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Tourism and Local Community Development in Assam's National Parks: Opportunities, Challenges, and Socio-Economic Impacts

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Abstract

Tourism in Assam's national parks, particularly Kaziranga and Manas, has emerged as a significant driver of socio-economic development for local communities. This paper investigates the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism in these protected areas, focusing on employment generation, income diversification, community empowerment, and the sustainability of tourism-led development. Using a mixed-methods approach involving field surveys, interviews, and secondary data analysis, the study reveals that while tourism has created substantial economic benefits and fostered cultural preservation, challenges remain in ensuring equitable benefit distribution, effective community participation, and ecological balance. The paper concludes with recommendations for participatory tourism management and sustainable development strategies.

Keywords: Assam, national parks, tourism, community development, socio-economic impacts, sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Assam, located in northeast India, is renowned for its rich biodiversity and unique cultural heritage. The state is home to several national parks, including Kaziranga and Manas, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These parks not only protect endangered species and vital ecosystems but also attract thousands of domestic and international tourists annually. Tourism has become an important economic activity in these regions, offering new avenues for local community development. However, the relationship between tourism and community welfare is complex and requires careful examination to ensure that development is both inclusive and sustainable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tourism and Socio-Economic Development

Tourism is widely recognized as a catalyst for socio-economic development, particularly in rural and ecologically sensitive areas (Ashley & Roe, 2002) ^[1]. In the context of protected areas, tourism can generate employment, stimulate local entrepreneurship, and finance conservation efforts (Scheyvens, 1999) ^[4]. However, the distribution of benefits often depends on the degree of community involvement and the structure of tourism governance (Tosun, 2000) ^[5].

2.2 Community-Based Tourism in Assam

Studies on Assam's national parks highlight the dual role of tourism in promoting conservation and supporting livelihoods (Borah *et al.*, 2018) ^[2]. Kaziranga and Manas have seen the growth of homestays, guided tours, and handicraft sales, providing alternative incomes for local residents (Das & Choudhury, 2020) ^[3]. Yet, challenges such as limited capacity, unequal benefit sharing, and environmental pressures persist.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Study Area

The research focuses on the communities surrounding Kaziranga National Park (KNP) and Manas National Park (MNP). Both parks are biodiversity hotspots and major tourist destinations in Assam.

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3.2 Data Collection

A mixed-methods approach was adopted:

Field Surveys: Structured questionnaires administered to 100 households in villages adjacent to Kaziranga National Park and Manas National Park.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with local leaders, tourism entrepreneurs, park officials, and NGO representatives.

Secondary Data: Review of government reports, academic studies, and tourism statistics.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were coded thematically to identify key issues and perspectives.

4. Results

4.1 Economic Benefits

Employment: Tourism has created direct jobs (guides, drivers, hospitality workers) and indirect jobs (handicrafts, food supply, transport).

Income Diversification: Many households now have multiple income sources, reducing dependence on subsistence agriculture.

Entrepreneurship: Growth of homestays, eco-lodges, and local tour operations, especially in Kaziranga.

4.2 Social and Cultural Impacts

Community Empowerment: Training programs and tourism cooperatives have enhanced local skills and participation.

Cultural Preservation: Showcasing local traditions, festivals, and crafts to tourists has revived interest in indigenous culture.

4.3 Challenges

Inequitable Benefit Distribution: Benefits often accrue to a small segment of the population, with marginalized groups left out.

Limited Community Participation: Decision-making is frequently top-down, with limited local input in tourism planning.

Environmental Pressures: Unregulated tourism activities have led to waste generation, habitat disturbance, and increased pressure on park resources.

5. Discussion

5.1 Comparative Insights

Kaziranga has a more developed tourism infrastructure and greater community involvement compared to Manas, where tourism is relatively nascent. In both parks, NGOs and local institutions play a crucial role in capacity building and advocacy.

5.2 Balancing Conservation and Development

While tourism offers economic incentives for conservation, unchecked growth can undermine ecological integrity. Participatory management, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and strict environmental guidelines are essential for long-term

sustainability.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Tourism in Assam's national parks holds significant promise for local community development, but realizing its full potential requires addressing issues of equity, participation, and sustainability. The following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Community Participation: Involve local communities in tourism planning, management, and benefit-sharing.

Capacity Building: Provide training in hospitality, entrepreneurship, and environmental stewardship.

Sustainable Tourism Practices: Implement guidelines for waste management, visitor limits, and eco-friendly infrastructure.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish systems to regularly assess the socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism.

By adopting these strategies, Assam can ensure that tourism in its national parks contributes meaningfully to both conservation and the well-being of local communities.

7. References

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