

Significance of Eco-Tourism as a Tool for Natural Resource Management in Kurseong Hill Area under Darjeeling District

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Abstract— Eco-tourism is a form of tourism that appeals to our ecological and social consciousness. Kurseong, located in Darjeeling district at the northern part of West Bengal has optimum climatic ambience and some special attractions for the eco-tourists. Kurseong means “the land of white orchid”. Kurseong is a perfect place for people who want to derive the pleasure of being in an alpine surrounding without worrying about higher altitudes and bone-chilling cold weather. The serenity and beauty of Kurseong has attracted and inspired famous personalities in different times. Kurseong has tremendous natural resources, like water resources, agricultural resources, soil resources, mineral resources, forest resources and wild life resources. These resources are depleting in recent times and proper care should be taken immediately to preserve these natural resources and whatever resources utilisation is done, should be conducted sustainably. The only way to keep this beautiful hill station environmentally sound is to devise proper natural resource management along with eco-friendly tourism that can be achieved through several scientific approaches, proper management methodologies and proper communications among different departments concerned within the Kurseong hill area. Proper resource management programme will finally help to achieve sustainable eco development of this place.

Key words: Eco-Tourism, Natural Resource Management, Kurseong, Darjeeling

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, eco-tourism focuses on local culture, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new ways to live on the planet earth. It is a process typically involving travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. In addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, an integral part of eco-tourism is in the promotion of energy efficiency, water conservation and creation of economic opportunities for the local communities. Ecotourism has become a tool to guard against poaching of animals and trees at various sanctuaries and Protected Areas. This apart, the significant attractions like stalactite caves and Salamandar ponds get a face lifting and better maintenance due to proliferation of Ecotourism. Knowledge of medicinal plants would also enhance the resource management procedure through preservation of those plants along with other natural resources of the hill area.

II. MATERIALS & METHODS

Large scale deforestation in the name of tourism related development has led to severe environmental hazards like soil erosion and landslides. All these contributed to the transformation of the “land of white orchid” into filthy concrete jungle gasping for breath. Eco-tourism is the only solution to this. A regulated eco-tourism, under well-

managed conditions, is the best beneficial way by which the adverse conditions can be avoided.

Natural resources are naturally occurring substances that are considered valuable in their relatively unmodified (natural) form. A natural resource's value rests in the amount of the material available and the demand for it (Chaudhuri, 1999). Both extraction of the basic resource and refining it into a purer, directly usable form are generally considered natural-resource activities, even though the latter may not necessarily occur near the former.

Conservation of natural resources means an occurrence of improvement by virtue of preventing loss or injury and careful management of the natural resources. The management process includes optimum utilization of natural resources in a scientific manner for the betterment of man and environment and for sustainable development (Sinha 2003).

Eco-tourism is eco-friendly nature based tourism for persons with enduring passion to admire and enjoy life in their natural best, keeping in view the conservation of the natural environment and sustainability of the well being of local people. Introduction of eco-tourism will construe assessment of existing tourism products, recreation and promotion of nature and wildlife education, employment generation for locals and rural infrastructure development. Kurseong is the only block that has forest and mountains in its geography together with extensive varieties of flora and fauna. The temperature, geomorphology, rainfall is best suited for orchids and medicinal plants. The deficiency is only in the proper management, utilization, proper tourism plan, guidance and communication within the natural resource rich areas (Bhagat *et al.*). If the natural resources can be utilized in a proper scientific manner through a planned natural resource management programme involving local people and other government and non-government organizations in a sustainable manner with the help of eco-tourism, Kurseong will become a perfect heaven of nature.

A. Concept of Rural Tourism as a part of Eco-Tourism in Kurseong Hill area

Kurseong does not suffer from severe winters and a healthy, comfortable climate is prevalent throughout the year except the monsoon season. Kurseong suffers from non-stop downpour in the rainy season and in fact, Kurseong receives the highest amount of rainfall after ‘Cherrapunjee’ in Meghalaya. The beauty of nature lies in that, such heavy amount of rainfall is ideal for white orchids that adorn the hill-slopes of Kurseong in abundance. The natural beauty of Kurseong thrives because of the generosity of the rain-god.

B. Concept of Rural Tourism as defined in the Government of India Guidelines

Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially and promoting

interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism and eco-tourism.

Rural tourism has certain special characteristics, like:

- It is essentially an activity or a group of activities which takes place in the countryside,
- It is experience-oriented,
- The locations are sparsely populated,
- It is predominantly in natural environment,
- It emphasises seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

C. Application of the Concept of Rural Tourism as a Strategy for Rural Development in Kurseong Hill Area

Putting the concept of Rural Tourism into practice is definitely useful for a country like India where almost 74% of the population resides in its 7 million villages. Kurseong hill area is predominantly a rural-cum-agricultural area with the tea gardens playing a significant role in providing livelihood to the people as well as making a substantial contribution to the economy of the area. The Tea gardens and other natural resources with their natural beauty and environment is eminently suitable for development of rural tourism centers at appropriate locations.

Kurseong sub-division is dotted with a large number of verdant tea gardens (around 32) with a total plantation area of about 980 hectare. These tea gardens are a treasure house of exotic beauty of nature with colourful people and their enchanting songs and dances, sprawling heritage Tea Estate bungalows and residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens are not only bestowed with unparallel natural attractions nearby (like hilly rivers, wildlife sanctuaries, etc.) but also have some man-made attractions like Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, golf courses, etc. The road communication to most of the tea gardens is fairly well maintained, and the rest houses and bungalows with modern facilities are generally kept ready for visitors and guests. Tourists visiting these places may find it interesting to move around in the tea garden ambience and watch tea plucking 'two leaves and a bud' (peak period of plucking being 8 months from March end to November end) done mainly by women workers.

They will find it interesting to observe the manufacturing process and final packaging.

- Withering of green leaves spreading thinly on trays for 10 to 20 hours,
- Rolling by machines for bruising the leaves and rupturing the cells and making them curried and twisted,
- Fermentation – by spreading about 2 inches deep upon low tables until they assume the coppery colour (taking about 5 hours to complete the process)
- Drying or firing by machines immediately after fermentation,
- Further they may also visit Tea Auction Centre in Siliguri.

Kurseong hill area elongated from south is endowed with triple heritage viz., the grand heritage of the

Himalayas, the technological heritage of the DHR and the heritage of aromatic tea. This place is already internationally acclaimed as the land of four T's – Toy Train, Tea, Timber (Forest and Wildlife) and Tourism.

Spread well over the region are the sprawling lush green tea gardens and 9812 ha. of dense forests including Wildlife Sanctuaries, National Park and varieties of flora and fauna. The proximity of this region to North Eastern States and also to the foreign countries of Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Tibet Region of China has considerably enhanced its strategic and tourism importance.

However, in absence of adequate infrastructure like proper roads, hotels, wayside facilities and new exotic tourism products, the potential of tourism in the region cannot be fully exploited (Bhat, 1995). It is perhaps pertinent to mention that some of the private tea gardens have already initiated a form of tea tourism in a very isolated manner at the private bungalows/ houses available with the gardens like Makaibari T.E. The idea is gradually catching on a gaining popularity by the day as one of the best modes of eco-tourism coupled with leisure and circuit based activities. Therefore, if properly marketed, Tea tourism can form an attractive package for developing rural tourism both for the domestic and the international tourists.

DHR's last National Standing Committee Meeting highlighted the possibility of Tea-Train Tourism, the concept of which is to ride the DHR to a tea-garden, visit a tea-factory, roam in a tea-garden, meet the pluckers, participate in tea-tasting, interact with tea community in their villages, stay in tea surroundings etc. and also visit Tea Research Association/Museum.

Realising the potential of developing Tea Tourism in the region, the State Government has already relaxed the lease conditions of tea estate lands for allowing tea estate owners to utilise their surplus land for developing tourism related facilities, including accommodation in their Tea Estates, with prior approval from the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal.

Darjeeling tea is produced mainly in the tea gardens situated in Kurseong hill area. As a move towards protecting the brand value of this tea across the globe, the Govt. of India has recently issued notification for Geographical Indication (GI) under the country's Geographic Indicator of Goods Registration and Protection Act. Those found guilty under the act can now be imprisoned for a period upto three years along with a fine upto Rs. 25 Lakh. This will definitely boost exports of Darjeeling Tea and thereby enhance the popularity of Kurseong tea gardens and also their eco-tourism potential.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The benefits of ecotourism include an enhanced appreciation of natural environment (Rao 1997). It can be expressed in terms of nature's intrinsic and economic worth derived under proper protection and conservation, the educational value by exposing visitors and local people to nature and the potential of ecotourism to motivate exploring additional natural areas.

However, pressures originating from inappropriately managed infrastructure and visitor activities can adversely impact the receiving environment. Negative impacts on terrestrial ecosystems include destruction of

plant and wildlife habitats, soil and dune erosion, soil compaction, disruption of soil stability, alteration of geological regimes, disruption of nutrient cycles and reduction in biodiversity (Sharma 2004). Impacts on vegetation include structural alterations to plant communities, damage due to trampling, the introduction of exotic species carried in on clothing and direct removal of specimens through harvesting. Further to these biophysical impacts, increased human presence may lead to disturbances such as thrown away litters here and there, visual impacts (such as infrastructural developments and signs) and air and noise pollution (human and mechanical). Although there is limited understanding of the effects of tourism on wildlife (Andereck, 1995), all of the aforesaid impacts may have deleterious effects.

Direct impacts on wildlife include disruption of behavior such as feeding, breeding, mother-offspring interaction, poaching, killing (usually accidentally) and the disruption of predator-prey relationships. Indirect impacts on wildlife include changed habitats and feeding patterns (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and the introduction of disease. Even the pressures of photography may impact on wildlife. Wildlife may also be directly impacted by visitor management techniques which place a priority on visitor satisfaction. Many biophysical impacts also adversely affect the visitor experience. Buckley and Pannell (1990) have identified damage to the natural environment as one of the major causes for dissatisfaction of the eco-tourists.

Rural Eco-Tourism in and around Kurseong hill area would definitely become popular resulting in increased flow of visitors or tourists. Further assets arrangements or facilities in the form of additional tourist cottages and artisan cottages may be constructed and accordingly infrastructure development can be done at various spots in Kurseong hill area to make the place more eco-friendly, natural and aesthetic.

IV. CONCLUSION

Greater visitor concern regarding potential impacts, compared to observed impacts, indicates a perception that social and biophysical conditions in the hill area are likely to worsen in the future. Therefore, these management concerns are potential indicators for monitoring visitor impacts in Kurseong. Further research is required to complete the remaining steps to effectively guide ecotourism management in the hill area. Respondents indicated strong support for management actions in general, including both educational and regulatory strategies such as controlling visitor numbers at a time and limiting forest use. One of the major challenges for the management of ecotourism is using interpretation and education to help visitors to gain a better understanding of the natural environment of an area, thereby enhancing their experience and protection of the area. As Lucas (1990) notes, visitors to natural areas provide a particularly good audience for information and education and such approaches are ideal for conservation reserves because they do not directly alter the natural environment. The findings of this study also have implications for conservation management.

Eco-tourism has great potential to act as a tool towards preservation of natural resources and sustainable socioeconomic development of the hill area. The present

study showed the available natural resources of Kurseong hill area, their exploitation and present status and also clarified the concept of eco-tourism and finally depicted the interrelationship of eco-tourism and natural resource management.

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