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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FARM TOURISM: A STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING THE RURAL AREAS OF THE NORTH EAST REGION OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The study has been attempted with a specific objective i.e. To focus on the understanding of the utilization of farm based resources within the rural areas of the North Eastern region to integrate such agrarian ecosystem to the mainstream of the economy by developing it into tourism areas through community participation. The research work is the outcome of the analysis drawn from relevant literatures since the initialization of policies for farm based tourism to get a broader insight of the concept of ecotourism, to build environmental and cultural awareness among people for conserving bio-cultural diversity while generating income using the rural ecosystem. It is expected that the concept will help the policymakers draw strategies to develop the rural agrarian areas into profitable tourism venture to reduce poverty in isolated and underdeveloped and problem areas without damaging the ecosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is to build environmental and cultural awareness among people, provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts and to empower the local people through community participation to enhance their livelihood in a sustainable manner. Under community control, local expertise on biodiversity will play a significant role in natural resource management through traditional practices which is significant in rural areas. Farm based tourism which showcases rural life, its culture; tradition along with the grandeurs of nature can be used as an effective developmental mechanism to reduce poverty in isolated and underdeveloped rural areas. The North-Eastern Region (NER) of India which comprises of the Seven Sister States—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura—and the Himalayan state of Sikkim with its unique agro-ecosystem cultural presents a plethora of varying local lifestyle within the region. So, with such a diverse cultural and ecological asset, the North East Region has enormous potential to promote farm-tourism as a means to provide sustainable livelihood while conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity with community participation within the region.

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The Union ministry of tourism's data showed that the northeast has registered a growth of 6.9% in the number of foreign tourists in recent years. The number of domestic tourist in the region too has shown a growth of 8.09% in 2010. Sustainable tourism is the sector that can be explored in the region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A crucial policy challenge in the years to come is how best we can organize schemes to contribute to ecology conservation for sustainable growth while reducing poverty. So in this study an attempt has been made to focus on the understanding of the utilization of farm based resources within the rural areas of the North Eastern region to promote sustainable livelihood using agro ecotourism in underdeveloped and problem areas.

Need for Farm-tourism in NER

Sustainable livelihood Development through Farm-tourism

The rapid growth of population followed by uncontrolled urbanization, industrialization and massive intensification of agriculture is creating major environmental problems like decline in forest cover and degradation of agricultural land, resource depletion (water, mineral, forest, sand, rocks etc), loss of biodiversity and resilience in ecosystems thereby creating livelihood insecurity for the poor in the North East Region.

Present Status of Tourism in the North Eastern Region of India

State-wise Number of Domestic Tourist Visits, (2005 to 2010)

States	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Arunachal Pradesh	50560	80137	91100	149292	195147	227857
Assam	2467652	3268657	3436833	3617306	3850521	4050924
Manipur	94299	116984	101484	112151	124229	114062
Meghalaya	375901	401529	457685	549936	591398	652756
Mizoram	44715	50987	43161	55924	56651	57292
Nagaland @	17470	15850	22085	21129	20953	21094
Sikkim @	251744	292486	329075	460564	615628	700011
Tripura	216330	230645	244795	245438	317541	342273
India	391948589	462310177	526564364	562982298	668800482	740214297

Revised domestic tourist visits for 2008. Source: Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India

State-wise Number of Foreign Tourist Visits, (2007 to 2010)

States	2005	2006#	2007	2008	2009	2010
Arunachal Pradesh	289	607	2212	3020	3945	3395
Assam	10782	10374	12899	14426	14942	15157
Manipur	316	295	396	354	337	389
Meghalaya	5099	4287	5267	4919	4522	4177
Mizoram	273	436	669	902	513	731
Nagaland	883	1002	936	1209	1423	1132
Sikkim	16523	18026	17498	19154	17730	20757
Tripura	2677	3245	3181	3577	4246	5212
India	9939782*	11403661	13267273	14112590	14372300	17852777

Note: # - Provisional. * - Figures are estimated, Source: Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India

State-wise Number of Tourism Sites and Amount Sanctioned for Promotion of Rural Tourism Projects, (2002-2007 and 2007-2012): (Rs. in Lakh)

States	No. of Tourism Sites	Amount Sanctioned
Arunachal Pradesh	4	246.78
Assam	4	230.08
Manipur	4	162.39
Meghalaya	3	143.29
Nagaland	12	803.15
Sikkim	11	715.77
Tripura	10	625.95
India	167	10316.48

Source : Lok Sabha Starred Question No. 160, dated on 19.11.2010.

State-wise Number of Projects* and Amount Sanctioned* by Ministry of Tourism, (2007-2008 to 2011-2012-upto 30.09.2011)

States	2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-12 (upto 30.09.2011)	
	No. of Projects Sanctioned	Amount Sanctioned								
Arunachal Pradesh	11	43.3	13	31.5	14	36.54	13	32.26	6	13.62
Assam	6	17.5	5	33.1	7	22.76	4	23.55	3	4.23
Manipur	5	11.1	9	29.4	9	27.10	8	39.40	4	22.99
Meghalaya	2	6.7	7	17.1	7	14.70	9	22.53	2	0.40
Mizoram	6	26.9	4	3.2	7	24.10	9	11.51	6	13.81
Nagaland	22	32.4	11	25.4	13	24.60	10	29.10	6	25.87
Sikkim	25	55.9	20	66.8	19	42.50	14	23.48	4	13.45
Tripura	11	11.1	6	3.6	13	20.70	12	40.73	6	15.44
India	277	757.1	240	961	247	671.19	228	774.36	102	454.15

(Rs. in Crore)

Note : * : Includes projects relating to PIDDC, HRD and A&RT. Source : Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India (13077), Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1218, dated on 01.12.2011.

Selected State-wise Number of Rural Tourism Projects Sanctioned by Ministry of Tourism, (As on 31.03.2011)

States	Number of Projects Sanctioned
Arunachal Pradesh	5
Assam	4
Manipur	4
Meghalaya	3
Mizoram	1
Nagaland	12
Sikkim	11
Tripura	10
India	172

Both flora and fauna in the Northeastern Region are under threat due to deforestation, mining and quarrying, jhum or shifting cultivation, charcoal-making, construction of reservoirs and dams, overharvesting of medicinal plants, drying up of wetlands, and overfishing and pollution of water bodies. In addition, general political and ethnic conflict in the region articulated with conflict between development and conservation, are likely to have negative impacts on biodiversity conservation. To mitigate the depletion of environment in the region, agro-ecotourism can be used as an effective tool to make sustainable or renewable use of the resource composed of forests, land and water sources that are also the basic mode of sustenance of the rural people.

A. Farm based livelihood generation through Farm-tourism in NER

Farm tourism is one of the five categories of rural tourism, the others being ecotourism, cultural, adventure and activity tourism (Roberts and Hall, 2001). The North Eastern States with its cultural and geographic diversity offers a wide range of scope to promote agro-ecotourism within the rural areas of the region which has been highlighted below as:

Tea tourism

The states of Assam and Sikkim having huge tracts of land under tea plantations which provides scenic beauty to the landscape gives ample opportunity to promote tea tourism for providing direct and indirect means of livelihood to the unemployed rural people. Tourists who come to seek for peace and leisure within the ambience of nature can be attracted to such tea gardens by providing exciting ventures within the estate such as:

- Tea Garden Walk
 - Tea processing observation
 - Tea Tasting
 - Picnic day out with Bird viewing or fishing
 - Visit to nearby villages and Interaction with the Garden workers
- Nature tours and ethnic cultural program with bon fire.

Floral tourism

The North east region with its beautiful natural floral diversity provides huge opportunity for its commercial production and offers lucrative investment opportunity for farmer and agro entrepreneurs. Commercial cultivation of cut flowers such as rose, orchids, gladiolus, carnation, anthurium, gerbera and lilies have also been adopted by farmers on large scale. With the growth of floriculture in the region, it has ample scope to promote floral tourism to provide a sustainable alternative to agriculture. By opening floral gardens and parks in rural areas and organizing flower shows to showcase its floral potential, the region can draw a large number of tourists interested in nature tourism.

Nature tourism

The forests of North East India covering a span of 1, 67,000 sq. Km have rich reserves of endemic flora and fauna. It is home to

some rare species of trees, flowers, wild animals and birds in the world. Many of these forests are open to tourist in the form of National parks and Sanctuaries. But some of the forests in the region are still out of bound to tourists and remains unexplored. Such forests can be utilized effectively through the concept of community forestry to promote nature-tourism by developing eco-parks and medicinal gardens to provide sustenance to the tribal people living within such forests and to check the harmful effects of shifting cultivation in the region.

Constraints

1. Conflict

Conflicts amongst the local communities in the North Eastern Region over issues like natural resources, migration, displacement, social values and identity ranging from inter-community, communal and inter-ethnic conflicts to separatist movements is the main cause of concern for initiation of schemes like rural ecotourism which involves community participation.

2. Lack of Initiatives by State governments to create infrastructure

Lack of strategic action plans and policies to create an environment conducive to investment for the development of rural infrastructure and to take up economic development programs to uplift the rural economy is the main reason for the increasing backwardness of the rural areas in the region. Due to lack of in due to initiatives by the respective governments at the state level the region is facing economic underdevelopment. The basic infrastructure, such as roads and bridges are not developed as per need of the rural areas and poor connectivity in most of the rural areas has contributed to the economic backwardness of this region. There is also a lack of an appropriate legislation to make judicious use of the natural resources in the region.

3. Lack of Education and Awareness among local people

The rural people live a simple life and prefer to hold on to their cultural and traditional values and try to avert the changes influenced by modernization with a fear of loss of ethnicity. Due to lack of education and awareness the illiterate mass within the rural community usually hold on to their traditional practices of life which may prevent them from using technologies that can be used to enhance the socio-economic conditions of their lives and it may also result in lesser community participation in different developmental policy matters. Even the educated section within the rural community who are aware of the happenings around the world may not be able to utilize fully his understandings of different technologies due to social norms and fear of isolation from the traditionally bound mass of the region.

4. Ethno-diversity –A barrier for inducing community participation

The North Eastern Region with great ethnic diversity has several dialects, customs and traditions. The varied norms of

the rural tribes may often result in conflicts over community issues within the same geographic areas; the language may also act a barrier for communication within members of different tribes which may hamper the process of attaining mutual consensus over the utilization of resources with community participation for starting developmental activities like ecotourism in the region. Language may also act a barrier for the local people to communicate effectively with the visitors.

Participatory Planning- An Effective Tool for Augmenting Agro-Ecotourism

Local tourism development requires that people affected by tourism get involved in planning and implementation of policies and action plans. Such bottom up approach could ensure that development meets the perceived need of the local community (Simpson, 2001). Development programs framed by central government bureaucracies for the North East Region is not attuned to the needs of the local socio-political conditions, so to bring forth a mutual consensus among the local groups an identification of their felt needs is required for promoting community action. To ensure effective implementation of rural tourism the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which are participatory approaches and methods that emphasize local knowledge and enable local people to make their own appraisal, analysis and plans and intends to gather enough information to make the necessary recommendations and decisions can be used along with Rapid Rural Appraisal Methods (RRA) which is a qualitative survey methodology using a multi-discipline team to formulate problems for research and development.

Conclusion

Tourism is not ecotourism unless it "clearly integrates both protections of resources with provision of local economic benefits (Norris, 1994). To initiate the different aspects of agro-ecotourism which have been highlighted in the study it is

necessary for the respective governments in north eastern region to be pro-active to develop agro-ecotourism within the rural areas to alleviate poverty and also to conserve the available natural resources along with community participation in various decision making processes at the local level through participatory planning processes. It is necessary to conduct further studies on the habitat of the sites by agencies involved in policy matters to prevent the negative impact of such projects on the ecology of the region. It is also essential to promote mass education in the rural areas to create an understanding of concept of agro-ecotourism which will enhance the participation of rural folks in such developmental activities within the rural areas. Legislations needs to be framed to make best use of the available natural resources while conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity which will help to protect the natural and cultural heritage to achieve sustainable development with community participation.

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