



ISSN: 2350-0328

**International Journal of Advanced Research in Science,
Engineering and Technology**

Vol. 9, Issue 9 , September 2022

Low Impact Eco-tourism: Is it the need of the hour? The case of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT: Ecotourism is undoubtedly one of the fastest growing trends of tourism in the twenty-first century. There has been numerous definitions of the term 'ecotourism' over the past few years, however the basic tenets and its applicability is mostly inconsistent, as there is a need to shift from nature based tourism to a form of tourism which is sustainable and emphasizes on conservation. However with the changing values of life, the concept of ecological conservation is becoming more and more important which brings us to discuss about the new form of eco-tourism known as Low Impact eco-tourism (LIET) and its importance post COVID 19 scenario. There are some people who stress that it is merely another form of the many types of 'alternative tourism'; such as green tourism, sustainable tourism and eco-tourism. However there are differences which can be seen from its approach to balance the 'demand and supply' market. Through this exploratory paper, we attempt to review the research in order to have a better understanding of the many issues that ecotourism faces and can LIET can be the solution to the same? It will also try to assess the feasibility of promoting Low Impact Eco-Tourism in a state like Assam and is it the type of tourism which is indeed the need of the hour?

KEYWORDS: Low Impact Eco-Tourism (LIET), Conservation, Sustainability, Supply-Driven, Training, Local Community

I. INTRODUCTION

Eco-tourism has developed into a new trend in tourism in the 21st century. It has sparked a lot of attention in the tourism literature as it emphasizes on travelling to undisturbed areas, ^{[1], [2]} minimizing the negative consequences on the environment ^[3], communities and conservation ^[4]. Although the main goals of ecotourism are to increase the awareness of the people regarding the environment, sensitization of travelers about the nature and its processes ^[5] but many argue the term "ecotourism" is vague to an extent. . Some researchers argue that the concept defined has been confusing ^[6] and also that universally accepted definition of the concept does not exist ^[7]. Some define it as low **impact** travel to unique, pristine and often undisturbed locations but the emphasis on 'Low Impact' is very limited. Malcom Lillywhite in 1985 had coined the term 'Low Impact Eco-Tourism' (LIET) and the present situation of the COVID 19 demands this form of alternative tourism be stressed upon post pandemic. Ecotourism promotes development and this leads to depletion of the natural resource base. There are many challenges related to ecotourism, mostly driven by demand forces, this paper discusses about the supply side of low impact ecotourism.

Low Impact Ecotourism is concerned mainly with the establishment of a socially acceptable, locally managed, tourism business which stimulates economic development and natural resource management of a place and the communities living in these tourist destinations. The important features which LIET introduces are that it controls and regulates the development of tourism which lies with the eco-destination and its communities, and not the demand side of the travel agents and tour operators. This allows them to define the kind and magnitude of tourism which is sustainable in many ways. ^[8]

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Farrell and Runyan , 1991 ^[4] stresses on the kind of environment where "the conservationists along with the tourists work together in order to safeguard the quality of the environment while also protecting tourism... conservation of



ISSN: 2350-0328

International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

Vol. 9, Issue 9 , September 2022

nature aided by cooperative strategies...a subset of nature tourism where in a step farther has been taken, considering nature and tourism as equal partners... the purpose and focus is solely on the enrichment or maintenance of natural systems through tourism ”.

Place, 1991^[9] focused on the approach of eco-tourism, which is “steady and small-scale based on local savings and investment... the participation of locals can help to provide better opportunities to assimilate conservation and economic development for park-based tourism development.”

Ziffer , 1989^[10] states that it is “ a type of tourism which has been inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures. An eco-tourist usually tends to visit areas which are relatively undiscovered in the fortitude of appreciation, participation, and sensitivity. S/he practices a non-consumptive way of using wildlife and natural resources and tends to make some valuable contributions to the visited area by means of labor or financial means which is aimed to benefit the site conservation directly as well as the economic well-being of the local people. It also seeks to imply an approach managed by the host region which commits itself to establish as well as maintain the sites with the help of local residents’ participation and involvement, appropriately promoting them, enforcing strict regulations, and finally using the proceeds of the enterprise to bring about community development and also fund the area’s land management”.

Ziolkowski, 1990^[11] opines that low-impact tourism is a kind of tourism which mainly focuses on providing a valuable experience of the local culture which is further offered to on its own unadulterated terms. This is expected to be far from the common “beaten track.”

III. OBJECTIVES

The current study has been undertaken for the fulfillment of the following objectives:

- i. To gain knowledge about the concept of low-impact ecotourism.
- ii. To ascertain its significance and necessitate in relation to post Covid 19 scenario.
- iii. To assess the feasibility of promoting Low Impact Ecotourism and its challenges.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design is exploratory in nature. A systematic review of literature has been conducted. The relevant data have been gathered from various research publications, journals, magazines, books, websites, government and non-government reports along with other consistent sources.

V. DISCUSSION

The impact of ecotourism can be deliberate or unintentional. For instance, It may be deliberate when a eco-lodge / tourist facility is constructed, it modifies the environment around it and has costs to be incurred. However, it can be acceptable only if it is constructed in a less sensitive zone that too at a small scale. Unintentional impacts may include overcrowding leading to disruption in the wildlife behaviors, modification in their breeding and migration patterns due to the harmful technological effects, etc. It is also pertinent to mention that most eco-tourist destinations exist in the developing countries while the eco-tourists are from more developed countries.

The stakeholders of Ecotourism also demand a basic level of infrastructure; transport, accommodation, service, recreation, etc. at the expense of natural pristine destinations^[12]. Due to the demand for varied recreational activities, there exists outdoor areas which provide recreation however this might lead to the policymakers and other private individuals to not take into account the threats to wildlife that are usually not addressed by setting aside separate less sensitive areas for ecotourism. Such areas might be very small^[13] or even be located away from the most important areas that are threatened^[14]. It is also important to note that the success of any eco-tourist destination is ascertained by the number of visitors over a period of time which in the future will threaten sustainability. With the increasing interest in a given site and usage, there is deterioration in the natural quality of that site.



ISSN: 2350-0328

International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

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Ecotourism also claims to lay importance on conservation; both the aspects might not work simultaneously. While ecotourism means travelling to natural areas which are undisturbed with the objective of enjoying the scenery along with its flora and fauna ^[15], the question lies in the fact whether conservation can be effectively served along with the development of ecotourism.

VI. ANALYSIS

Low Impact Ecotourism can act as a solution for these challenges. It is supply driven as the control of tourism development is in the hands of the destination and its communities. It believes in locally managed camp sites with basic yet sustainable infrastructure. Without any modification in the environment, it seeks to provide recreational activities which are natural existing such as trail-walks, storytelling, stargazing, etc. It emphasizes on providing learning experiences regarding the local community, culture and heritage, values, conservation practices to the eco-tourists, thus having a worthwhile tourism experience. LIET assesses the long-term worth of cultural and natural resources when pricing tourism experiences. This type of tourism offers better control over the physical and environmental pollution. The local-level tourism puts restrictions on the growth restrictions of the eco-tourist sites to maintain effective controls on the socio-cultural carrying capacity of the existing local community ^[16].

Appropriate training and participation are main tenets in the LIET process. It stresses on the joint partnership of the local community, state and national governments, Non-Governmental Organizations for its functioning. Experts who have prior experience from similar tourism developments are to provide the necessary guidance and training to the people involved. This further allows the people to participate in the sustainable process and seem to invest more time, energy and resources whenever they are given the opportunity to exercise control over key decisions and thus are certain of reaping the benefits ^[17]

The key characteristics of LIET are as follows:

- It is managed by the local communities;
- It provides a quality travel product and memorable tourist experience;
- It values local culture and spreading knowledge about it;
- It emphasizes on proper training of the stakeholders;
- It depends on the use of natural and cultural resources sustainably;
- It also integrates development with conservation.

VII. FINDINGS AND RESULT

It was found out that small-scale, local-level tourism requires minimal capital, and also the payment directly is received by the provider without any intermediaries in between. LIET focuses on one-to-one interaction between the tourists and the service providers which promotes better communication. All these features of LIET make it suitable to be practiced for a state like Assam.

Low Impact ecotourism has many sustainable strategic benefits ^[18] for supply side of emerging destination like Assam while promoting its image along with satisfying experiences of tourists, visitors, travel writers, tour operators and researchers ^[19]. Its environmental assets, rich biological variability of the ecosystems can be used to attract tourism intermediaries, provided the traditional communities and the village level institutions (Gaonburhas,^[20] etc.), is empowered in preserving the ecology and manage the age old knowledge systems ^[20]. Traditionally, these institutions manage the natural resources and environment issues through their customary laws ^[21]. For assessing the direct impact of sustainable practices of responsible tourism, the economic activity needs to be balanced with social activity; aesthetic appeal has to be maintained; efforts on preserving ecological and cultural parameters; and collective effects of such activities contribute directly and indirectly to the biological diversity and life support system of ecology of the host destination ^[22].

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Some Steps that can be considered to provide low impact ecotourism in a state like Assam:



ISSN: 2350-0328

International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

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- A. Since, LIET is small-scale, local-level tourism, post covid 19, it requires that there are tourist groups consisting of only few tourists who have genuine interest of exploring these areas without putting any negative impact during their travel / stay.
- B. It can be feasible if a strategic approach is undertaken and partnerships among the key stakeholders are encouraged.
- C. The potential problem 'hotspots' within sensitive ecological spots needs to be identified and kept safe.
- D. There has to be proper monitoring stressing on visitors' compliance with the regulations and local practices.
- E. The patterns of impact on the key sites as indicators of increasing visitor flow needs to be identified and limited so that the carbon footprint is the least.
- F. A good conservation mechanism is very necessary to protect the wildlife and its resources of a place. But for this the tourists must have informed choices with regards to the impact arising from irresponsible human activities on the environment and hence knowledge sharing is also important.

IX. CONCLUSION

The pandemic, Covid 19 has resulted in awareness among humanity regarding the growing environmental concerns. People have realized that it plays a significant role for their survival and can never be free from its constraints.^[23] It is perhaps the values which the tourists' hold which will redirect the existing ecotourism towards having the least impact on the environment while being sustainable. Then, may be redefinition of ecotourism too can be possible according to the rapidly changing needs of the environment. The paper highlights the strength of Assam suitable for a high value low impact tourism destination in India. LIET can be a solution to most destinations in India post Covid-19 ; especially for all such places which have not been discovered by tourism but avoid the 'danger' due to mass tourism . Further studies can be taken up by future researchers in context with boosting low impact ecotourism in different regions having varied potential.

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