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## A study on potential benefits of eco-tourism in the Tinsukia district of Assam

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### **Abstract**

Tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world and as a result is also a large scale activity of global human society, with its negative impacts on the natural environment. Eco-tourism, as a specialized form of tourism, has been found to provide a new dimension to the tourism industry by reducing these impacts. The present paper is going to study the various potentialities of developing eco-tourism in the district of Tinsukia, Assam.

**Keywords:** Eco tourism, environment.

### **1. Introduction**

Ecotourism originated in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The degradation of wildlife habitat due to the growing mass tourism by 1970s, created a gradual awareness and concern for conservation of ecosystem which led to the introduction of ecotourism. The word Eco-tourism was first used in Central America. Basically ecotourism means “tourism involving travel to areas of natural or ecological interest, typically under the guidance of a naturalist, for the purpose of observing wild life and learning about environment, and at the same time focus on wildlife and promotion of understanding and conservation of the environment.” Ecotourism has twin objectives of conserving the environment and promoting the welfare of the local people. Thus according to International Ecotourism Society, “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people.” Currently Eco tourism has received a priority in global economy and considering its growing importance the year 2002 was announced by the United Nations as the “International Year of Eco tourism”. Keeping pace with world economy India has also intended to develop this eco-friendly venture. Assam, a state in the North Eastern fringe of India is endowed with rich bio-diversity, ethnic culture and heritage sites which offer ample scope for development of eco-tourism in various parts of the state. Tinsukia district of Assam, is located at the North fringe of the state, bordering the state of Arunachal Pradesh to the north (Lohit district) and east (Changlang and Tirap district), while the district of Dibrugarh in Assam bounds the western and southern borders. The international border of Indo-Myanmar (Nampang in Arunachal Pradesh) is a little more than 100 kms from the district headquarters of Tinsukia. Tinsukia, the district of rising sun is a very old commercial & industrial belt of Assam with many large industries viz, coal, tea, plywood & oil refinery. The district is gifted with rich forest resources, mixed ethnic cultural bonding, and beautiful scenic view. All the areas are appeared to be prosperous by nature and there is the need to enhance their optimum utilization for economic development.

### **2. Objectives**

#### **2.1 The objectives of the present study are**

1. To identify the areas in and around of the Tinsukia district of Assam which has the potentiality for the development of eco-tourism.
2. To highlight the potential benefits that can be derived by the region from the development of eco-tourism.
3. To find out the problems of eco-tourism development in the Tinsukia district.
4. To find out the strategies that is necessary for the development of eco-tourism in the region.

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### 3. Methodology

The focus of this study is to explore and gain ideas and insight of eco-tourism destination in the district of Tinsukia. Secondary data was collected from the journals, reports, online articles and the official websites of various public and private bodies and travel agencies. These sources provided an overview of eco-tourism in the district.

#### 3.1 Places having high potentiality for Eco-Tourism in the Tinsukia District

##### a) Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

This park which is 13 kms away from Tinsukia town is an ideal for bird watching. A total of 36 species of mammals have so far been recorded here, of which, 12 are listed in the Schedule I of Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, like Royal Bengal Tiger, Gangetic Dolphin, Asian elephant, hollock gibbon, water buffalo, feral horses etc. Various eco camps have been set up in the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, such as Banashree eco camp and Wave eco-tourism which are making all round effort to promote eco-tourism in and around the National Park. They organise well-guided trekking, boating and picnics for the visitors.

##### b) Rain forest

The Jeypure-Dehing forest landscape comprises, the Dehing-Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary, Upper Dehing East and West Block Reserve Forest and Dilli Reserve Forest, covering an area of 575 sq kms, of which the protected area under Dehing Patkai sanctuary is only 111 sq km. Here the tourists can enjoy trekking, bird watching, wild life viewing etc. A total of 43 mammals have been recorded in the forest. It is in fact the first site in world where photographs have confirmed 7 species of cats co-existing within one landscape.

##### c) Bherjan-Borjan-Padumoni Wildlife sanctuary

This wildlife sanctuary is at a distance of about 6 kms from Tinsukia. It is famous for different species of primates including endangered Hoolock Gibbon.

##### d) Orange orchards in Tinsukia

Tinsukia is the largest producer of orange both in terms of area and production in Assam. The major pockets of orange cultivation in the district are Kakapathar, Hapjan, Doomdooma, philobari, Ketetong, Margherita and Talap. These orange orchards can be projected and developed as points of tourists' attraction. A visit to an orchard, heavily laden with oranges and to behold the beauty and colour and to get engulfed in the irresistible fragrance it spreads, would be an alluring experience.

##### e) Bell Temple

This temple of Lord Shiva, symbolized by a huge Banyan (pipal) tree, is at a distance of 17 kms from Tinsukia. It is believed that one may get his wishes fulfilled by offering a bell to this temple. Believers hang the bells to the branches of that tree and this is how the temple got its unique name.

##### f) Digboi town

This is the first oil town of Asia, where oil well was drilled commercially in September 1889. A refinery was commissioned in December 1901, first of its kind in Asia and it was only refinery till India achieved independence and now it is the oldest operating oil refinery in the world. Digboi also has the distinction of establishing first oil

museum in India. The 18 hole golf course is an added attraction to the visitors. This golf course is known for its scenic beauty. Here, two of the most prestigious tournaments are held annually- the All Assam Amateur and the only professional tournament held in the North-East, the Servo Masters. This course lives up to the expectations of all the professional golfers and is maintained by Indian Oil Corporations. Moreover, a visit to the nearby War Cemetery and the Centenary park can offer a unique experience.

##### g) Margherita town

Margherita, one of the sub-divisional head-quarters of Tinsukia district, the Coal Queen of Assam, is nature's own paradise. The splendor of the mystic Patkai range on one side and the river Burhi-Dehing flowing right across with a carpet of lush-green tea gardens forming the natural landscape. A ride through the beautiful tea gardens contouring the hillocks of Dirok, Namdang and Namtok section, touching the foothills of Patkai ranges will be treat for one's eyes. Watching the process of making tea and a visit to a plywood factory may also be a pleasant experience. It has a beautifully maintained coal museum. The picturesque of Margherita Golf Course, a favourite destination for Golfers, has also added a feather to the crowning beauty of this tiny little town.

Moreover there is a Singpho Ecolodge at Inthong village, which is around seven kilometers from Margherita. It was inaugurated in October 2008. A long driveway through tea bushes lead to the thatched building built along the lines of a traditional Singpho house on stilts.

##### h) Sadiya

About 75 kms east of Tinsukia is Sadiya, an sub-divisional headquarter of Tinsukia district. Sadiya was the central market for all hill tribes inhabiting the extreme North-East. The place of the Chutias, Sadiya is famous for Tameswari temple. It is one of the important centres of shakti worship in Assam. A visit to Sadiya can also be an experience to relish as one has to catch a ferry at Dhola Ghat to cross the mighty Brahmaputra to reach Sadiya.

##### i) Pangsau Pass & the Lake of No Returns

Pangsau Pass in the Patkai ranges is about 130 kms away from Tinsukia in the Indo-Myanmar border. The area is in Arunachal Pradesh and is located at a distance of just 12 kms from the beautiful town of Nampong. The journey to Pangsau pass from Nampong through the abandoned stretch of Stillwell road with dense forest on one side and deep gorges on the other can offer a thrilling experience to the adventurers.

The famous Lake of No Return is near Pangsau pass international border between India and Myanmar. The pilots had chosen this lake for emergency land in case of imminent air crash and so many aircrafts were reported to have crashed into the lake. Visitors interested in trekking and adventure tourism would find it an ideal place.

##### j) Phaneng village

The village of Phaneng is located in Tinsukia district in the eastern most corner of the state of Assam, India. Situated between the cloistered Patkai rainforest range and the Tirap River, this small hamlet is home to approximately 150 people. With a great vision, a small community called the Tai-Phake, without any help from the Government

agencies transformed the remote and jungle village into a spot of attraction for home and foreign tourists.

### **3.2 Development of Eco-Tourism and potential benefits to local people**

#### **a) Generation of income and employment**

- Local people will become a part of this venture by taking charge of boarding, lodging, housing, site-seeing, cooking etc.
- Indirect employment for those who are involved in the furnishing and equipment industries, souvenir industries, farming and food supply.

#### **b) Development of infrastructure**

- Residents may enjoy a higher standard of public transport, communication, water supply and other public amenities than they would be able to support otherwise
- Creation of basic infrastructure for tourist usage will also be of service to other sectors of the economy like industry and agriculture

#### **c) Sustainable use of natural resources**

- The development of eco-tourism in this region of parks, sanctuaries and reserve rainforests will lead to more sustainable use of natural resources.
- Local people should be properly trained as competent guides who can give accurate information to tourists about biological diversity, conservation techniques and observe good conservation measures during tours.

#### **d) Cultural exchanges among different types of people**

- There is great possibility of communication between different groups of people
- Eco tourists – both domestic and foreigners can enjoy and appreciate the cultures, festivals and foods of various tribes.

#### **e) International understanding**

- The development of eco-tourism can be a vehicle for international understanding by way of bringing diverse people face to face.
- It has been cited as a major contributor to international goodwill and as a prime means of developing social and cultural understanding among all peoples of the world.

#### **f) Creation of market for local product**

- Handloom and handicrafts of different tribes of the area awaiting a suitable market, hand processed Singpho tea, organic tea and other agro- based output are expected to get market outreach.

### **3.3 Problems related to the development of eco-tourism in the Tinsukia District**

#### **a) Insufficient Financial Support**

The tourism sector in the Tinsukia district is getting lack of attentions from the government and proper exposures in the domestic and international fields. Proper financial support can enhance the tourism potential of the region, which would help the folks to preserve the local culture, traditions, heritage, art forms etc. Tourism can showcase the uniqueness of the place in the proper manner.

#### **b) Inadequate infrastructural facilities**

Lack of adequate and well developed facilities for transport and communication as well as accommodation can be regarded as another major problem affecting the region.

#### **c) Lack of Trained tourist guide**

The whole tourism concept is very indigenous in the region. Though initiative attempt have been taken by the local youths, yet the professionalism is lacking. They are lacking proper training to project in the manner from tourism perspective.

#### **d) Lack of business planning skill**

The region has great potential as an upcoming tourist spot. But, in order to bring it to a greater platform, sound business planning has to be made.

#### **e) Socio-political unrest**

Frequent bandhs, hartals, insurgency problems are major deterrents to the development of eco-tourism in the region.

### **4. Strategies**

- Ecotourism packages should include educational tours for school and colleges, summer camp, family packages, adventure packages like trekking, rock climbing, rafting etc.
- Strategic partnership between different government departments and private agencies
- Campaign with print and electronic media which should include sponsored visits to eco- potential sites by reporters, photographers and other resource persons from media.
- Promote responsible business practices, which work cooperatively with local authorities and people to support poverty alleviation and deliver conservation benefits.
- Emphasise the need for tourism zoning and visitor management plans for sites that will be developed as eco-destinations.
- Use environmental and social base-line data, as well as long-term monitoring programmes, to assess and minimise negative impacts.
- Maximise the economic benefit for the economy especially local businesses and people living in and around the protected area network.
- Ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental limits of acceptable change as determined by researchers in cooperation with local residents.
- Promote local styles of architecture and infrastructure that are developed in harmony with the local culture and environment, that use local materials, minimise energy consumption and conserve local plants and wildlife.

### **5. Conclusion**

Eco-tourism can play a major role in improving the economic condition of Northeast Region as a whole and Tinsukia in particular. It can contribute a lot towards improving the unemployment scenario of the state and enable the region to have a good amount of foreign earnings. Proper initiative by the government towards developing tourism and making the people aware of the various tourism products would contribute towards making this region as the dream destination of every tourist.

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