

“Ecotourism and Dibru-Saikhowa National Park”

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Introduction

Responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people is known as Ecotourism. It is the management of ecology, in such a way to obtain maximum pleasure with an eye on conservation needs. The tourists are ‘responsible’ in the sense that they never try to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, and are ‘respectful’ to the fragile environment. They expect only what can be delivered on the spot ‘reasonable’ and don’t leave with anything other than their valuable memories. Any form of tourism that does not reduce the availability of resources and does not inhibit future travelers from enjoying the same experience can be termed as Sustainable Tourism.

Assam is rich of natural beauties, verities of species of birds and animals and green trees and forest with mighty river Brahmaputra. Of various tourist spots Assam is famous for world largest river island Majuli, National Parks, one horned rhino, gibbons, river dolphin, wild horses, tea estates, local silk etc. One of the most developing ecotourism spot of Assam is Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. It is one of the five national parks of Assam, one of the 14 biosphere reserves in India and one of the 34 hotspots in the world; it also perhaps the only river island national park in the country. The sanctuary is a home to some rare and endangered animals like hoolock gibbon, capped langur, slow Loris, water buffalo, tiger, elephant, river dolphin, apart from a large population of both local and migratory birds and a sizeable population of feral horses.

Ecotourism is a new concept for Dibru-Saikhowa National Park of India. Recently some youths are engaging with the work ecotourism. . It is high time to study the pros and cons of ecotourism. The study is also important to develop Dibru-Saikhowa National Park as a major tourist attraction of Assam as well as India.

Objectives of the study

The following objectives are set for the study

- 1.To study the ecotourism prospects in Assam,
- 2.To consider Dibru-Saikhowa National Park as a ecotourism spot, and
- 3.To study the requirements to develop Dibru-Saikhowa National Park as a major tourist attraction spot.

Discussion

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that involves visiting natural areas—in the remote wilderness or rural environments. According to the definition and principles of ecotourism established by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) in 1990, ecotourism is "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." (TIES, 1990). The characteristics of ecotourism are:

- Involves travel to natural destinations
- Minimizes impact
- Builds environmental awareness
- Provides direct financial benefits for conservation
- Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Respects local culture
- Supports human rights and democratic movements such as,
 - * Conservation of biological diversity and cultural diversity through ecosystem protection
 - * Promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity, by providing jobs to local populations

- * Sharing of socio-economic benefits with local communities and indigenous peoples by having their informed consent and participation in the management of ecotourism enterprises
- * Tourism to unspoiled natural resources, with minimal impact on the environment being a primary concern.
- * Minimization of tourism's own environmental impact
- * Affordability and lack of waste in the form of luxury
- * Local culture, flora and fauna being the main attractions
- * Local people benefit from this form of tourism economically, often more than mass tourism

Ecotourism, responsible tourism, Jungle tourism, and sustainable development have become prevalent concepts since the mid 1980s, and ecotourism has experienced arguably the fastest growth of all sub-sectors in the tourism industry. The popularity represents a change in tourist perceptions, increased environmental awareness, and a desire to explore natural environments. However, in the continuum of tourism activities that stretch from conventional tourism to ecotourism proper, there has been a lot of contention to the limit at which biodiversity preservation, local social-economic benefits, and environmental impact can be considered "ecotourism". For this reason, environmentalists, special interest groups, and governments define ecotourism differently. Environmental organizations have generally insisted that ecotourism is nature-based, sustainably managed, conservation supporting, and environmentally educated.

The needs and important of ecotourism can be discussed as follows:

- Tourism is labour oriented and provides employment several times more than normal manufacturing industries.
- Tourism is an invisible export. Commercially it differs from other sectors of trade and industry. The tourist industry earns a large amount of foreign exchange without actually exporting any material goods. This is the only trade which brings in returns without any sacrifice on the part of exporting country.
- The government can gain more economic benefits from taxes and duties on things tourist use and buy. These are the extra sources of national income from the tourism industry. Ecotourism can also help in this field.
- Natural resource management can be utilized as a specialized tool for the development of ecotourism.

Though tourism has many advantages, it also suffers from certain limitations. The limitations are pointed out as follows:

- Ecotourism activities are, in and of themselves, issues in environmental impact because they may disturb fauna and flora.
- Ecotourism operations occasionally fail to live up to conservation ideals. It is sometimes overlooked that ecotourism is a highly consumer-centered activity, and that environmental conservation is a means to further economic growth.
- Most forms of ecotourism are owned by big investors and corporations that provide few benefits to local communities.
- Ecotourism often claims that it preserves and "enhances" local cultures. However, evidence shows that with the establishment of protected areas local people have illegally lost their homes, and most often with no compensation.
- While governments are typically entrusted with the administration and enforcement of environmental protection, they often lack the commitment or capability to manage ecotourism sites effectively. The regulations for environmental protection may be vaguely defined, costly to implement, hard to enforce, and uncertain in effectiveness

Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

Dibru-Saikhowa biodiversity reserve is located on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, lying between the Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district of Assam, is fast developing into a major tourist attraction in the North-East region of India, extremely rich in flora and fauna, the park was declared a biodiversity and biosphere reserve in the year 1997. The park was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1986 by uniting two reserve forests, Dibru and Saikhowa, including some other areas. It was elevated to the level of a national park in 1999, restricting its core area to 340 square km with a large buffer zone.

Dibru-Saikhowa National Park in the easternmost corner of the state has witnessed the highest tourist inflow, since it was declared a national park in 1999. According to official figures, the park has been host to 3,956 tourists during the financial year 2011-12. The previous highest was in the financial year 2009-10 when 2,675 tourists visited the national park spread across Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. On an average, the park, famous for bird-watchers and feral horses, hosts tourists between 1,800 and 2,000 each year.

The sanctuary is a home to some rare and endangered animals like hoolock gibbon, capped langur, slow Loris, water buffalo, tiger, elephant, Indo-Gangetic river dolphin and others, apart from a large population of both local and migratory birds and a sizeable population of feral horses. While the other national parks in the state remain closed during the monsoons, Dibru-Saikhowa being an island, offers the pleasure of a boat safari through wilderness in the numerous *nallahs* traversing through the park. The park is criss-crossed by Lohit, Dibang, Siang and Dibru rivers, all tributaries of the Brahmaputra. During winter when these *nallahs* dry up, tourists trek inside the park to watch birds, as several species choose Dibru-Saikhowa as their winter home.

The park is home to nearly 500 species of birds and most foreign tourists visit the place just to watch a few rare birds like the black breasted parrot bill, Jerdon's babbler and swamp prinia. One can find rare species of river dolphins, orchids, wild buffaloes, elephants and other animal and marine life. It is regarded as a paradise for bird watchers, as more than 500 different species of birds visit and nest in the area in different seasons. The 340-square kilometer reserve is open throughout the year for tourists and generates a huge amount of revenue for the state government. One of its most attractive features is the Flood Tour, as most parts of the park is inundated with flood waters. It also offers a huge scope for promoting eco tourism in the region.

Dibru-Saikhowa National Park is one of the five national parks of Assam, one of the 14 biosphere reserves in India and one of the 34 hotspots in the world; it is also perhaps the only river island national park in the country. It provides eye-soothing sights of migratory and rare endangered birds, the wild feral horse, the Hoolock Gibbon and the river dolphin, among other delights. The park is also a bird watchers' paradise and so, first on the itinerary of the tourist, must be the Maguri- Motapung Beel. The lake, which has six villages strewn on either side of it, is classified as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and is host to 374 different species of birds, out of which 50 are migratory. Boat rides are available to tourists as part of a package tour (where they can stay in the nearby cottages) or they can be availed individually too. Bird and man co-exist harmoniously on the lake. Fishermen busy at work, set jengs to capture fish, and hundreds of birds glide smoothly on the still waters of the lake; each in their own domain and completely unmindful of each other's business. Time seems to be an alien concept here. The only occasional disturbance is the advent of boatloads of tourists who attempt to get close to the seemingly-still birds. The Hoolock Gibbons, which are an endangered species, are yet another example of the harmonious relationship between man and animal. In India, Hoolock Gibbons are the second largest among gibbons and their habitat is confined to the Northeast. However unlike any protected sanctuary, they are regarded as almost divine by the locals and can be found in the villages itself, where they live in the coconut or betel nut trees in the fields adjacent to the houses.

A 15-member team of educated but unemployed youths from Natun Gaon has started an eco-tourism project at Guijan to attract more tourists to the park. Guijan, around 15km from Tinsukia, is one of the multiple entrances to the park. The youths have formed an NGO called Wave Eco-Tourism and has built eco- huts on Dibru riverside. The group has built four huts, each meant for two, but can also accommodate three to four people. Two types of bamboo, thatch and 'tokow' leaves were used to construct these huts, which also have attached toilets and washing facilities, keeping in mind the requirements of local as well as foreign tourists. The NGO has planned a day long itinerary for the tourists begins at around 8am with breakfast followed by sightseeing on boats, as most part of the park is covered with Dibru, Dangori, Dhola and the Brahmaputra rivers. In the afternoon, the tourists will be brought back to the camp for lunch and after lunch there is another round of sight-seeing. The day will end with evening tea being served at the camp. Dibru-Saikhowa National Park will give the tourists an opportunity to see different species of birds, wild buffaloes, herds of elephants, among others. In the afternoon trip, tourists will be taken towards river junctions to catch a glimpse of the rare and endangered Gangetic river dolphin. The NGO, however, feels sad about the government's stand towards the park despite its enormous potential of becoming a destination for eco-tourism. The government has not maintained the infrastructure in and around the park for promotion of eco-tourism. The National park covers an area of 340 square km and has recorded the presence of around 500 species of birds, both residential and migratory. It is interesting to know that many of the birds are globally endangered.

Conclusion

Ecotourism is based on four principles – nature orientation, eco sustainability, possibility of conducting research and involvement of local people. Modern tourism may take different forms including adventure, health, trade fair, cultural and religious festivals. Among those ecotourism blends a different strategy of enjoying the nature's serenity of its own way.

Considering the wide geographical and biological diversity, the scope of ecotourism in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park is very high. If these resources are tapped successfully we can transform the face of tourism industry in Assam. What actually needed is careful planning and a target oriented approach.

It is hoped that with the positive approach of the Central Government, State Government, Panchayat Samities, Non Government Organizations and local people; constructive efforts will be made in promoting ecotourism. The time has come when we must concentrate on the potential of ecotourism in Assam. Government as well as private sector needs to perform much better in this regard in the years to come. It is suggested that if government pays more attention towards ecotourism development, it may prove to be the backbone of the economy of Assam as well as India.

References

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