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ECOTOURISM AND LOCAL RESOURCE BASED SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD: A CASE STUDY OF KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract

Ecotourism, a fast-growing segment of tourism started catching up in the last quarter of the 20th century with a new reason to travel i.e., to see natural habitats and their harbored wild life before they vanish from earth. Any tourism program which is nature based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is major concept and where local people are benefited can be called ecotourism. Kaziranga National Park (KNP) which is situated in upper Assam in the north east region of India has great potentials of tourist resources for the development of ecotourism. An Ecotourism activity by involving local people not only enhances the level of income of the stakeholders, but also encourage them to conserve natural resources. The main objective of the paper is to see the extent of local people's participation in ecotourism activities in the KNP. The study finds that local people are aware of ecotourism activities and they are also involved to a great extent in the ecotourism related activities.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Conservation, Livelihood, Bio-Diversity, Kaziranga.

I. Introduction

Ecotourism has the potential to enhance wilderness protection and wild life conservation, while providing nature –compatible and sustainable livelihood for a large number of people living around natural ecosystems. This can help to contribute directly to the protection of wildlife or forest areas, while making the local community stakeholders and owners in the process (GOI, 2011). It is now widely acknowledged that the integrity of protected areas cannot be sustained without taking into the views and needs of the people living adjacent to the area.

Wood (1998) made an attempt to investigate appropriate community participation in ecotourism development in Ecuador. A wide range of community groups including indigenous people, Afro-Ecuadoreans, and Mestizos were all involved in developing ecotourism projects in a diverse variety of ecosystem. Scheyvens (1999) in his research paper considers way in which one can better understand how ecotourism ventures impact on the lives of local community. It is observed that successful ecotourism is possible if there would be local participation. Ecotourism increases the local empowerment. It has also been seen that how local communities exert some control over ecotourism activities, however, power will need to be decentralized from the national level to the community level. Campbell (1999) in his paper explained that with the active participation of local community how ecotourism has been developed in Ostional, Costa Rica. This has also given economic and other benefits to local community. Garrod (2003) showed that ecotourism is increasingly being advanced as a strategy to help address economic and social problems in local communities and as an appropriate and effective tool of environmental conservation. The full and effective participation of local communities in the planning and management of ecotourism is, however, rarely feature of ecotourism projects. At the worst, ecotourism projects can ignore the issue of local participation completely. Such projects frequently fail after a relatively short period of time. Singh (2008) asserted an increasing concern about the involvement of indigenous and local communities both in planning and development of ecotourism in many African countries.

“Ecotourism”, a fast-growing segment of tourism started catching up in the last quarter of the 20th century with a new reason to travel i.e., to see natural habitats and their harbored wild life before they vanish from the face of the earth. Any tourism programme which is nature based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is major concept and where local people are benefited can be called ecotourism (Thampi, 2005). In 1991, the ‘Ecotourism Society’ coined the definition of ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (Honey, 1999). In ecotourism, indigenous communities or local communities are an inseparable part. Any project or venture to develop ecotourism by ignoring local communities cannot be considered as ecotourism. Hence ecotourism is community-based tourism. So far Community based ecotourism is concerned it refers to ecotourism enterprises that are owned and managed by the community.

II. The problem

Kaziranga National Park (KNP) which is situated in upper Assam in the north east region of India has great potentials of tourist resources for the development of ecotourism. Kaziranga is located within two districts in the Indian states of Assam- the Kaliabor Subdivision of Nagaon District and the Bokakhat Subdivision of Golaghat District. The Park has the mighty Brahmaputra



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River on the north and verdant Karbi-Anglong on the south. The climate of Kaziranga National Park is typical subtropical monsoon type. KNP has global importance for tiger, elephant, and rhinoceros' conservation, is an IUCN category II-National Park (Heinen, et al. 2009).

KNP is known worldwide for its success in the conservation history of one horned Indian rhinoceros, provides habitat for a number of threatened species and migratory birds. A symbol of dedication for the conservation of animals and their habitat, KNP, with a national park status represents single large established protected area within the Burma Monsoon Forest biogeographically province to provide long term viable conservation. KNP is an outstanding example representing significant on going ecological and biological process in the evolution and development of wet land ecosystem and communities of plants and animals.

The Park has great potentials of tourist resources for the development of ecotourism. It is an enchanting land with exotic flora and fauna, exquisite landscape and rich folk heritage. As the economy of this region is mainly agro-based, the tourism industry needing lesser import content can help in capital formation in this state. Tourism is essentially a labor-intensive hospitality industry. It can provide room for a large number of unemployed youths of the region. If this kind of industry stands on firm ground, it may go a long way in providing subsidiary job opportunities to many. With the local participation, ecotourism not only can enhance the level of income of the stakeholders but make them compel to conserve the natural resources. In the age of growing automation and consumption, it is very much difficult for a region to preserve its unique folk culture and craftsmanship that exist among its people. This can only be preserved, when one rediscovers their importance and commercial demand. Ecotourism is a major way by which indigenous and local art and craft can be re-evaluated and used gainfully.

III. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are framed as follows-

- 1. To study the local participation in ecotourism activities in KNP
2. To study the local people's attitude towards conservation of KNP
3. To give some suggestions to improve the ecotourism in KNP.

IV. Source and nature of data

The present study is based on primary as well as on secondary data. Primary data were collected through a detailed questionnaire in the area while secondary data were collected from different journals, Books, Newspapers, Environment and Forest Department, Government of Assam, and Directorate of Kaziranga National Park, Assam.

V. Ecotourism activities in KNP

Central and State government have taken various initiatives for the development of eco-tourism in Kaziranga National Park. The tourism project for up gradation and expansion of tourist facilities in Kaziranga is completed. The Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in association with private parties has taken the Luxury vessel project between Kaziranga and Guwahati. ATDC and Cane & Bamboo Technology Centre first inaugurated bamboo based eco-tourism cottage in Kaziranga in Jan, 2007. The Ministry of Tourism, government of India and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also developed a Tourism village named Durgapur in K.N.P. State government has also completed tourist cottage at Kohora and Agaratoli. In 2006 Central government has sanctioned Rs. 44.95 lacs for development of adventure tourism in Kaziranga. State government's continuous effort in organizing Kaziranga Elephant Festival has helped in increasing both domestic and foreign tourists. The table-1 given below shows the number of visitors visiting Kaziranga National Park annually and making it a ecotourism hot spot.

Table No. 1
No. of visitors visiting Kaziranga National Park annually and revenue collected

Table with 5 columns: YEAR, Indian tourists, Foreign tourists, Total, Revenue in rupees. Rows show data from 1997-98 to 2004-05.



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| | | | | |
|---------|----------|------|----------|-------------|
| 2005-06 | 49,116 | 5210 | 54,326 | 76,15,169 |
| 2006-07 | 67,968 | 5748 | 73,716 | 79,80,949 |
| 2007-08 | 53,640 | 6106 | 59,746 | 87,34,185 |
| 2008-09 | 1,00,284 | 5767 | 1,06,051 | 1,12,20,698 |
| 2009-10 | 1,05,264 | 7580 | 1,12,844 | 1,21,67,974 |
| 2010-11 | 1,12,392 | 7447 | 1,19,839 | 1,36,73,482 |
| 2017-18 | 1,69,112 | 8319 | 1,77,431 | 5,40,79,929 |

Source: Directorate of kaziranga National Park. Assam

Assam is one of the bio-diversity hot-spot of the world (Mayers, 1991). It also forms part of two endemic bird areas, viz., Eastern Himalaya and Assam Plains (Collar et al., 1994). The state has immense potentialities for the growth and development of ecotourism, which could be one of the major sources of revenue generation and sustainable employment supporting activities in present day. Kaziranga National Park is an ideal place where ecotourism can flourish best of all. However, there are various other factors that have to be considered and worked upon to develop ecotourism ventures. These factors include active participation of host community, government; NGOs as well as involvement of local communities can also be a good source of revenue generation which in turn can lead to sustainable bio-diversity conservation. There are 74 revenue villages situated adjacent to the Kaziranga National Park. The villagers of these villages have been directly and indirectly contributing greatly towards conservation of Kaziranga National Park. The Management Authority of the park also has been trying to involve the villagers and other communities like Kaziranga Development and Jeep Safari Association, the local Hoteliers Association, Parivesh Samannay Samiti, a senior and Leading Villagers Association and other local NGOs in the promotion of ecotourism in the park. 55 Eco-Development Committees (EDC) so far have been constituted and registered under Eastern Assam Wildlife Division Forest Development Agency as per the guide lines of government of India with an objective to build up capacity and provide empowerment for a sustainable socio-economic development. About 220 Self-Help Groups (SHG) have already been constituted under the Eco-Development Committees with similar objective. Further efforts are on to increase the numbers of such Eco-Development Committees and Self-Help Groups. The management plan of Kaziranga National Park further envisages promotion of ecotourism in the fringe villages of the park for better economic development of the local communities (KNP, World Heritage Site,GoA). Kaziranga National Park authority introduced Eco-Development Committee programme in 2008, much later than in some other parts of the country, but here it has met with enormous success. Within two years, the programme has proved to be so successful that it has not only provided gainful livelihood to 15 hardcore poachers, it has also promoted ethnic culture and heritage in Natundanga and other nearby villages. The table No. 2 and Table No. 3 are showing the numbers of local people engaged in elephant and Jeep safari activities, which is one of the most important characteristics of ecotourism.

Table No. 2
Engagement of local people in elephant safari

| Range | Elephant engaged | People engaged | Monthly income of Owner (in Rs.) | Monthly income of Mahut (in Rs.) | Monthly income of Helper (in Rs.) |
|-----------|------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Kohora | 20 | 60 | 70000/- to 1 lakh | 7000/- to 12000/- | 4500/- |
| Bagori | 14 | 42 | 70000/- to 80000 | 7000/- | 4500/- |
| Ghorakati | 5 | 15 | 70000/- to 80000 | 7000/- | 4500/- |

Source: Fieldwork by authors

It is found that the majority of local community members hold positive perceptions and attitudes towards ecotourism development in KNP. They are attracted by a philosophy that ecotourism would help to improve the livelihood of the local people, to diversify local economy, to foster community development programs and support conservation of nature.

Table No. 3
People engaged in Gipsy Safari

| Range | Gipsy engaged | People engaged | Monthly income of owner (in Rs.) | Monthly income of Driver(in Rs.) |
|-----------|---------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Kohora | 320 | 640 | 40000/-to 70000/- | 7000/- to 10000/- |
| Bagori | 86 | 172 | 40000/-to 70000/- | 7000/- to 10000/- |
| Ghorakati | 20 | 40 | 40000/- to 70000/- | 7000/- to 10000/- |
| Agoratoli | 44 | 88 | 40000/- to 70000/- | 7000/- to 10000/- |

Source: Fieldwork by authors



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It can be seen from the table no.2 and 3 that, large numbers of local people are engaged in elephant and jeep safari activities, this not only providing employment opportunities to the local people but also providing livelihood. This is very much important in a state like Assam, where terrorism has already shattered the state economy.

Local people are not only engaged in safari activities but also engaged themselves in different cultural activities. Where the tourists can enjoy the indigenous culture and the community engaged with these cultural activities can be encouraged to preserve their rich heritage. From this kind of activities, the local people earn a huge amount of money for their livelihood.

Table no. 4
Folk Cultural activities perform by the Local people

| Sl. No. | Folk Cultural activity | Community engaged | Price charged (in Rs.) |
|---------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Bihu Dance | Assamese/tea community | 8500/- to 10000/- |
| 2 | Jhumu Dance | Tea community | 7500/- to 8000/- |
| 3 | Nepali Dance | Nepali community | 7500/- to 8000/- |

Source: Fieldwork by authors

Ecotourism is preserving the local culture and providing the opportunity for cultural and social exposure to the outside world. With the local community participation, ecotourism not only can enhance the level of income of the stakeholders in KNP but also encourage them to conserve the natural resources. In the age of growing automation and consumption, it is very much difficult for a region to preserve its unique folk culture and craftsmanship that exist among its people. This can only be preserved, when one rediscovers their importance and commercial demand. Ecotourism is a major way by which indigenous and local art and craft can be re-evaluated and used gainfully.

Table No. 5
Handicrafts locally produce or supplied

| Sl.no. | Name of the product | Price (in Rs.) |
|--------|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Gamucha | 100/- to 1000/- |
| 2 | Mekhela | 700/- to 10000/- |
| 3 | Wooden rhino and other wooden animals | 250/- to 12000/- |
| 4 | Other wooden products | 100/- to 10000/- |
| 5 | Cane products | 40/- to 40000/- |

Source: Fieldwork by authors

The concept of ecotourism is new one; the study region has great potentiality for ecotourism venture. Active involvement of local communities can be a good source of revenue generation as people had encroached into the park's periphery, which is a great threat to bio-diversity of the area. Hence involving the local communities in the efforts of the government to promote ecotourism would help in the conservation of the park. For the preservation of the nature and wildlife local people always co-operate with the KNP officials in number of ways, these are as follows,

- local communities provide information about the poachers
- Protect animal from the poachers
- Teach the tourists not to damage any natural habitats in the KNP area
- Teach the tourists not to leave any wastage or make noise inside the park area

Conservation of both animal and plant diversity with the help of active involvement of surrounding communities would be highly beneficial to reduce environmental degradation and also man-animal conflict in the nearby the park. The present study can provide the government with an assessment of community livelihood which can speed up ecotourism ventures. There is also a need to develop proper infrastructural facilities which could meet the need of tourists as well as the local communities of the area.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ecotourism has positive and significant effects on the local and national economy as it increases the livelihood opportunities for the local community. Ecotourism is a poverty reduction strategy because it supports and improves local community economically and socially. Participation of local communities in ecotourism is essential to maximize the potential benefits of this sector, eliminate



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poverty and conserve nature. It is to be mentioned that possible positive socio-economic and environmental benefit of ecotourism could be direct, indirect or induced. But overall, such activities improves human wellbeing by providing opportunities to earn income.

Every year KNP authority is organizing ‘Elephant Festival’ as a part of ecotourism activity to attract more tourists in the park. Where local people participate in different small business, cultural activities and earn good amount of money. Like ‘Elephant Festival’ other more festivals should be introduced to attract more tourists in KNP. At the same time basic infrastructural facilities must be developed in the adjacent areas. This will bring the positive impact of tourism to a larger group of people by giving them opportunities of direct participation in tourism activities. Government should take initiative to provide more financial and other help to the EDCs and self-help groups. Though 55 numbers of EDCs have already been formed but all of them not working properly. Apart from this the government is on the way to declare KNP as tiger project, if it is finalized then the tourism sector will be affected largely, because it will restrict the movement of tourists. Therefore, before declaring any project by the government or the Forest Official, they must have to realize the practical scenario of KNP and its fringe areas. Because with tourism sector huge numbers of people are directly or indirectly related and earning their livelihood. If ecotourism is encouraged in KNP by the government and NGOs then it will definitely improve the economic conditions of local communities. Moreover, the local communities should be involved in the decision-making and should be given ownership in local businesses in the area. This will not only protect local culture and social structure but also encourage people to protect biodiversity of the park.

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