



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

CODEN: IJRSFP (USA)

International Journal of Recent Scientific Research
Vol. 10, Issue, 02(A), pp. 30753-30755, February, 2019

**International Journal of
Recent Scientific
Research**

DOI: 10.24327/IJRSR

Research Article

THE SCOPE OF TOURISM IN MEGHALAYA

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2019.1002.3118>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 10th November, 2018
Received in revised form 2nd
December, 2018
Accepted 26th January, 2018
Published online 28th February, 2019

Key Words:

Mass tourism, alternative tourism,
attraction resource base, community
participation

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to bring into spotlight the utility of tourism as a potential tool in providing an alternative means of livelihood without hampering the cultural values and the natural environment of a place. It also point out the difference in characteristics between mass and alternative tourism and the suitability of the latter in the context of Meghalaya where the tourism resource base is dependent on nature and culture. Thirdly, the paper cites the potential tourism attributes or resources that the state has been bestowed that need to be tapped cautiously for ensuring a sustainable development. Fourthly, the paper highlights the trend of tourist arrival in the state in the last more than one decade and finally the paper also sought to venture out ideas to overcome the challenges due to fragility of resource base, lack of community participation and seasonality impact.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered as one of the most important tools in upbringing rural development and the most promising employment generators worldwide. Tourism is well recognised for being an industry without smoke and hence it is the most convenient industry to play a leading role in global sustainable development initiative. However, whether tourism is in concurrence with the principles of sustainable development or not, depends on the approach of organization of tourism itself. Two major forms of tourism should be taken into consideration-conventional mass tourism and alternative tourism. The former is characterised by rapid but unstable development and short-term economic benefits, extreme concentration of tourists in one place with little or no concern for the environment and local culture and hence does not comply with the principle of sustainable development. The latter, however, is characterised by its small scale, spontaneous growth, local control, and hold high responsibility for long-term local economic benefit, environmental stability and cultural enrichment. Alternative tourism can also be referred to so many other names like eco-tourism, responsible tourism, green tourism, niche tourism, sustainable tourism and so on depending on the concerned service or products offered or the concept of subject matter under discussion.

In the context of Meghalaya as a tourist destination, it is difficult to differentiate between mass tourism and alternative tourism. Many tourist spots in Meghalaya are nature based or eco-tourist spots where the locales or hosts are very much concerned about keeping the spot clean and green, yet the same tourist spots experience high inflow of single day or overnight domestic tourists during monsoon season and also a high concentration of day picnickers during the month of November and December and even up to first or second week of January every year. However, so far local people have shown no serious complaint of visitors' intolerance, instead local people gain a lot of economic benefit with increase number of visitors. Hence it becomes apparent that large concentration of visitors is not a pertinent negative indicator of alternative tourism. In fact, lack of pre-information to visitors about the environmental and cultural desirability of the host community, absence of proper garbage disposal system, poor maintenance of recreation, sightseeing sites and garbage disposal zones, poor management and poor projection of desired rules and regulations are characteristic factors causing degradation of features of alternative tourism. Certain visitors may not choose to visit a place embedded by stringent rules and regulations, however, alternative tourists are not worried about the rules because they know their own ethics and abide by them no matter whether they come alone or in groups. Alternative tourists are both

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spontaneous and instant learners or researchers who like to explore new things in a conscious manner and they know how to appreciate local effort in preserving the environment and cultural values.

Scope of tourism in Meghalaya: Meghalaya is endowed with the gift of nature. Being a hilly area with a moderate climate, it is the perfect destination for summer vacation. The potentiality of eco-tourism is dependent on availability of natural resources, involving beautiful sceneries, topography, water resources, vegetation and wildlife and cultural resources and Meghalaya has them all. Also known as the abode of clouds due to heavy rainfall during monsoon season, Meghalaya is bestowed with cascading crystal-clear water bodies, diverse flora and fauna, deep gorges and canyons, high cliffs and gentle meadows and valleys in many areas, magnificent waterfalls and caves in some areas, green canopies, gigantic rocks, sacred groves, etc. One can experience a thrill simply by travelling on the hilly roads in many parts of the state. Apart from the gift of nature, the beauty of Meghalaya also lies on its rich cultural heritage and tradition, beliefs and customs, languages and numerous dialects. The capital city of Meghalaya, i.e. Shillong, is one of the most preferred destinations for holding of meetings, conferences and conventions, festivals, trade fairs and Sports events, besides it is also an educational hub and many prestigious hospitals are located in the city. The city is also one of the most preferred destinations in India for holding of international concerts due to the likeness of its people for music and hence it has got the name as the rock capital of India. The state is also known for the inherent knowledge of its people to treat medical or trauma cases using herbal medicines. Some places in the state are famous for the existence of fossil remains or stone impressions of folkloristic origins like *Kalaw-Luri-Lura* (legendary animal market) at Mawlyngbna, *U Thlen* (dragon snake) at Sohra. Meghalaya is also known for the agrarian lifestyle of the people and their good use of leisure time in weaving, arts and handicrafts.

Based on the above available resource base, it can clearly be understood that Meghalaya has a huge potential for development of alternative or eco-tourism. There are four main approaches of eco-tourism which can be employed in the context of Meghalaya based on the availability of resources and the fragile nature of the resource base viz. adventure tourism, cultural tourism, agri-tourism and educational tourism.

Adventure tourism: It can be of two types, hard and soft. Hard tourism activities that have been undertaken or can be undertaken in the future in the state involve rock climbing, caving, trekking in wilderness areas. Soft adventure tourist activities are comprised of backpacking, exploring bio reserves, bird watching, camping, canoeing, cruising, eco-tour, educational programmes, boating, fishing, hiking, kayaking, orienteering, rafting, sky walk, side walk by the cliff side, sightseeing, swimming, angling, mountain cycling and car or bike racing, parachuting, attending or participating in games and sports events, etc.

Cultural tourism: Cultural tourism products that Meghalaya can offer include of homestay, homely stay in local resorts, exploring legendary attractions, tasting local cuisines, attending religious festivals, visiting cultural heritage sites, museums, monuments and churches, pilgrimage to some sacred sites in

Jaintia and Garo hills, visiting sacred groves, attending cultural events, shopping for local souvenirs, attending music festivals, talent shows, story-telling, etc.

Agri-tourism: Agri-tourism has not been projected as an approach in any tourism events and yet some activities like exhibition of agri-products fruit, pickles, jams, tea leaves, heirlooms had been witnessed and wine festivals were conducted many times in the state. Some other agri-tourism activities that can be undertaken include of barn dances, breweries, cabin living, campfires, camping in agricultural sites, flower arrangement, jelly making, meeting banyard animals, gardening, farm cooking contest, fee-fishing, herb walk, hiking paths, etc

Educational tourism: Educational tourism activities that can be offered to tourist visiting the state include of wildlife discoveries, exploring cultural heritage sites and monuments, exploring folklores associated with places, rivers, waterfalls, stone impressions or fossil remains, science expedition, marvelling the traditional skills of creating arts and crafts, calligraphy and carving on rocks, walk with nature, exploring biodiversity, learning local history and literature, learning indigenous herbal treatments, visiting museums, exploring local tribal lifestyle, etc.

It is important to note that the tourism landscape on the basis of the above foreseen resource base is fragile in nature and hence proper assessment of the fragility level of the physical landscape and local culture and incorporation of the outcome of the assessment in the infrastructure development plan, site maintenance, management and community participation plan before developing a place for tourist attraction is a prime necessity in order to achieve the objective of sustainability.

Trend of tourist inflow in Meghalaya: According to the Meghalaya tourism statistical report, 2016, the share of foreign tourist visits into the state from 1999-2014 was quite low compared to that of domestic tourists. The period from 2005-2010 witnessed a steady decrease in number of foreign visitors in the state. The following table shows the statistic of tourist arrival in the state from 1999-2014

Year	No. of tourists	Total
1999	1971	159730
2000	2327	169929
2001	2390	178697
2002	3191	268529
2003	6304	371953
2004	12707	433495
2005	5099	375911
2006	4259	400287
2007	5267	457685
2008	4919	549954
2009	4522	591398
2010	4177	652756
2011	4803	667504
2012	5313	680254
2013	6773	691269
2014	8664	717789

Source: NEDFi Databank

Moreover, compared to Assam, the leading recipient of tourists in North-East India, Meghalaya still functions as an add-on destination to Assam for the last one or two decades and till today. A statistical report on tourist arrival in North East

showed that in 1996, Assam received 3,27,260 domestic tourists and 5885 foreign tourists while Meghalaya received a mere 1,36,183 domestic tourists and 1573 foreign tourists. In the year 2000, there were 10,01,577 domestic and 5,959 foreign tourists who visited Assam, while Meghalaya received only 1,69,929 domestic and 2,327 foreign tourists. In 2007, there were 34,79,870 domestic and 13,657 foreign visitors in Assam while there were only 3,75,911 domestic and 5,099 foreign visitors in Meghalaya. However, compared to other North-East states, Meghalaya still stands second to Assam in terms of tourist arrival. The state also witnessed a steady increase in both domestic and foreign tourist arrival since the year 2011 onwards.

Boosting tourism development in Meghalaya- challenges and prospects: Even though Meghalaya has the potential resources for sustainable tourism development, there are also hindrances that must be addressed and incorporated in development planning in order to achieve sustainability in the process.

The adventure tourism resource of Meghalaya is purely nature based which implies that adventure tourism in the state takes place mainly at the cost of serene landscapes which are fragile in nature. Hence, it is important to know the context of fragility of attraction sites so that precautions can be undertaken may it be in the case of infrastructure development or in maintaining limits in entry of visitors and waste disposal so that the process of development itself should not go beyond the carrying capacity of the attraction sites and whatever resources belonging to the attraction sites should not be disturbed, tarnished or degraded in any way.

Meghalaya has a rich cultural resource base for cultural tourism development because of its distinct cultural identity, customs and traditional lifestyles, the existence of stone impressions, waterfalls associated with folklores, monoliths and monuments, unique arts and crafts, etc, however, the indigenous folks are not even aware of the economic value of all these cultural attributes that they have and even if they are aware, they do not have the courage to come out of their conservative nature and they do not have the knowledge to present them to the world. Eco-tourists are eager to learn much about the culture and way of life of local folks by involving themselves in homestay in local households, in cooking and eating, in games and religious rituals, however, they do not find a way to do so. Therefore, the need of the hour is to generate proper *conscientization* of local people about their own economic situation and their own position in the world and how to get rid of that situation by becoming active participants in the process of cultural tourism. Raising awareness on the economic value of cultural attributes and creating platforms for the local people to display their culture to the world is vital to the process of cultural tourism development in the state.

The state has a huge potential for agri-tourism on account of the fact that agriculture remains central to the economy of the state and the agricultural products of the state are known for their good quality. Agri-tourism requires less investment compared to other forms of tourism, however, so far it was not projected as an approach in tourism development initiatives of the state. Hence, it requires that agri-tourism should be encouraged and be projected in a distinguishable manner.

Lack of local control over management of most of the attraction sites is another challenge which demotivate community participation. Local control and local economic benefit should be the central focus while setting up plan for tourism ventures. Mawlynnong, one of the eco-tourist destinations in Meghalaya, sets a good example of the success of eco-tourism on account of citizen control and equal sharing of benefits among local households which then serve as motivational factors for more active community participation in tourism.

The negative impact of seasonality is quite high in the state. To reduce this impact, it is advisable to introduce more niche tourism products during low seasons to serve the demand of different types of tourists. It is also important to note that the state government has introduced theme tourism programmes which were quite successful and hence more of such theme tourism approaches should be organized in the state.

CONCLUSION

Meghalaya has a huge potential for alternative tourism development because it is bestowed with varied natural attraction attributes. However, in tapping such potential resources for tourism venture, it is also necessary to establish measures in order to ensure long term benefits. Community participation and community control over management of tourism is a determinant of success of tourism and hence local communities should be encouraged to come forward and be active participants in alternative tourism development and special programmes for raising awareness on community participation in tourism should be organised. Where tourism venture is nature based, it is impossible to avoid seasonality effect, however, the same effect can be reduced by introduction of niche tourism products and theme tourism approaches to serve certain high end visitors during the low seasons.

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