ECOTOURISM-A TOOL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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Growing public concern about the decline of natural forests, loss of endangered species, global warming and climate change has brought conservation issues to the forefront of public debate. An emerging dissatisfaction with mass tourism has led to increased demand for nature based experiences of an alternative kind. At the same time, less developed countries has begun to realize that nature based tourism is providing a less destructive use of resources. To be with nature and enjoy its creations in the most natural way without endangering is known as ecotourism. It can take several forms to be in a beautiful natural forest or landscape; to enjoy watching animals, birds and trees or corals and marine life in a sea; to engage in trekking, boating or rafting and to wander into sand dunes. These are some of the common forms of ecotourism. Ecotourism is a logical component of ecodevelopment. It is a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon and has a tremendous role to play in the interpretation of nature and natural resources as well as in the understanding of human history and its interaction with the rural environment and the diffusion of environmental knowledge and awareness. It can serve as an important tool for environmental education and for raising ecological awareness, both in tourists and local people.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism respects the environment and promotes the well being of local people. The World Heritage Convention of UNESCO has declared world heritage sites to preserve and protect our natural and cultural heritage. When both nature and culture are present together, is an attractive combination, which we call it as ecotourism. Ecotourism development is visualized as a development tool not just in promoting tourism growth but also in reducing poverty particularly in the rural areas. Ecotourism is expected to engage them in the higher productivity areas by linking to commercial process and marketing chain. Any tourism program which is: nature-based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is a major concept and where local people are benefited. Basically ecotourism means making as little environmental impact as possible and helping to sustain the indigenous populace, thereby encouraging the preservation of wildlife and habitats when visiting a place. This is responsible form of tourism and tourism development, which encourages going back to the natural products in every aspect of life. Today, ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry (TIES, 2006). According to the World Tourism Organization with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and representing 6% of the world gross domestic product. Ecotourism is consecrated for preserving and sustaining the diversity of the world’s natural and cultural environments. It accommodates and entertains visitors in a way that is minimally intrusive or destructive to the environment and sustains and supports the native cultures in the locations it is operating in. Responsibility of both travelers and service providers is the genuine meaning for ecotourism. Ecotourism also endeavours to encourage and support the diversity of local economies for which the tourism related income is important (Manalel and Vinodan, 2009). Besides all these, the revenue produced from tourism helps and encourages governments to fund conservation projects and training programs. Ecotourism focuses on local cultures, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new ways to live on our vulnerable planet. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water reuse and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism.

Geographical diversity of India

India is a country of continental dimensions consisting of four distinct regions namely, the great mountain zone, plains of the Ganga and the Indus rivers, the desert region and the southern peninsula. Almost two-thirds of the Himalaya is in the mountain zone of India, including large plateaus and valleys. The plains of the Ganga and the Indus are formed by basins of three distinct river systems, the Indus, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The desert region consists of the great desert and the little desert. The great desert extends from the Rann of Kachchh and runs through the Rajasthan-Sind frontier. The little desert extends from the Luni River between Jaisalmer and Jodhpur up to the northern wastes. The peninsular plateau
Ecotourism resources

The geographical diversity of India has also given it a wealth of ecosystems which are being protected and preserved. They have also become the major resources for ecotourism. One specific element is biosphere reserves. These are multipurpose areas protected in order to preserve the genetic diversity and integrity of plants, animals and micro-organisms in representative ecosystems, there are 17 such reserves in India at present (NWD, 2012). A second element is mangroves, which are specialized forest ecosystems in tropical and sub-tropical regions of the world bordering sheltered sea coasts and estuaries. Major mangrove areas are- Northern Andaman and Nicobar, Sunderbans, Bhitarakanka and Mahanadi Delta, Coringa, Godavari Delta and Krishna Estuary, Pichavaram and Point Cali mar, Goa, Gulf of Kutch, Coondapur, Achra/Ratnagiri and Vembanad. The third element is coral and coral reefs. There are four coral areas identified in India so far- Gulf of Mannar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep Islands and Gulf of Kutch. The fourth element is the great and little deserts in the North-Western region of the country. This is a distinct ecosystem which has attracted the fascination of tourists. The fifth element consists of mountain and forests, including great Himalayas and other mountain ranges in the country. Along with their forests, rivers and snow, they have also become great attractions for ecotourists. India’s sixth element is the flora and fauna which are very abundant. There are about 45,000 species of plants including shrubs. The country also has a great variety of fauna, numbering a little over 65,000 known species, including 1,228 species of birds, 428 species of reptiles, 372 species of mammals, 204 species of amphibians and 2,546 species of fishes. In order to protect and preserve these genetic resources, India has created 102 national parks and 515 wildlife sanctuaries in different parts of the country (NWD, 2012). Some have already become popular with tourists, such as Kaziranga and Manas in Assam; Jim Corbett Park in Uttar Pradesh; Bharatpur, Ranthambore and Sariska in Rajasthan; Kanha and Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh; Bandipur in Karnataka and Similipal in Orissa.

Development of ecotourism

India has consistently included environmental and ecological safeguards in the development of ecotourism in order to avoid gross commercialism. Opening ecological areas for tourism is generally done after careful assessment of carrying capacity to ensure that nature’s bounty is not destroyed. India has also always tried to ensure that tourism does not impinge on the culture and heritage. In general, a sound and sensitive environmental approach is adapted to tourism development planning. Landscaping and upgrading the environment of parks, gardens and other natural areas has been another stream of developmental activity associated with ecotourism. Creation of public conveniences and road side amenities was also given considerable importance in the development process.

Ecotourism - in India’s perspective

India is well known for its diverse topography, its ecological diversity and rich biodiversity. The conservation and sustainable use of these natural resources could contribute significantly to improving the livelihoods of people who have depended on them for generations. Government of India has made several efforts in this regard. The establishment of protected areas is one notable effort. While there has been spontaneous tourism development in some of these areas, ecotourism development in the protected areas has been emphasized and promoted by the government through various policy instruments. Ecotourism is expected to make a significant contribution towards achieving the goal of sustainable development. Ecotourism is increasingly recognized as a community development tool with significant economic contribution. Studies show that nature tourism is one of the largest growing segments of tourism where ecotourism occupies a prominent position with 20-34% growth per year since 1990 (TIES, 2006).

In fact, ecotourism contributes to sustainability of all dimensions i.e., socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental, fixing criteria for the purposes of evaluation and monitoring of project success (Christ et al., 2003). The cultural values of these remote areas which are inherent to the aboriginal communities are innumerable and are manifested in the form of costume, architecture, art, festivals and other community engagements (Williams et al., 2001). Community based participative management of resources maximizes the benefit to the needy who sacrifice their resources for tourism development. In this case the local people become the focal point of resource appropriation and benefit sharing. This is achieved through the establishment and operationalisation of committees, partnership and other resource sharing mechanism that provide local inputs to the public, like protected area managers, conservation groups etc. Such democratization of development interference should be started from the grass root level. Economic sustainability is a core aspect of all development initiatives. Ecotourism ultimately seeks to contribute to the wellbeing of the community both directly and indirectly (Amador, 2004).

Appreciation for and desire to learn about local ecosystems and people is important part and parcel of ecotourism. Ecotourism is also ideally characterized as small scale economic activity run by locals and therefore, has come to be regarded by many as a development strategy that has the dual advantage of benefiting the local economy while simultaneously protecting the local natural and cultural capital (World Tourism Organization, 2002). Tourism development and conservation should meet at a point which will not compromise each other through proper planning by involving the local communities, government and the private players. Hence an integrated framework of nature conservation and tourism development, which will combine the destination sustainability and encourages the local community to support the conservation and livelihood programmes needs to be framed. Ecotourism can support protected areas in conservation and livelihood requirements of destination communities if managed in a manner in which direct economic benefits will accrue to local communities (Manalel and
Vinodan, 2009).

**Tribal community and ecotourism**

Tourism and indigenous people are one of the widely discussed topics on different issues like the exclusion of indigenous people from destination, development, loss of cultural identity and so on. It has been argued that indigenous people and ecotourists both value the resources, as they are seen in relatively virgin areas, which gives opportunities for studying admiring and enjoying the nature and culture. As an enterprising effort ecotourism can establish a sustainable relationship for the improvement of the welfare of such communities in various way through participation, resource sharing frameworks, development of livelihood opportunities, conservation of resources both cultural as well as natural (Hinch, 2001). For the successful tourism development, the aboriginal people must be allowed to take control despite all elements working against their intervention in mainstream developmental process (Fennell, 2003).

**Benefits for local community**

Benefits for local communities are wide reaching. Not only is there emphasis on proper environmental management, emphasis on improving social operation has been effective in these areas. Ecotourism provide new jobs in the local community through the growth of hotels, restaurants and guided tours. This creates business growth and provides additional income for often economically unstable areas. Also, an outlet to new markets for local products is created in that local are able to sell their goods directly without having to use an intermediary. Other social benefits of ecotourism include improved funding for facilities and an improved infrastructure, the acquisition of new skill and technologies, increased cultural awareness by the culture its self and also improved land use pattern for development in the area (Dowling and Fennell, 2003; Wearing, 2001).

**Ecological impact**

1. Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
2. Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
4. Provide financial benefits and empowerment of local people.
5. Raise sensitivity to host countries, political, environmental and social climate.

**Indirect benefits**

Apart from the employment and other direct benefits availed from direct engagement of communities in ecotourism activities the community could avail a number of other incentives and facilities. These incentives had both financial and non-financial components (Vinodan and Manalel, 2011). These are educational incentive, loan and financial assistance, insurance coverage, health programme, training etc.

**Problems associated with ecotourism**

Ecotourism have been thronging India in large numbers for it has rich sources of flora and fauna. A great number of endangered and rare species are also to be found in the various Wildlife Sanctuary, National Parks and Biosphere Reserves in India. The government of India and Ministry of Tourism need to make concerted efforts to ensure that ecotourism in India is able to keep pace with ecotourism destinations across the world and making sustainable tourism a priority. Ecotourism faces a set of problems that threaten the entire program. While growth in the popularity of ecotourism may be beneficial monetarily, the growth of the global tourism industry often does so at the expense of the social and ecological integrity of destination regions (Dowling and Fennell, 2003). The social integrity of a region is compromised when development occurs too quickly and without proper input from the local communities. This becomes a major issue with the involvement and control of foreign powers in the development of ecotourism. Ecological integrity is also compromised with the lack of proper planning, as well as with an influx in tourists who do not understand the delicate balance in the ecological stability of the region. Developing countries possess a powerful economic incentive to develop tourism rapidly and with as few constraints as possible (Griffin, 2002). The benefits of tourism on a developing country are immediate and widespread. This reflects a danger to the developing of ecotourism in a developing country. Ecotourism takes years of planning across many different levels of governance, including international, national, regional, local and site scale (Dowling and Fennell, 2003).

Without having full control of tourism planning, the culture of the host society is as much at risk from tourism as the physical environment (Wearing, 2001). Many indigenous cultures affected by tourism are not accustomed to the fast-paced, material-oriented lifestyle of developers and the tourists that soon follow. Relinquishing control of the tourism industry makes it easy to then turn instead to the representation of environments and cultures as products (Crouch and Scott, 2003). Now much of the tourism spots have become overshadowed by the tourism industry that was supposed to raise their economy. Local culture are being exploited and misrepresented and the industry promotes further environmental degradation on the sites because of poor planning, much of the detriment of these that still rely of the sites natural resources (Weaver, 2004). There is also conflict with the conventional tourism industry. It is know that conventional tourism does not always take into account the consequences of their actions (Moreno, 2005). Ecotourism is implemented differently around the worlds and the impacts on native cultures vary similarly. It is universal that tourism is a crucial industry to provide economic support to developing countries (Moreno, 2005). In the area where two different community lives, in such region, the lack of consultations and participation by local communities has fueled hostilities and loss of trust by the locals (Benson and Clifton, 2004). However, the two communities have very different cultures and the effects of global communication are obvious on one culture compare to the other.

**Direct environmental consequences**

Ecotourism operations occasionally fail to live up to conservation ideals. It is sometimes overlooked that ecotourism is a highly consumer centered activity and that environmental conservation is a means to further economic growth. Although ecotourism is intended for small groups, even a modest increase in population, however, temporary,
puts extra pressure on the local environment and necessitates the development of additional infrastructure and amenities. The construction of water treatment plants, sanitation facilities and lodges come with the exploitation of non-renewable energy sources and the utilization of already limited local resources. The conversion of natural land to such tourist infrastructure is implicated in deforestation and habitat deterioration. In other cases, the environment suffers because local communities are unable to meet the infrastructure demands of ecotourism. The lack of adequate sanitation facilities in many parks results in the disposal of campsite sewage in rivers, contaminating the wildlife, livestock and people who draw drinking water from it.

Aside from environmental degradation with tourist infrastructure, population pressures from ecotourism also leaves behind garbage and pollution associated with the Western life style. Although ecotourists claim to be educationally sophisticated and environmentally concerned, they rarely understand the ecological consequences of their visits and how their day-to-day activities append physical impacts on the environment. Ecotourism activities are, in of itself, issues in environmental impact because they disturb flora and fauna. Ecotourists believe that because they are only taking pictures and leaving footprints, they keep ecotourism sites pristine, but even harmless sounding activities such as a nature hike can be ecologically destructive. Where the ecotourism activity involves wildlife viewing, it can scare away animals, disrupt their feeding and nesting sites or acclimate them to the presence of people.

Natural resource management
Natural resource management can be utilized as a specialized tool for the development of ecotourism. There are several places throughout the world where the amount of natural resources are abundant. But, with human encroachment and habitats these resources are depleting. Without knowing the proper utilization of certain resources they are destroyed and floral and faunal species are becoming extinct. Ecotourism programmes can be introduced for the conservation of these resources. Several plans and proper management programmes can be introduced so that these resources remain untouched. Several organizations, NGO's, scientists are working on this regards.

A successful ecotourism program must involve aspects of both environmental planning and social planning for the destination regions. Without one or the other, the program with focus too heavily on the environment or too heavily on the culture at a detriment to the neglected aspects. Ecotourism cannot be developed out of every type of conventional tourism; it takes a conscious effort to maintain the integrity of local cultures and environment.

Environmental planning
There are four main dimensions (Dowling and Fennell, 2003) to the environmental maintenance of a successful ecotourism program; it must have a strong nature base, support for conservation of the area, sustainable management practices and an element of environmental education for local and tourist. Support for conservation and sustainable management are especially important to ecotourism destinations because they are usually concentrated in sensitive and unique environments (Diamantis, 2004). These unique environments represent different uses to different people. Locals use their environment delicately to maintain a balance and future for their culture. Visitors are mostly unaware of the impact that their presence imposes on these delicate environments. These negative consequences to the environment can be eliminated through proper education of both native and foreign people with respect to tourism.

Social planning
Social planning in a destination region is equally as important as environmental planning for ecotourism. But local and tourists must understand the goals of a program if everyone is to be working towards the same goal. The most important social factor is to make sure that local community have a crucial level of awareness of the prospective benefits and costs of tourism to contribute effectively in the planning process (Diamantis, 2004). Wearing (2001) commented that the community is rarely asked by private operators about their vision for the area, nor have they been traditionally part of the planning process. As the research on ecotourism has increased, there has been a trend to include the community more in development. The simplest and most effective way to ensure community involvement in ecotourism is through the development of community organization programs.

Controls and sustainability
India has legislation to protect untouched ecologies and sensitive ecosystems. The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 controls the use of forests for non-forestry uses. The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 designates the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and stipulates a comprehensive framework for wildlife protection and conservation. The Environment Protection Act, 1986 stipulates several measures for protecting and improving the quality of the environment and preventing, controlling and abating environmental pollution. Coastal Regulation Zones were gazetted by a notification under the Act in 1991 and a wide range of activities have been prohibited within 500meters of the high tide line. In addition, the Department of Tourism has been developing a national policy and guidelines for the development of tourism in forests, deserts and marine ecosystems. Once formulated, these guidelines would be implemented to ensure the sustainability of ecotourism development.

CONCLUSIONS
Ecotourism, no doubt, is a significant tool for local regeneration and development of rural or remote areas. Ecotourism will not be an immediate success in every culture that attempts it. Sustainable tourism can only exist in an area where human activity is already sustainable. The success of the ecodevelopment depends upon the concern for achieving a balance between conservation of the area and livelihood of people living in and around it. The involvement of local communities in ecotourism activities is a step in the right direction. It provides for alternative sources of income to local communities, which live in and around protected areas, thus decreasing their dependence on forest resources and increasing their commitment to keeping the forests intact. For
the vast protected area network in India, the lessons from the past experience are important, as it legitimately shows the need for communities and conservation to go hand in hand. Ecotourism is a logical component of ecodevelopment. It is a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon and has a tremendous role to play in the interpretation of nature and natural resources, as well as in the understanding of human history and its interaction with the rural environment and the diffusion of environmental knowledge and awareness. It can serve as an important tool for environmental education and for raising ecological and environmental awareness, both in tourists and local people.

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