



Eco tourism: A key driver of sustainable Development

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Abstract

Eco-tourism an integral part of the green economy is experiencing increasing popularity as it focuses on environmental conservation and socio economic development. It is an instigator of change that provides a sustainable development in Odisha such as an alternate source of employment to the local community, generation of environmental awareness amongst local residents as well as visitors, and the conservation and sensible use of natural resources.

The objective of the study is to ascertain the impact of ecotourism in protecting the natural resources and enhancing the livelihood of the local community. The researcher has also given insights about Chilika Lagoon, one of the major ecotourism spots in Odisha. The study focuses on how tourism can be a major source of generating employment opportunities, enhancing production, productivity and contributing significantly towards development of the state. The aggregated information is obtained from secondary data collection.

Keywords: ecotourism, chilika lagoon, sustainable development, environmental conservation, socio economic development

Introduction

The term 'eco-tourism' was originally defined as "travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery, its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations found in these areas" (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996)^[3, 10]. The Department of Tourism (DoT) has given a new dimension to the tourism sector by aggressively promoting ecotourism. Odisha is situated on the eastern coast of the country and has abundant natural resources. Ecotourism is not only a type of sustainable tourism but also a major conservation of environment through community development. The development of communities in the truest sense means the economic development as well as socio-cultural development of a place. Its role are manifold viz., conservation of resources, sustained maintenance of resources, ecological balance and economic benefit. According to *International Union for the Conservation of Nature*, ecotourism is "environmentally responsible to travels and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature; that promotes conservation, has now visitor impact; and provides for beneficially active social-economic involvement of local populations".

The state of Odisha has huge potential as far as the growth and development of ecotourism is concerned and there can be no better example than Chilika lagoon which is a biodiversity with flora, fauna and rare endangered species.

The purpose of this paper is to look at ways in which ecotourism and sustainable development can be evaluated; and suggest ways to improve current ecotourism practices.

Review of Literature

Jennifer Hil and Timgale (2000)^[11] in their book 'Ecotourism

and Environmental Sustainability Principles and Practice' explained about the complex environment and tourism relationship. According to them, ecotourism is one of the experiential tourism types which the tourists are looking for.

Puneet Aneja (2006)^[19] highlighted the role of sustainable tourism in meeting the needs of tourists. He further opined that ecotourism helps in management of resources in a manner that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled and at the same time maintaining the ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.

Mohanlal (2007)^[14] expounded that ecotourism is promoted by many governments and communities at large as vehicle for economic development and preservation of environment. He emphasized the need for potential spots for ecotourism.

Harikumar (2007)^[8] explained the role of backwater ecotourism spots in Kerala especially the importance of houseboats.

Poya Moli (2007)^[17] in his paper on 'Eco-Cultural Tourism in Indian Islands: Some Implications' made a conscious effort to emphasise on paradigm shifts taking place in tourism with particular reference to sustainable alternatives to ensure that the Indian Island ecosystems are not just financially self-sustainable but socially and ecologically sustainable.

Prabha Shastri Ranade (2008)^[18] in his book 'Ecotourism, Perspectives and Experiences' analysed various problems in process of determining what constitutes successful ecotourism and how to strike a balance with development. The book also contain the experiences, strategies and local economic development through ecotourism. It also highlights the economic benefits, source of alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities.

Shrivastav (2010) emphasized on the role of ecotourism towards uplifting the local communities. According to him,

“tourism stimulates cultural activities and leads to improved understanding of each other and better relations between the tourists and the hosts”.

Santhosh Yadav (2010) ^[20] emphasized the importance of ecotourism as long-term bio-diversity and conservation. He elucidated that awareness about ecotourism needs to grow by linking conservation and ecotourism development as a main agenda. He further opined that ecotourism are often neglected in terms of infrastructural development and upliftment of local communities.

Research Gap

Today, ecotourism is one of the important areas of research in tourism studies. The literature survey shows that several studies have been carried out on ecotourism and its impact, however, no systematic study has been conducted on the importance ecotourism in Chilika Lake in particular and its impact on local people. Hence, infilling this gap, the present paper has much relevance.

Objectives of the Study

- To ascertain the impact of ecotourism in protecting the natural resources and acting as an economic rescuer by enhancing the livelihood of the local community by creating employment opportunities
- To study the social-cultural impact of ecotourism to the locals in Chilika Lake, Odisha, which is an important bio-diversity hotspot in India

Research Methodology

Secondary data analysis was adopted to carry out the research. The analysis involved extensive study of the state specific tourism policies, programs and trends; views and trends of Chilika Lake tourism in Odisha.

About Chilika Lagoon

Chilika lagoon is the largest open lagoon in Asia and the second biggest in the world. It is not only home for the migratory birds in the country but also those from far off lands. This lake is a highly productive ecosystem for several fishery resources for more than one lakh fishermen of 132 villages and 8 towns who directly depend upon the lagoon for their sustenance based on a unique biodiversity. The lagoon also supports a unique accumulation of marine, brakish water and fresh water biodiversity and is enriched with avi flora and avi fauna, fishery fauna and special attraction for eco-tourism. The other major components of the restoration are based on the management of lagoon by local community participation for the sustainable of the ecosystem.

It also hosts over 230 species of birds on the pick migratory season. Birds from as far as the Caspian sea, lake Baikal, remote part of Russia, Central and South Asia, Ladhak and Himalaya come here. Based on unique biodiversity and socioeconomic importance, India designated Chilika lagoon as a wetland of International importance under the Ramsar convention in 1981. It is usually said that a visit to Odisha is incomplete without exploring the ecotourism destinations of Chilika lake. Thus, it has a place of prominence in the tourism map of Odisha and India.

Eco-Tourism in Chilika Lagoon

Some of the ecotourism spots in Chilika lake include

- *Rambha Bay* : It is situated at the southern end of the lake. There are number of inviting islands with an excellent site for water sports, camping sites.
- *Becon Islands* : It is an architectural marvel with a conical pillar and a small room constructed on a sub-merged mass of rocks.
- *Breakfast Islands* : It is a pear shaped island. The Bungalow constructed by the king of Khallikote. The flora of the island is quite interesting.
- *Honeymoon Island* : Britishers used this island for picnicking. The water around the island is very clear and dark blue in colour.
- *Somoto & Dumkudi*: Situated in the central and southern sectors of the lake, these islands are inundated remnants of the Eastern ghats through rocky, they are rich in Flora and Fauna.
- *Birds Islands* : It is situated in the southern sector of Chilika lake. This is a hillock with huge exposed hanging rocks. The island is covered with herbs, shrubs, trees and creepers. The granite rocks are the remnants of Eastern Ghats.
- *Kalijai Temple* : Kalijai Temple is situated on an island considered to be the above of the Goddess Kalijai.
- *Satapada* : Located on the eastern shore of the lake. It is bounded by the lagoon on three sides and thus offers an excellent view of the lagoon. One main attraction Satapada is Irrawady Dolphins.
- *Sand bar and mouth of Chilika lagoon* : A beautiful and endless unexplored stretch of empty beach exists across the sand bar which separates the lagoon from the sea.

Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

The idea of sustainability first came to into being in the World Commission report on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987. The report supports the concept of sustainable development by mentioning that environmental conservation and economic growth are mutually interdependent to each other (Harris *et al.*, 2002) ^[9]. Bhuiyan *et al.*, (2012) ^[1] empahsised that sustainable development is highly prospective for any community in terms of economic, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions. Hall (2008) ^[8] maintained that “sustainable development and tourism is about a change from one state or condition to another and such a change may be positive or negative depending upon the type of change taking place and to what extent”. This concept is a major concern for all states and nations across the globe.

Ecotourism and Environmental, Social and Economic Impact

Ecotourism is a sustainable form tourism that offers several benefits such as conservation, employment opportunities for local communities and educational support services and experiences. It primarily focuses on learning and experiencing about nature, its landscape, fauna, flora and their habitats as well as artefacts from local regions (Dowling, 1997; Fennell, 1999) ^[4, 5]. Myburgh & Saayman (2002) ^[15] expounded that

ecotourism is “a mixture of conservation and tourism to benefit local communities, especially focusing on sustainability”. According to (Li, 2006) ^[13], economic use of natural resources of ecotourism can be compared with farming, hunting and mining. Bob *et al.*, (2008) ^[12] are of the opinion that ecotourism promotes improvement in natural environment and education by exposing visitors and locals to nature and conservation.

In planning of ecotourism, the first and foremost agenda is the conservation of its environment. So, ecotourism focuses on learning and experiencing the nature, the landscape, its habitats, fauna, flora etc., (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Gössling, 1999) ^[3, 10]. McMinn (1997) cited that “ecotourism has the potential to seriously impact local communities, largely due to the tendency of ecotourists to have a greater interest in the culture and nature of the areas they visit, as compared to mass tourists”.

Impact of Ecotourism as a potential livelihood for Locals of Chilika Lagoon

Various organisations have come up with different livelihood options for the local communities of Chilika with an objective to improve the economic condition and minimise the over dependence on the limited resources i.e., fishery. However, they failed in their mission due to lack of interest from the communities of Chilika. Chilika is an important support system for the local communities and ecotourism is a major livelihood options for them due to the following reasons:

- Chilika Development Authority (CDA) and a few local NGOs consciously endeavoured to stop poaching activities and educate the local communities about the importance and benefits of conservation of natural resources, thereby, increasing their livelihood.
- The poachers who turned conservationists have taken up the responsibility of stopping the new poachers from bird poaching and earning huge amount of money. Constant efforts in this direction has to some extent improved the livelihood of the local communities. Hence, if conservation efforts are supported then adequate income generation is possible.
- Villagers are involved in availing livelihood through fishing in Chilika lagoon, which is proving as an ecological threat due to depletion of Biodiversity available in Chilika. There are around 132 fisherman villages in and around Chilika. Total Fisherman population in the area is 1, 04,040 out of which 27,200 are active fisherman (Kishore S. and Shibalal M. 2003) ^[12]. Ecotourism will help in diversifying the livelihood and decreasing undue pressure on Natural Resources of Chilika.

Suggestions/Recommendations

- Chilika Development Authority and Wildlife Division can provide support to the local communities by putting right policies in place and the policy formulators need to implement them with help of civil society organizations working in the area.
- Community conservation initiatives are the need of the hour. A strategy may be implemented keeping in mind livelihood and conservation in focus and should include maximum number of people. Once alternate livelihood

opportunities are created to the local communities, ecotourism becomes a powerful tool for conservation and protection of ecosystem.

- The local communities need to consciously make a living by adopting alternate livelihood practices and should give up the previously followed unsustainable practices that have a profound adverse effect on the limited natural resources in Chilika Lagoon.
- Tourism activities in wildlife habitats should be initiated only if the local communities support and practice the conservation activities in the area.
- Investment in form of infrastructure should a priority only after capacity building of local communities. This will help in sensitizing tourists to conservation practices.
- Ecotourism has immense potential and a very important and useful tool for conservation of fragile wetland ecosystem by interweaving together community participation and development and conservation of fragile ecosystem.
- Strict conservation measures and monitoring must be developed to ensure that tourism does not have a negative impact on fragile ecosystem of Chilika Lagoon.

Conclusion

Ecotourism has two sides to it. One, it should take into account the ecological balance and the other side is managing the cultural sensitivity of its destinations. When the local communities and biodiversity co-exist in such a scenario, the need of the hour is conservation of communities which will protect the native culture and environment. Although the object is to ensure socio-economic development of the wetland, the protection of natural resources and landscapes cannot take a backseat. Ecotourism has a major role in terms of conservation and prevention of nature by involving the local communities in all phases of development process. However, the development process needs a sustained endeavor from all the stake holders and significant others on a long-term basis. In this regard, Chilika lagoon is playing a very important role in the social, economic, political and cultural development of the local communities living in and around it. More than a lakh fishermen living in one hundred and thirty two villages earn their livelihood from the fisheries of this lagoon. This increase in human habitats in and around the lagoon and their insatiable endeavor for fishing, agriculture and other aquaculture activities for the last several decades has adversely impacted on the fragile habitat of the wetland causing immense damage and loss to its ecological diversity. Sustainable development of Chilika lagoon is only possible with the maintenance of its ecological balance which in turn will help in conserving its total biodiversity. There should be restrictions on human settlements in terms of controlled aquaculture activities which will help in resurrecting its biodiversity and the glory of Chilika lagoon.

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