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Rabindra Mahato
Department of Physics,
Science College, Kokrajhar,
Assam, India

Manika Das
Department of Zoology,
Science College, Kokrajhar,
Assam, India

Sanjay Kumar Thakur
Department of Mathematics,
Science College, Kokrajhar,
Assam, India

Krishna Kumar Thakur
Department of Management,
Bodofa UN Brahma College,
Dotma, Assam, India

Corresponding Author:
Krishna Kumar Thakur
Department of Management,
Bodofa UN Brahma College,
Dotma, Assam, India

Analysing the Ecotourism Marketing and Wildlife Branding of Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam, India

Rabindra Mahato, Manika Das, Sanjay Kumar Thakur and Krishna Kumar Thakur

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Abstract

This paper presents a secondary research-based analysis of the ecotourism marketing strategies and wildlife branding initiatives employed in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, India. Historically marked by socio-political conflict, BTR is rebranding itself as a premier ecotourism destination, leveraging its unique assets like Manas National Park (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), its population of wild water buffalo, and a rich tapestry of indigenous Bodo culture. This study critically examines the official narratives, visual branding, and promotional materials disseminated by the Bodoland Territorial Council and Assam Tourism. It investigates the alignment between marketed branding—centered on the Living Culture and Wilderness ethos and the on-ground realities of conservation, community involvement, and sustainable development. The research identifies a strong potential for a distinct wildlife brand but notes challenges including infrastructural gaps, the overshadowing of smaller community-based initiatives, and the lingering effects of past instability. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for a more integrated, community-centric, and resilient branding and marketing model that can contribute to both ecological conservation and socio-economic empowerment in the post-accord BTR.

Keywords: Wildlife Branding, Ecotourism Marketing, Bodoland Territorial Region, Manas National Park, Community-Based Tourism, Destination Marketing, Assam, India

1. Introduction

The global tourism industry has witnessed a paradigm shift towards sustainable and experience-driven travel, with ecotourism emerging as a significant segment (Fennell, 2020) [7]. In India, regions rich in biodiversity but facing socio-economic challenges are increasingly viewing ecotourism as a tool for conservation and local development.

BTR, located in the northeastern state of Assam, is rich in biodiversity, hosting protected areas like Manas National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Despite its ecological wealth, the region faces challenges such as human-wildlife conflicts, underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, and limited conservation funding.

Wildlife branding, which involves associating iconic species or ecosystems with a regional identity, has emerged as a powerful tool to attract tourists while generating awareness about conservation. For instance, the one-horned rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park serves as a symbol of conservation success in Assam. Similarly, BTR's wildlife offers untapped potential for branding and ecotourism marketing.

2. Bodoland's Wildlife Assets and Protections

2.1 Manas National Park (MNP): Manas, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and biosphere reserve, hosts endangered species such as tiger, pygmy hog, Indian rhinoceros, and wild water buffalo. Following conflict-related depredations, UNESCO removed Manas from the "In Danger" list in 2011 after documented recovery efforts. Recent assessments and media coverage highlight tiger resurgence and cross-border connectivity with Bhutan.

2.2 Raimona National Park (2021): Raimona, notified in June 2021, anchors BTR's western forests contiguous with Bhutan. Sources emphasize golden langur presence and

landscape connectivity (Ripu-Chirang).

2.3 Sikhna Jwhlwao National Park (2025): In February 2025, Assam notified Sikhna Jwhlwao National Park (formerly Chirang- Ripu Elephant Reserve area) within BTR, making it Assam's eighth national park and India's 110th. This adds a high-attention narrative for brand freshness and biodiversity continuity.

2.4 Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary: Chakrashila is famed for the golden langur (*Trachypithecus geei*)—a photogenic, endangered primate with strong brand potential. The official Bodoland Tourism page positions Chakrashila as a birding and trekking venue and cites c. 800 langurs in the landscape.

2.5 Bornadi (Bornadi/Bornadi) Wildlife Sanctuary: Bornadi, straddling Udaluri and Baksa, was established to protect pygmy hog and hispid hare—globally significant micro-fauna for conservation storytelling. Government and media note recent pygmy hog releases and population building under the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme.

2.6 Dwijing Festival on the Aie River: The annual, multi-day Dwijing Festival (Dec-Jan) in Chirang draws large domestic audiences and media, blending culture, crafts and soft adventure—useful for seasonal brand spikes and cross-selling wildlife safaris.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. This study aims to critically analyze the ecotourism marketing and wildlife branding strategies of the BTR based on secondary data. It seeks to answer the following research questions:
2. How the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is currently positioned and marketed as an ecotourism destination?
3. What are the key elements of its wildlife branding, and how are these linked with cultural narratives?
4. What are the major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in the existing marketing approach?
5. What strategic interventions can strengthen the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusivity of BTR's ecotourism branding?

4. Literature Review

Zaman, B, and Jain (2021) ^[36] highlighted tourism in the Bodoland Territorial Region, noting its rich resources but limited development due to infrastructural and socio-political challenges. They emphasized the role of rural tourism during COVID-19 and identified events like the Dwijing and Baukhungri festivals as key drivers of branding and community benefits.

Kalita (2017) ^[29] studied rural tourism at Chandubi Lake, showing its value for local livelihoods through activities like boating, guiding, and festivals. Despite strong natural and cultural potential, issues such as weak infrastructure, limited promotion, and man-animal conflict constrain growth, highlighting the need for community participation and better support systems.

Sinha (2017) ^[32] identified Manas National Park in BTAD as a key eco-tourism site with global recognition and livelihood potential. Despite its biodiversity and cultural value, poor infrastructure, limited facilities, and weak

promotion constrain growth, underscoring the need for better amenities, maintenance, and stronger community-government engagement.

Brahma (2014) ^[4] examined tourism in BTAD, noting its biodiversity, culture, and festivals as key assets. Growth, however, is hindered by weak infrastructure, poor promotion, and political instability. The study stressed community participation, government-NGO collaboration, and sustainable ecotourism for regional development.

Wildlife branding connects iconic species or ecosystems with a destination, creating an emotional appeal for tourists. According to Buckley (2009) ^[5], flagship species like tigers and elephants are effective marketing tools that attract global attention and funding. Wildlife branding also educates tourists, enhancing their understanding of biodiversity (Weaver, 2011) ^[35].

Ecotourism has been widely recognized for its dual role in conservation and socio-economic development. Honey (2008) ^[10] highlights that ecotourism promotes environmental awareness, generates revenue for conservation, and creates livelihoods for local communities. However, poorly managed tourism can lead to habitat degradation and overexploitation of wildlife.

Jayswal (2008) ^[28] further emphasized the benefits of hosting events, noting their ability to attract new and repeat visitors, create co-branding opportunities with destinations, and enhance destination image.

Getz (2007) ^[8] examined the evolution of event tourism, highlighting its role in knowledge creation, theory building, and destination development.

True ecotourism is defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education." Effective ecotourism marketing must, therefore, authentically reflect community participation and benefits, avoiding mere "greenwashing" (Donohoe & Needham, 2006) ^[6].

Destination branding moves beyond logos and slogans to encompass the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions a person has of a place (Blain *et al.*, 2005) ^[1]. Wildlife branding, a niche within this, uses charismatic megafauna and pristine ecosystems as Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) to attract a specific tourist demographic. The "Big Five" branding of African safaris is a classic example.

Research by Krüger (2005) ^[30] identifies challenges such as human-wildlife conflicts, lack of infrastructure, and the potential commodification of nature. These issues are particularly relevant to regions like BTR, where tourism remains underdeveloped despite significant ecological potential.

Tourism can be a potent tool for rebuilding a positive image, fostering reconciliation, and creating livelihoods in post-conflict areas. However, marketing such destinations requires sensitive handling of past issues while confidently projecting a new, secure, and welcoming identity (Anson, 1999).

5. Research Methodology

This study is based on secondary research using information already available in reports, publications, and online sources. The data was gathered from:

- Official documents such as tourism policies, plans, and reports of the Bodoland Territorial Council and

Government of Assam.

- Promotional materials including websites (bodolandtourism.com, assamtourism.gov.in), brochures, social media pages, and YouTube videos.
- Academic studies on ecotourism, wildlife conservation in Manas, and tourism branding in Northeast India.
- News articles that covered tourism developments, visitor experiences, and challenges in BTR.

The collected information was reviewed to find common themes in branding, visuals, and messages. Finally, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) was used to summarize and evaluate the findings.

6. The Bodoland Context: From Conflict to Conservation

6.1 The Bodo Movement and Peace Accords

- The Bodo people's organized demand for autonomy began with the Plains Tribals Council of Assam in the late 1960s, later intensifying under the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) in 1987.
- In 1993, a first peace accord led to the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council, although it was soon dissolved due to unmet expectations.
- A landmark. 2nd Accord in 2003 established the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule, granting substantial administrative autonomy.
- The 2020 Bodo Peace Accord transformed the area into the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), further enhancing legislative and financial powers and including Bodo-majority villages under its jurisdiction.

6.2 Manas National Park: From Conflict to Conservation Triumph

- Manas National Park, located in BTAD, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985. However, armed conflict and poaching during the insurgency gravely damaged its wildlife and infrastructure, earning it a "World Heritage in Danger" designation by 1992.
- Following the 2003 Accord, coordinated efforts by BTC, government agencies, NGOs, and local communities led to a dramatic revival. By 2011, UNESCO removed Manas from the Danger List.
- As of 2025, the park hosts over 60 tigers—a testament to conservation success. Restoration was supported by anti-poaching measures, technological monitoring, and community engagement.

6.3 Other Key Attractions Fuelling the Brand

- Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary (established as a sanctuary in 1994, spanning over 45.6 km²) is the second protected habitat for the endangered golden langur—hosting over 600 individuals amid rich biodiversity including 119 bird species and mixed deciduous forests.
- Cultural festival highlights: Traditional celebrations such as Bwisagu (harvest festival) and Bagurumba (Bodo folk dance) are integral to BTR's tourism identity.

7. Analysis of Current Branding and Marketing Strategies

7.1. Wildlife Branding in Bodoland Territorial Region

The analysis of official portals reveals a dual branding strategy. The tagline "Living Culture.

Wilderness." (bodolandtourism.com) effectively merges the two core assets. The narrative is one of "discovery" and "authenticity," positioning BTR as an off-the-beaten-path destination for the discerning traveller, unlike the more commercial Kaziranga National Park.

7.2 Key Wildlife Assets

BTR is home to iconic species like:

- **Golden Langur (*Trachypithecus geei*):** Endemic to the region, it is a symbol of biodiversity in Assam.



Source: iasgyan.in

- **Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*):** A key species attracting wildlife enthusiasts.



Source: Shutterstock.com

- **Pygmy Hog (*Porcula salvania*):** Critically endangered and unique to Assam's grasslands.



Source: Goutam Narayan / Conservation India

- **Dhole, or Indian Wild Dog (*Cuon alpinus*):** Known

for its social hunting pack, can be spotted in Raimona National Park.



Source: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhole>

- **Gaur, or Indian Bison (*Bos gaurus*):** A large and powerful herbivore can be spotted in Raimona National Park.



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaur>

- **The Chinese Pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*):** A rare and shy species, recognized by its unique scales and vital contribution to ecosystem health.



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_pangolin

7.3 Branding Strategies

- **Flagship Species as Icons:** Positioning the golden langur as the face of BTR's conservation efforts.



Source: Bodopedia.com (Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary) & Bodoland Tourism

- **Storytelling through Ecotourism:** Highlighting the conservation success of species like the pygmy hog.
- **Cultural Integration:** Linking wildlife to the region's rich tribal culture, such as the Bodo community's reverence for elephants.

7.4 Marketing Campaigns

- **Wildlife Festivals:** Annual events like the Manas Wildlife Festival to promote tourism.
- **Digital Campaigns:** Social media initiatives showcasing the region's biodiversity.

8. Benefits of Wildlife Branding and Ecotourism in BTR

Wildlife branding and ecotourism in the Bodoland Territorial Region create multiple benefits that go beyond tourism.

- **Conservation Funding:** Revenue from tourism directly contributes to protecting natural assets such as Manas National Park. Funds support habitat restoration, wildlife monitoring, and anti-poaching measures, ensuring long-term ecological balance.
- **Community Empowerment:** Ecotourism generates local jobs through guiding, homestays, cultural performances, and handicrafts. As Honey (2008) ^[10] highlights, fair revenue-sharing strengthens community ownership of conservation and fosters pride in protecting local heritage.
- **Regional Development:** Tourism encourages better infrastructure, connectivity, and services. Increased visibility can position BTR as a leading ecotourism destination in India, bringing both economic growth and international recognition.

9. SWOT Analysis of BTR's Ecotourism Branding

Strengths	Weaknesses
Unique, charismatic flagship species (Golden Langur, Pigmy Hog, Dhole, Elephant)	Over-reliance on Manas; other potential sites under-marketed
Powerful "post-conflict revival" narrative	Limited evidence of deep community involvement in marketing narratives
Strong UNESCO World Heritage Site designation	Perceptions of remoteness and past instability may deter tourists
Distinctive indigenous cultural selling proposition	Gaps in tourism infrastructure (e.g., high-end lodges, skilled guides)
Opportunities	Threats
Growing global demand for authentic, community-based tourism	Human-wildlife conflict incidents can damage the "wilderness" brand
Partnerships with national/international conservation NGOs	Over-tourism in Manas if not managed sustainably
Developing homestays and village tourism products	Competition from established brands like Kaziranga and Sundarbans

10. Discussion

BTR's branding is strong, using its unique mix of wildlife and culture to stand out in India's tourism market. This blend sets it apart from destinations that focus only on wildlife.

Yet, there seems to be a gap between the image promoted and what visitors actually experience. Reports highlight issues like weak infrastructure and limited community-based ecotourism options. Without better facilities and services, the brand may look more aspirational than real. To feel more authentic, the branding should also showcase local ownership—telling stories of community members, guides, and conservationists—so that visitors see both culture and real benefits to local people.

11. Recommendations

- **Develop Comprehensive Marketing Campaigns:** BTR needs to strengthen its visibility by launching well-designed marketing campaigns. Partnering with international organizations can bring both funding and wider promotion. Innovative tools like augmented reality (AR) can showcase BTR's wildlife virtually, attracting global audiences even before they arrive.
- **Promote Community-Based Tourism:** For ecotourism to be sustainable, local communities must be at the center. Training in hospitality, guiding, and cultural interpretation can help villagers become skilled tourism entrepreneurs. Community-led conservation projects, supported by revenue-sharing models, will ensure that the benefits are fairly distributed.
- **Address Human-Wildlife Conflicts:** To balance conservation with community well-being, BTR should set up buffer zones near sensitive areas and introduce compensation schemes for crop or livestock losses. This will reduce tensions and encourage local people to see conservation as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

12. Conclusion

The Bodoland Territorial Region has all the essential ingredients for a strong ecotourism brand, with its unique blend of wilderness and culture. While current marketing has built a clear identity, long-term success will depend on aligning the brand promise with real visitor experiences. By ensuring conservation, empowering local communities, and strengthening sustainability, BTR can position itself as a model destination where tourism drives both regional development and ecological balance.

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