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Ecotourism – Innovative way for sustainable development

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Abstract

Tourism in India is economically important and is growing rapidly. The idea of ecotourism is gaining importance as it is a growing segment of the global tourism industry which is making significant positive contributions. Ecotourism is a cultural and natural travel-learn experience with a little bit of adventure and benefitting the well-being of indigenous people. The various type of ecotourism includes hard-core type, dedicated type, mainstream type and casual type. The major actors of ecotourism system include visitors, natural areas and their managers, communities, operators, government and non-governmental organizations. The operational mechanism of ecotourism is unique as its aim is not only the achievement of maximum returns but also sustainable growth and environment conservation. The local communities need to involve themselves more efficiently as it can reap profitable returns to them in a long run.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The tourism and travel are one among the fastest growing industries in the world and the major source of foreign exchange earnings for many developing countries. Tourism in India is economically important and is growing rapidly. The World Travel & Tourism Council calculated that tourism generated ₹8.31 lakh crore (US\$120 billion) or 6.3% of the nation's GDP in 2015 and supported 37.315 million jobs, 8.7% of its total employment. The sector is predicted to grow at an average annual rate of 7.5% to ₹18.36 lakh crore (US\$270 billion) by 2025 (7.2% of GDP) (1)

The increasing pressure on the urban population has created an immense potential to utilize the natural environment for recreational purpose and generate a constant flow of income. Agroforestry and other allied activities have initiated attracting such population by the means of ecotourism and agritourism. The idea of ecotourism is gaining importance as it is a growing segment of the global tourism industry which is making significant positive contributions to the environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being of destinations and local communities around the world.

Definition

The International Ecotourism Society defines Ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education"

Ecotourism is a cultural tourism (a cross-cultural experience), nature tourism (assisting with conservation programmes), a travel-learn experience (discover how to cope up with modernity), a little bit of adventure and benefitting the well-being of indigenous people. {Western Samoa, national Ecotourism Programme}

Types of Ecotourism

Lindberg (1991) provides a typology of nature/ecotourism types, though many other typologies are possible:

1. **Hard-core type:** In this type, the scientific researchers or members of tours are specifically designed for education, environmental restoration, or similar purposes.

2. **Dedicated type:** this is the type of ecotourism in which people take trips specifically to see protected areas and who want to understand local natural and cultural history.
3. **Mainstream type:** In this format, people take trips to such destinations which provide exploration and excitement of the trip. The people visit the Amazon, the Rwandan gorilla park, or other such destinations primarily to take an unusual trip.
4. **Casual type:** in this type, the people partake of nature incidentally, such as through a day trip during a broader vacation.

With respect to visitor types and activities, a key consideration is the diversity within the ecotourism market. Eco tourists may differ greatly in several aspects, including:

- Distance travelled.
- The length of stay.
- The desired level of physical effort and comfort.
- The importance of nature in trip motivation.
- The level of learning desired.
- The amount of spending.
- Desired activities.
- Personal demographics.

Actors in the Ecotourism "System"

Ecotourism often involves numerous actors, including:

- Visitors: They are the major factor in ecotourism as they are the one who creates demand for tourism activity.
- Natural areas and their managers, including both public and private areas.
- Communities.
- Businesses, including various combinations of local businesses, in-bound operators, outbound operators, hotel and other accommodation providers, restaurants and other food providers, and so on.
- Government, in addition to its role as a natural area manager and
- Non-governmental organizations like environmental and rural development NGOs.

Principles of Ecotourism

The Ecotourism Society has given six basic principles of ecotourism. They are:

1. It avoids negative impacts that can damage or destroy the character of the natural or cultural environments being visited.
2. It educates the traveller on the importance of conservation.
3. It directs revenues to the conservation of natural areas and the management of protected areas.
4. It brings economic benefits to local communities and directs revenues to local people living near the protected areas.
5. It emphasizes the need for planning and sustainable growth of the tourism industry and seeks to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental "capacity."
6. It retains a high percentage of revenues in the host country by stressing the use of locally-owned facilities and services.

Essential Characteristics of Eco-Destination

- Natural features conserved in a protected landscape.
- Low density development, where natural areas are abundant and the built landscape does not dominate.

- Evidence that tourism is not harming natural systems such as waterways, coastal areas, wetlands and wildlife areas.
- Thriving small community business, including food stands and other types of craft enterprise owned by the local people.
- Plenty of designated outdoor recreational zones that are designed to protect natural resources.
- A variety of local festivals and events that demonstrate an on-going sense of pride in local community's natural environment and cultural heritage.
- Clean and basic public facilities for tourists and locals to share.
- Friendly interaction between the local people and visitors in natural meeting places.

Though estimates of ecotourism's growth are rare, due to the definitional problem, most observers feel that ecotourism has grown faster than tourism generally during the past several years.

There are various explanations for ecotourism's growth, including:

- The increasing environmental awareness and interest, including the desire to be perceived by others as environmentally sensitive.
- The increased media exposure to natural areas around the world.
- Related to the above two, a desire to see natural areas before they disappear.
- The increasing dissatisfaction with traditional tourism destinations and products, and a desire for more educative and challenging vacations.
- The desire to go to novel destinations.
- The easier access to remote ecotourism destinations through the development of air routes, roads, and other infrastructure.

Policy Gap in Ecotourism

In Indian system, ecotourism establishments are yet lacking in many basic facilities. The identified policy gaps in Indian ecotourism sector are the following:

1. Ecotourism policies often conflict with policies of the Tourism sector; tourism policies promote infrastructure development and recommend simplification of environmental regulations to attract large capital inflows. Ecotourism objective is to minimize new infrastructures and comply with all environmental regulations.
2. The role of Government and other institutions not specified Except in Kerala, there has been no attempt to craft a nodal agency for ecotourism, where the roles of different government departments are specified in any policy document.
3. Conservation - heavy and local benefits not emphasized Due to the conceptual ambiguity in defining ecotourism, most of the stakeholders, except forest department have not taken a proactive role. The result is an apparent conservation bias at the cost of local stakes.
4. Lack of community involvement even in cases where the local community is projected as beneficiaries, benefits mostly confine to the employment of a few locals as guides and cooks. Other forms of benefit sharing are nearly absent in the sector. Even the employment benefit could be higher if the capacity building was considered as a prerequisite for assessing the eligibility of locals for different jobs.

5. Lacks clear and measurable indicators to monitor Except for self imposed regulations in specific activities. There are no clear guidelines for monitoring even for environmental impact. Socio-cultural parameters so far remain ignored.
6. Absence of links between Monitoring and Regulations or incentives. Wherever some regulations exist, they are not linked to continuous monitoring. Well-laid out incentives linked to regular monitoring and standards can streamline the connectivity between practices and policy.

Strategies to Tackle the Policy Gaps

Objectives of eco-tourism cannot be met without a focused and concerted approach. The identified gaps are interconnected and consequence of the absence of a commonly accepted definition of ecotourism. National policies and guidelines should be drawn for the proposed components of ecotourism, within the purview of international environmental treaties and related Indian legislations, incorporating equity and fair Trade principles. State wise regulatory institutions and regulations can be based on these guidelines but should reflect grassroots ecological and cultural integrity. While all environmental legislations apply to these enterprises, the sector cannot sustain without targeted regulations, as it's potentially significant impacts on environment and social fabric.

Extensive decision making powers of Panchayati Raj Institutions under schedule XI of constitution could be made use of to ensure realization of all aspects of ecotourism: nature and culture conservation, generating livelihood opportunities and regular monitoring. These constitutional rights need to be taken into account for negotiations under international agreements.

Conclusion

Ecotourism is a growing niche market within the travel industry with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool. The operational mechanism of ecotourism is unique as its aim is not only the achievement of maximum returns but also sustainable growth and environment conservation. Ecotourism has a unique role in educating the travellers about the value of a healthy environment and biological diversity. However, proper planning and management are critical to its development. If not there are possible threats to biodiversity on which it depends.

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