ecotourism management practised in the selected ecotourism destinations in some villages in East Khasi Hills District Meghalaya. It also seeks to understand the impact of community-based ecotourism management practices and its contribution to the overall development of host community.

The study adopts a descriptive research design employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The primary data was collected from the respondents using semi structured interview schedule in the ecotourism destinations in the following villages; Mawlynnong, Riwei, Laitduh, Sohra, Nongriat, Mawsmat villages, East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. Key informant interviews with village council and respective tourism management council of the selected villages were conducted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The community-based ecotourism management and practice in the selected villages in East Khasi Hills District has contributed to the social and economic benefits of the rural households and the community as well, as discussed below:

Community Initiation: The findings reveal that ecotourism activities in the selected villages are being initiated by the village community with the active participation of the members of the host communities. It was also found that in few of the villages there have been establishments of a particular group to look specifically into the affairs related to ecotourism development and management in the village. Similar findings were found in; India (*Kumari, 2021*), (*Laloo et al., 2007*), (*Tiwari et al., 2021*), (*Singh, 2021*), Ghana (*Wuleka., et al., 2012*).

Livelihood Opportunities for households: Households were able to engaged in wide range of activities related to ecotourism such as homestays, food stalls or restaurants, guest house, grocery shops, selling artifacts, petty shops and as tourists guides. Similar findings were found in see; India, (*Khyriem, 2018*), (*Tiwari et al., 2021*), *Botswana (Stone, 2013)*. *Ghana (Wuleka., et al., 2012)*.

Community Revenue and its utilization: The village collects revenue from parking lots, community homestay, entry points to ecotourism destinations and by levying small taxes from homestays, restaurants, guest houses and other livelihood activities involved by the households and individuals. These revenues are being invested to improve public facilities, maintaining ecotourism areas, helping families within the village during times of emergency and to improve catering to the needs of the visitors. Similar findings were found in; India (*Rani., 2024*). (*Rana & Choudary., 2021*), (*Vinodan & Manalel., 2011*), *Tanzania (Njole., 2011)*,

Building Strong sense of ownership and unity: Community-based ecotourism practices contributed in building a strong sense of community ownership and responsibility among the community members towards conserving, protecting and development of ecotourism areas and hence it also contributes to building unity among members of the host community. Members do voluntarily participate in helping to maintaining ecotourism areas. Similar findings were found in; India (*Sarkar., 2023*), (*Sinha., 2023*), (*N. A. Ramchurjee and Suresha S., 2013*),

Diversification of Livelihood activities: The community-based ecotourism initiative has offered both social and economic benefit to the rural households. It has paved way livelihood diversification by engaging on economic activities derived or brought about by ecotourism. Similar findings were found in; see *Cameroon (Ijeomah., 2012)*, *Ghana (Wuleka., et al., 2012)*, *Botswana (J. E. Mbaiwa & L. K. Sakuze., 2009)*.

Collective effort to conservation of natural resources: Protection and conservation of nature was part of the traditional practice of the rural community but the initiation of ecotourism and the social and economic benefits that it has offered in return added more values to conservation and protection practices to the host community of the ecotourism areas. Similar findings were found in; India *Kumari (2021)*, (*Seervi., 2023*) *Karmakar (2022)*.

Require support and Infrastructural Development from authorities: It was also found that even though there is growth in ecotourism there have hardly been any role on the part of the tourism authority to assist, guide and support the rural communities particularly the ecotourism destinations for enhancing tourism development in the area. In most villages' infrastructure and public facilities like internet connection, healthcare facilities, ATMs, irregular supply of electricity, digital services are still lacking whose services are very much required by visitors. Similar findings were found in; *India (Verma, 2024)*, (*Laloo et al., 2007*), (*Singh, 2021*),

CONCLUSION

Community-based ecotourism has been instrumental in contributing to the social and economic development of the selected villages in this study. It has the potential as a tool that could contribute in the process of empowering the rural communities. Community-based ecotourism would be much more effective if it is complimented with a strong tourism policy emphasising equal importance to ecotourism and to bring about changes to involve active role of tourism authorities. Practices of conservation and protection of natural resources should be encouraged. Ecotourism can be adopted as an approach to poverty alleviation and should be incorporated as a development agenda particularly in the case for rural with great potential for ecotourism.

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