

Eco-Tourism Prospects and Possibilities in Dehing-Patkai National Park of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays environment protection is one of the major issues in our world. People are creating awareness about sustainable, conservation and preservation of our natural habitat. Tourism is also playing a very important role in nature-based awareness. Tourism Industry is trying to develop tourism with support of environment. Hence, Eco-Tourism, Rural Tourism these are coming into limelight.

The paper will be on knowing the prospects and development of Eco-Tourism and Rural Tourism in and around Dehing-Patkai National Park of Assam. The title will showcase the important areas like opportunities, prospects, community participation and eco-tourism destination potentialities.

Outcome of this research will create a positive impact and knowing the importance of tourism development in and around Dehing-Patkai and make the national park as one of the finest upcoming eco-tourism cum rural tourism destinations of North-East India. Method of Data Interpretation will be of Qualitative and Quantitative Interpretation through observations, documents, survey, questionnaire and face to face interviews.

KEYWORDS: Eco and Rural Tourism, Opportunities and Community participation, Tourist Sites and Infrastructure, Promotion and Popularity as compared to other sites of Assam, Prospects and Possibilities

INTRODUCTION

Eco-Tourism is gaining popularity in every part of the world. People are nowadays more cautious about the surroundings and the environment. Globally population and pollution is rapidly increasing and natural habitats are getting disturbed. Although we have already the threat of Global warming, but it's our responsibility to think about environment's protection. We cannot push everything to Government, but it's a responsibility of general citizens also that we should think about the nature and its diversity. Maintaining the ecological balance and biodiversity are now two major factors from which we can protect our natural habitat. When it comes to Tourism, definitely we expect development and infrastructure. Tourism development is now one of the vital activities taking place at every corner of the globe. But, we have to adopt the concept like Tourism with Environment and Tourism with supporting the nature. In country like India where the population and pollution is very high in the world context, we must concentrate on nature based tourism more and more in every state of our country. Simultaneously we have to preserve our monuments, culture and conserve our nature too. India has many natural sites and our country is blessed with natural paradise. When we promote and develop natural destinations, we must assure the safety of the environment and its natural habitat. National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in India attracts tourists from all parts of the world, so at the same time we have to focus on the nature too so that it couldn't get perished in future. To support the environment, nowadays Eco-Tourism and Village Tourism is literally gaining much importance in the

world and even in India also there are now many designated eco-tourism spots. Especially in Assam, the place called Dehing-Patkai National Park which is one of the most beautiful spots in the region and it's the only rainforest in Assam. The place is also called as "Amazon of the East". There is a huge potentiality to grow this place as one of the beautiful eco-tourism destinations as well as the rural tourism spot for the unique hospitality found in that area. So, developing the destinations with clear concentration on nature will help us to come up with more innovations and more environment free activities in the state and the country. Tourism should be developed with nature instead of developing without nature. Development and Environment, both we have to carry forward for better future benefits of the sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Ravi Shankar Kumar Singh (1995) in his book 'Ecotourism and Sustainable Development' remarks that ecotourism activities have been increasing rapidly worldwide over the past two decades and further growth is expected in the years ahead.
- In the book 'Sustainable Tourism: A Geographical Perspective', Hall and Alan (1999) describe, "Ecotourism is environmentally friendly and sustainable tourism, which also benefits the local community".
- Raghavan (2005) opines: ecotourism is ecologically sustainable with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation. It is therefore necessary to bring together conservation and development in the activities yearning economic progress.
- According to Dr.Vijaya Kumar's book 'Environment, Tourism and Development' (2014), tourism and environment should not only depend upon each other, but also benefit mutually. He also highlights the importance of environment in tourism.

HOW TO REACH DEHING-PATKAI

BY AIR:- Nearest airport from Dehing-Patkai is situated in Dibrugarh, called as Mohanbari Airport. The airport is connected with many Indian cities and around 2 hours drive from the national park.

BY RAIL: - There are several railway stations are situated within the vicinity of Dehing-Patkai region. Most major stations are New Tinsukia and Dibrugarh Railway Stations which is approx. 1 hr to 2 hrs away. The nearest stations are Duliajan and Naharkatia, but all trains don't have stoppages here.

BY ROAD: - Dehing-Patkai is easily accessible from all parts of the state via Dibrugarh, Moran and Tinsukia. The park has two wildlife divisions namely Dibrugarh and Digboi. The road connectivity is quite good and easily reachable to the park by all modes of ground transport.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aims and objectives of the study: -

- a) To highlight Dehing-Patkai national park as a suitable eco-tourism destination
- b) To study the potential routes, destinations and importance of rural, eco and wildlife in and around Dehing-Patkai National Park that can be added into the tourist map.
- c) To know the people's perception and views on the national park and its infrastructure
- d) To highlight the area properly with bringing up the possibilities and potentialities of Dehing-Patkai to become as community and tourist friendly site.

POTENTIAL DESTINATIONS IN DEHING-PATKAI TO MAKE IT AS ECO-TOURISM AND RURAL TOURISM CENTRES

Dehing-Patkai is a place where we can plan for eco-tourism as well as rural tourism. It's a perfect place to develop as a community based tourism spot. Not only wildlife, but the place has many more resources within the jurisdiction as well as in the nearby areas. Let's discuss the areas that can be covered:-

a) **JOYPUR RANGE** under Dibrugarh Wildlife Division: - The Joypur rainforest and the area of National Park spreads till Hukanjuri Border of Assam-Arunachal Pradesh. Famous for Asiatic Elephants. The banks of Burhi-Dihing river at Joypur Range attracts people for bird watching and it can be a good eco-tourism spot. It is also the home of annual festival called as Joypur Rainforest Festival.

b) **MERBEEL SASONI ECO-TOURISM:** - The place is just situated near to Naharkatia Town and approximately 15 kms from Joypur. The area host beautiful combination of plants and trees with a water body (beel) that hosts birds and amphibians. There are few eco-tourism cottages too so that people can stay overnight during their visit with enjoying local cuisines. The village people successfully trying to conserve the area and very much hospitable in nature. The area is also converting into Rural Tourism.

c) **NAMPHAKE AND TIPAM PHAKE BUDDHIST VILLAGES:** -These two Buddhist villages are one of the core products of Assam which can be converted under Buddhist Tourist Circuit of Assam. The villages are situated in just few minutes drive from the Joypur Range of Dehing-Patkai National Park. The Tai-Phake community residing in the villages shows the perfect "atithi devo bhawah" concept to the visitors or tourists. There are two central monasteries in the village and you can even enjoy local food here.

d) **SORAI PUNG RANGE:** - This is another major range of Dehing-Patkai National Park coming under Digboi Wildlife Division. Just few kilometers away from Duliagan Town, this range offers dense and beautiful forest. Covering with forest from both sides, one can enjoy its real beauty with the flavour of Wildlife Tourism. This area can be a perfect getaway for eco-tourism and wildlife tourism lovers.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT FOR ECO/RURAL TOURISM

Infrastructure Development is a prime concern when we think Tourism. Entire world is depending on better Tourist Infrastructure. But, in some places especially at the natural sites we have to focus on infrastructure development with supporting the environment. In other words, we can also say like Green Infra. The places like National Parks, Biodiversity hotspots, sanctuaries are very sensitive areas and we can't expect heavy infrastructure over there. As per the environment societies or any other green bodies, if we want to develop the infra for tourists then we should focus on eco-friendly process. Similarly, in Dehing-Patkai National Park, we can't build big hotels and resorts everywhere. If someone wants to construct guest accommodations, then proper location and necessary steps have to be taken so that nature couldn't get disturbed. Tourist accommodation is very important but we have to adopt the way of ecotels which are eco-friendly accommodations and not harmful to the environment. Dehing-Patkai is a highly eco-sensitive zone and in this area we can think to bring eco-friendly bamboo cottages near to Joypur and Soraipong Ranges. People can come up with the ideas of bamboo cottages on the bank of Burhi-Dihing River with proper waste disposal system. Even the place doesn't have any government accommodation from Tourism Department, but they can think to build Government Tourist Cottages near to the national park with taking all environmental precautions. Dehing-Patkai requires good wayside amenities for tourists with proper washroom facilities, food and beverage, refreshment centre etc. The local people residing near Dehing-Patkai are very much interested in homestays concept, so Government of Assam must support them to initiate with the homestay facilities. The local communities can bring and showcase their cuisines right at their home and commercially they can sell their cuisines to the tourists. It should be in a traditional way of eating

and the experience must be matched with the local lifestyle. There can be also E-rickshaws or battery vehicles inside the Namphake and TipamPhake villages specially, where people on their visit they can explore the village properly instead of running their vehicles. There should be proper designated car parking and guest further have to walk and explore. If someone can't walk properly or for senior citizens, the battery vehicles can transport them from the parking area. These initiatives will help local people to sustain properly and they can earn a good amount of money for livelihood. People truly say that Tourism can be a common people's dream and anybody can earn through tourist expenditure.

PROSPECTS, POSSIBILITIES AND SCOPES OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

When we talk about Dehing-Patkai National Park, the area is blessed with various communities. The place is surrounded by beautiful and hospitable local people who can offer homely service to the tourists. Though the place is yet to be explored, but still people over there expecting a lot to cater tourists in future. The local people can offer wide ranges of services and community tourism can be developed in a following ways:-

- a) Showcasing the local handloom products or art and crafts.
- b) Offering the traditional local cuisines in their style.
- c) Introducing few tea or local food outlets nearby the villages and national park.
- d) To maintain the place and to avoid the pollution, people can introduce battery operated vehicle for the village tour.
- e) The various communities residing in the areas can showcase their culture through dance and singing to the tourists as an Evening Cultural Program.
- f) Experienced and knowledgeable locals can play their role as Local Tourist Guide or Local Guide, so that they can conduct a tour within the vicinity of the villages as well as near to the National Park too.
- g) Introduction of proper Homestay facilities for the tourists will attract tourists from all parts who can enjoy the national park and nearby areas by staying on overnight basis.

All these activities and services can bring smiles to every household. These activities can be the proper earning sources for the local people. Though DehingPatkai National Park is not as much popular like Kaziranga and Manas National Parks of the state, but after official announcement as a national park now a new hope is arising and people are expecting for new sunrise. The place can be a tourist attraction for round the year which is a major advantage and its beauty is different. The national park cum rainforest with the help of Government of Assam can bring new opportunities for the local people as well as it can be a game changer for Tourism industry of Assam being a "Amazon of the East".

ECONOMIC POTENTIALITIES IN DEHING-PATKAI AND CHAKRASHILA

When we talk about Tourism Industry, we always focus on economic activities. Tourism is one of the largest revenue generation industries in the world. In India, Tourism contributes one of the largest employment opportunities. One of the largest foreign revenues in India comes from Tourism only. Tourism helps to grow and develop a particular destination and its local lifestyle. We always assume Tourism as "common people's dream". If nothing is possible, then Tourism makes it possible. The industry is successfully developing many local places, villages, remote areas of our country and today those unknown places are creating revenue generation from tourists only. For e.g. a place called Mawlynnong Village in Meghalaya, which is a perfect example of sustainability through Tourism. The most beautiful part of that village is happiness and responsible. The village is now known as "God's own Garden and Asia's cleanest village". Their local people have realized the importance of Tourism and Hospitality and the place which was never known before is now known by everyone. Today, the entire village is dependent on earnings through Tourism. They have introduced few attractions like living root bridge, balancing rock, made few homestays. Cafeterias etc. so that tourists can spend

time in a beautiful environment. The place has been automatically converted into Eco-Tourism Zone. Likewise Mawlynnong, there are many more places in India which are now known as major tourist spots that has been highlighted with the help of local people.

Now what about the Dehing-Patkai and Chakrashila of Assam? What economic potentialities or scopes we can expect from these two places?

DEHING-PATKAI

- a) Earnings from local handicrafts or handlooms.
- b) Entry charges for forest trails or nature walking.
- c) Forest guard charges.
- d) Earning from selling of local cuisine.
- e) Homestays.
- f) Earning from small cafeterias or souvenir shop.
- g) Local Guide

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DATA ANALYSIS

This research has been conducted through: -

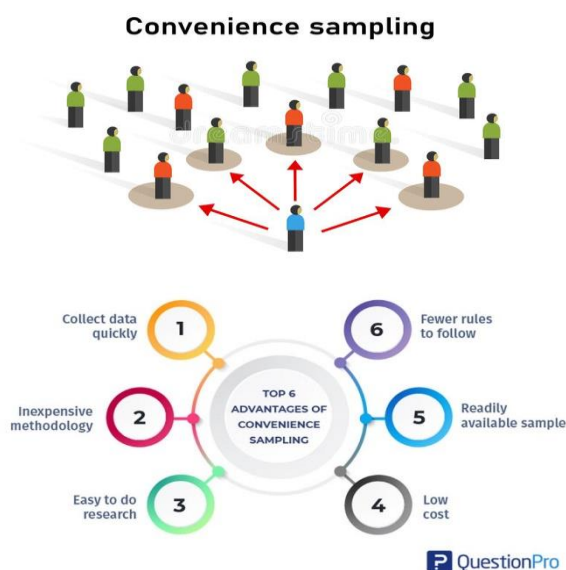
The primary data are collected through face-to-face interviews and telephonic conversations with Govt. officials, Local visitors, local business establishments and local people. Maximum data has been collected through personal observations and questionnaire.

For this research, the secondary data has been collected with the help of Assam Forest Department, Nature's Beckon Activist Group.

SAMPLING METHOD TO BE USED DURING MY RESEARCH

CONVENIENCE SAMPLING

- Convenience sampling is defined as a method adopted by researchers where they collect market
- research data from a conveniently available pool of respondents. It is the most commonly used
- sampling technique as it's incredibly prompt, uncomplicated, and economical. In many cases,
- members are readily approachable to be a part of the sample.



(Figure 1.2)

(Figure 1.3)

Target groups or Types of Respondents are (categorized like figure 1.2) : -

- a) Local people
- b) Visitors
- c) Local business owners
- d) Government officials

The entire research has been done with both Qualitative and Quantitative Interpretation. The maximum research has been conducted with the help of Qualitative data as the research is new for everyone and non-statistical research. Only quantitative method has been done in terms of survey.

The researcher spent around 10 to 15 minutes at the site providing a brief explanation of the study to the respondents who were willing to answer the questionnaires and waited at the site until the task was completed by all participating respondents. The questionnaire was administered at two sectors that are: Visitors and Local people. The respondents and their participation was purely voluntary and would remain anonymous, and they were encouraged to state their own personal opinions as truthfully as possible.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LOCALS AND LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

- a) Nature's Beckon has played a vital role in conservation of Dehing-Patkai National Park. Are you satisfied with their work?
- b) Whether Tourism is helping in economic growth and development of local people around Dehing-Patkai?
- c) Are tourist or visitor's inflow in Dehing-Patkai disturbing the nature and biodiversity of Dehing-Patkai?
- d) Whether Tourism promotion on Dehing-Patkai is properly going on or not?Has the State Government taken any step to promote the destination?
- e) Is the tourist inflow is increasing in Dehing-Patkai?
- f) What are the major earning sources for the local people residing in and around Dehing-Patkai?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR VISITORS

Are you satisfied with the Tourism resources of Dehing-Patkai and nearby areas? YES/NO

If no, why?.....

.....

2) Are you satisfied with the local infrastructure and its facilities? YES/NO

If no, why?.....

.....

3) How was your experience in Dehing-Patkai?

a) Poor b) Below Average c) Average d) Good e) Excellent

4) How's the behavior of the local people? Are they Tourist Friendly?

a) Poor b) Below Average c) Average d) Good e) Excellent

5) Do you wish to visit Dehing-Patkai National Park again? YES/NO

POPULATION: - In this research, population is taken from Joypur Range, which is a major center for Dehing-Patkai National Park. The entire vicinity of the park is very near to the town. The population of Joypur is approx. 1700.

SAMPLE SIZE: - Total number of respondents taken from this population is 100.

The 60% population of the Joypur Town and nearby villages are very much supporting Tourism. They are even ready to build homestays as well as try to sell the local art and crafts and cuisines.

25% of the population is not exactly comfortable with outsiders.

15% of the population is unaware, need proper guidance and lack of knowledge. They are still in doubt and response is 50-50.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As noted above, this study involved convenience sampling with its inherent limitations. Besides, this study involved only two districts of Assam, i.e., Dibrugarh and Tinsukia Districts. As such, the outcome of this study may not be generalized. The study has been taken only from local people, visitors and Govt officials. Local visitor's perceptions also have been taken who are interested about Eco and Rural Tourism in and around Dehing-Patkai.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

During the research, it was observed that there are various perceptions and views came to me from different sources who are directly linked and indirectly linked with Tourism Industry. In terms of Eco-Tourism and Rural Tourism, I have taken first hand data and reviews from different sectors like local visitors, govt officials and local people. It is noticed that most of the local visitors to Dehing-Patkai, their perceptions are it should be safe for tourists with adequate transport facilities and proper visitor's plan should be there to know how and when to visit Dehing-Patkai National Park. Local people residing in the area has stated that promotion of Dehing-Patkai is utmost needed same as like other national parks of Assam and their tourism resources should be highlighted on national and world platform with awareness and help from local people. As per Mr. Jintu Kalita, member of Nature's Beckon mentioned that proper signage and billboards should be placed from Assam Tourism Department by indicating the directions towards the tourist places of the nearby areas. Mr. Abhijit Singha, a notable resident of Joypur mentioned that proper awareness is needed as well as to introduce the homestay schemes. The Managing Directors of various Tour Operators of Assam, mentioned that proper eco-friendly accommodation facilities with wayside amenities must be built. Massive promotion needed to make Dehing-Patkai as a popular Tourist destination. It is found that, like other national parks Dehing-Patkai is not yet included in the common itineraries of the Tour Operators. But, after upgrading into National Park in 2020, the popularity is slowly gaining and expecting that the national park will play a very important role in Upper Assam Tour Itineraries.

DISCUSSIONS

The above findings of this study indicated and verified that parameters of safety and security, availability of adequate facilities, proper transportation system activity needed to highlight the national park in a strong way. Activeness of local administration is very necessary to satisfy the tourists. Apart from these, moderate emphasis may be given on few parameters like quality of cuisines, standard tourist-friendly environment, availability of local and tourist transport and

language proficiency of service providers. The above study and findings thereby provide a significant understanding regarding tourists or visitors perceptions in terms of their expectations and satisfaction. The satisfied tourists or visitors may go for repeat visits to the same place and destinations in future. This would help the large number of revenue generations, cash flows and profit of tourism sector in coming years. These findings may help filling the significant research gaps as far as tourism is concerned. These findings and research would promote, highlight and contribute the Dehing-Patkai National Park's Tourism potentiality and its knowledge throughout the state and country as the place has a vital role in offering best of wildlife experience to its visitors.

CONCLUSION

After conducting the survey, I came to know that the Tourism planning of Dehing-Patkai National Park is found to be very much interesting amongst all and this project can attract tourists from all over to know the tourism resources and culture of the area. The positive responses and many views about this research I have successfully collected from Tour Operators, Local Visitors, Local people and Government officials. The project will fulfill the needs of local people and it will create more employment generation in the area related to Tourism Industry. First, people can learn about the resources and secondly, people can also buy and gain the knowledge of local products. This research will highlight the Dehing-Patkai National Park into the big scenario and successful promotion can be done once the planning is implemented in the future. Not only private sector, but Government participation is very much needed for this prestigious planning. In future, if it is accepted then the overall project will create a tremendous demand and boosting of tourism in Upper Assam with reference to Dehing-Patkai. It will result successful utilization of the destination's resources and promotion of cultural heritage of the destination so that people can serve and cater tourists with their great hospitable nature.

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