

Chapter 10

Conservation of Biodiversity as a Roadmap for Sustainable Tourism Development in Manas National Park, Assam

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ABSTRACT

The current study delves into the conservation of biodiversity and ecotourism activities in Manas National Park (MNP), Assam. It intends to offer a roadmap for sustainable ecotourism with an emphasis on biodiversity conservation and assessing the involvement of local communities in conservation efforts in MNP. The study carefully combines available online sources to investigate the effects of ecotourism on biodiversity conservation and the ongoing conservation initiatives that involve local communities. Furthermore, it investigates eco-friendly tourism strategies that aid in the conservation of biodiversity and provides recommendations for enhancing the situation of local communities and increasing public knowledge of ecotourism. The study seeks to provide a thorough understanding to stakeholders and policymakers of the opportunities and problems related to sustainable ecotourism and biodiversity conservation in MNP and provide valuable insights for regulating ecotourism to ensure the preservation of the park's natural integrity.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in recent years has experienced significant growth, it is emerging as a notable economic and social phenomenon (Buckley, 2000). In this industry, mainly nature-based tourism has seen rapid expansion, with a prominent increase in tourists to protected areas (Hartig et al., 2014). National

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Parks (NPs) which represent one component of protected area, encompasses diverse natural resources like jungles, forests, deserts, rivers, lakes, and mountains which is safeguarded by governments to preserve the biodiversity and mitigate human interference (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

The term ecotourism refers to a journey to relatively intact or historical places of study, appreciate and enjoy panorama, flora, fauna, and cultural assets (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is the first organization committed to ecotourism, established in 1990 (www.ecotourism.org). Ecotourism has since then become one of the subsets of tourism industries with the quickest growth rates. Since the “Berlin declaration of Biological Diversity” in 1997, when specific norms of ecotourism ethics were formed, the significance of ecotourism has grown.

With the urbanization on rise, National Parks have now become popular destinations for eco-based tourism, necessitating the demand of recreational activities and identification of factors influencing their use (Cessford and Muhar, 2003; Eagles and McCool, 2002). Some scholars debate on the ideal locations for ecotourism by emphasizing basic and undeveloped areas like nature reserves etc. which have significant impact on the environment (Ross and Wall, 1999). Although local communities living around nature reserves play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity (Ma and Wen, 2016), the establishment of nature reserves may disrupt traditional lifestyles, leading to conflicts between ecological conservation and community livelihood (Mao et al., 2018). Nevertheless, ecotourism presents a sustainable alternative in many ways, reducing reliance on natural resources (Cu et al., 2017). Diamond (1997) asserts that tourism offers economic benefits such as foreign exchange earnings and employment opportunities, particularly in developing nations, making it an attractive growth approach. Yet, besides its advantages, tourism growth can bring challenges like vulnerability to displacement and dependency on tourists (Boer, 2012).

Talking about northeast India, there is a need to promote tourism in a more organized way since the region still lags in terms of tourist footfalls when compared to other regions of our country. The efforts to promote tourism in this region require several measures including image improvement, infrastructure development, and structural and security improvements (Duarah and Mili, 2013). Against this backdrop, the current study attempted to assess the current tourism practices within Manas National Park and identify areas of improvement and potential threats to biodiversity and identify opportunities for enhancing community participation in ecotourism activities around MNP.

Manas National Park: An Overview

The research area encompasses Manas National Park (MNP), which is in the northern part of the Brahmaputra Valley inside the recently formed districts of Chirang and Baksa of BTAD, Assam. MNP, which is an UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, is also officially acknowledged as a Tiger Reserve, an Elephant Reserve, and a Biosphere Reserve, garnering substantial conservation attention. Mostly flat and situated at the foot of the Himalayas, it is made up of moist deciduous, semi-evergreen, and eastern wet alluvial grasslands (Champion and Seth, 1968). MNP's latitude ranges from 26°30' to 27°00'N and its longitude from 91°51' to 92°00'E. It is bordered to the east and west by the buffer zones of the Manas Tiger Reserve (MTR), which is designated as a Reserve Forest, and has a northern boundary with Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park. Its southern border is shared by heavily inhabited fringe villages that are part of the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), specifically the recently established districts of Baksa and Chirang). In a 2 km broad area along the Southern Boundary, from Panbari in the Southwest to Kokilabari in the Northeast, is home to about 61 settlements. Furthermore, the southern boundary is shared by Central Seed Farm at Kokilabari and Fatemabat Tea Estate in Bansbari. Because

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