

Defining Eco/Agro Tourism-A study on initiatives and steps for sustainable approach in India

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Abstract: The development of a strong platform around the concept of eco/agro tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 74% of the population resides in its 7 million villages. Across the world the trends of industrialization and development have had an urban centric approach. So, the stresses of urban life have led to a “counter urbanization” syndrome. People from urban areas nowadays have shown keen interest towards experiencing the rural life. They want to meet farmers and the producers to discuss with them about what goes into food production and participate in various activities like buying vegetables directly from a farm stand, picking fruit, plucking tea leaves, riding bullock-carts, learning about wine making, paddy cultivation, making potteries, buying local and regional produce or hand-crafted items. Eco/agro tourism help to sustain communities encourage expansion of organic agriculture and provide an enchanting and authentic experience to the visitors. This paper describes the principles of eco/agro tourism and prioritizes the livelihood of those who stays in a rural part of a country, along with the process necessary for partnership between government/private firm and village communities. The benefits of eco/agro tourism are discussed as a way for rural communities to help economically and preserve their natural culture and heritage.

Ministry of Tourism in India has laid a great deal of emphasis on the development of such rural tourism which boasts of rich art, culture, handloom, heritage and crafts. The villages in India are affluent in both natural beauty and cultural splendour. This paper gives an overview on eco/agro tourism policy and the guidelines of Govt. of India and initiatives of Agri Tourism Development Company Pvt Ltd. (formerly Agri Tourism Development Corporation) that empowered the local community of the state. It also emphasizes processes and mechanisms to engage local communities in planning and managing tourism activities.

Keywords: Eco/agro tourism, Farmers, Communities, Rural, Culture, Program

INTRODUCTION:

Eco Tourism and Agro Tourism is an alternative approach to mass tourism. Eco/Agro tourism is a part of Sustainable Tourism. Eco Tourism as defined by Ceballos-Lascurain is “a tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas (Harish Bhatt & B.S.Badan,2006). Whereas Agro tourism is farm or ranch based activity that allows hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experience. It can be defined as “a set of activities that occur when people link travel with the products, services, and experiences of agriculture” (Romila Chawla, 2006).

Farmers and local communities have difficulties in earning good income because of the rural location, which does not give much job opportunities as an urban location gives. Farmers are usually dependent upon the agricultural production only which sometimes does not give much income due to various reasons like low technical facility, drought, flood etc. therefore tourism activities can be an add-on to their income. Agro tourism is one of the few activities which can provide a solution to these problems.

Agro tourism is the latest concept in the Indian tourism industry, which gives the opportunity to experience the warm and authentic attachment with the rural community. Agro tourism is one of the forms of rural tourism that allows tourists to spend leisure time by staying on a working farm. Farm owners in rural areas perform variety of activities that combine agriculture and tourism (Fennel & Weaver, 1997; Brandth & Haugen, 2011).

AGRO TOURISM FARM:

Agro tourism farms in India offer tours to allow a person to view the growing, harvesting and processing of locally grown food products such as paddy, corn, coconuts, sugarcane, tea, coffee, wine yard etc. Often the farmers provide a home-stay opportunity and general education on the working of the farms.

WAYS OF MANAGING AGRO TOURISM FARM:

Type of managing	Features of managing
Land Usage	Partial using for the agricultural production (crops and livestock) and rest for tourism (restaurant, farm shops etc.)
Structure of production	Farming activities serves agro-tourism; crop and

	livestock diversification; balanced development of the farm
Way of production	Production of agriculture is not a totally commercial basis; even enabling the tourists taking part in it
The level of production	Extensive production and protection of the environment; preferably organic farming; optimal usage of the agro tourism area
The market for products	Production inside farm for its own tourism purposes, over production sold on the market
Source of income and its meaning	Two sources of income: agricultural production and tourism; the meaning of tourism depends on its share in total income
Socio cultural	Need of using folk traditions, benefits to the community

Source: Rohana P Mahaliyanarachchi (Agri Tourism Farm & Farm Stay, 2015)

AGRO TOURISM BENEFITS:

Benefits of agro tourism can be categorized under three elements: i) Farmers, ii) Rural Communities & iii) Tour Operators

- i) Benefits for Farmers: Some of the benefits of agro tourism for farmers are: expansion of farm operations; promoting organic farming; using farm based product in new and innovative ways; developing new consumer market niches, increasing awareness of local agricultural products; increasing appreciation of the importance of maintaining agricultural land; channelling additional on farm revenues directly to family members; improving the farm living conditions; working areas and farm recreation opportunities; developing managerial and entrepreneurial skill; and increasing the long term sustainability for farm businesses.
- ii) Benefits for Communities: Agro tourism contributes a lot for the communities such as generating additional revenues for local businesses and services from tourists; Upgrading/revitalizing community facilities for residents and visitors; helping to preserve and sustain the local traditions, art and craft; promoting inter-regional, inter-cultural communication and understanding; and helping to diversify and strengthen rural economy via job and income creation.
- iii) Benefits for Tour Operator: Some of benefits of agro tourism for the tour operators are: diversifying the mix of tourism products and services available to visitors; increasing tourism flows into attractive rural regions; increasing season length during traditionally lean-peak business periods; and bring foreign currency to local business.

AGRI TOURISM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (ATDC) INITIATIVES FOR EMPOWERING THE AGRICULTURAL FAMILIES- A STUDY:

Agri Tourism Development Company Pvt Ltd. (formerly Agri Tourism Development Corporation) was established on 16th May 2004 in Maharashtra. Its main objectives are to develop and promote agricultural tourism (Agro Tourism), through ATDC's projects, training and support as potential vehicle for diversifying and stabilizing rural economics; creating jobs, increasing farming community income, providing a broader market base, opportunities for on-farm employment so they do not have to migrate to urban areas; Agro tourism income to improve their livelihoods, traditional forms of art and music in rural areas; and increasing awareness of local agricultural products, enhancing understanding of the importance of maintaining agricultural lands thereby strengthening the long term sustainability of small farms. The main activities include operating its Agri Tourism Centre along with encouraging more farmers to take up Agro Tourism, conducting training and research programmes. In 2007, ATDC launched Training and Skill development programs with Maharashtra State Agro Tourism Vistar Yojana, first 52 farmers were selected in Maharashtra for capacity building. This Agro Tourism model has been replicated in 328 Agro Tourism Centres across 30 districts in Maharashtra, which has helped to conserve, enhance the village environment, village traditions and culture, customs, village arts and handicrafts. The ATDC survey in 2014,2015,2016 shows that 0.4 million, 0.53 million, 0.7 million tourists have visited these centres respectively totally generating 35.79 million Indian rupees to farmer's family, generated jobs to women and youth in the rural communities. By seeing this we can say that ATDC allowed guests and hosts to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and experience through agro tourism. It created a win-win situation to farmers, communities and the tourists.

POLICIES/GUIDELINES OF MINISTRY OF TOURISM (RURAL TOURISM, GOI)

A set of policies establishing specific guideline and promoting eco/agro tourism the primary tourism product encourage the farmers and the local people to diversify their entrepreneurial portfolios through tourism. Ministry of Tourism (Rural Tourism, Govt. of India) has established rural tourism scheme, which focusses to promote village tourism as the primary tourism product to

spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural and its new geographic region activities like improving the environment, hygiene, infrastructure, etc. would be eligible for assistance. Financial assistance under the scheme: a maximum of Rs 50 lakhs would be sanctioned under this scheme. The permission activities under the scheme are listed below:-

- Improvement of the surroundings of the village. This would include activities like landscaping, development of parks, fencing, compound wall etc.
- Improvement of roads
- Illumination in the village
- Providing for improvement in solid waste management and sewerage management
- Construction of wayside amenities
- Procurement of equipment directly related to tourism, like Eco-friendly modes of transportation for moving within the tourism zone
- Refurbishment of the monuments
- Signage
- Reception
- Other work/activities directly related to tourism
- Tourist Accommodation

ECO TOURISM:

Ecotourism can be described as a low key, minimal impact; interpretative tourism where conservation, understanding, and appreciation of the environment and cultures visited is sought.

According to the **International Eco Tourism Society (TIES)**:

“Responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and which provides benefits to local communities while ensuring enriched experiences for visitors can be termed as eco-tourism.”

Eco Tourism is a part of sustainable tourism in which the local communities are benefitted as well as the destinations environmentally, culturally and economically.

Eco Tourism is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel.

Ecotourism includes four fundamental elements (Stephen Wearing & John Neil, 2009):-

- Notion of movement or travel restricted to relatively undisturbed or protected natural areas.
- Ecotourism is Nature based.
- Ecotourism is Conservation-led.
- It has an Educative Role.

PRINCIPLES OF ECO TOURISM:

- Adopt low-impact tourism that protects ecological integrity of wilderness areas, secures wildlife values of the destination and its surrounding areas.
- Highlight the heritage value of wilderness and protected areas.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Provide positive experience for both visitors and hosts.

- Provide livelihood, opportunities to local communities.
- Use indigenous, locally produced and ecologically sustainable materials for tourism activities.

Ecotourism, when properly executed based on these principles, exemplifies the benefits of socially and environmentally sound tourism development. (Brundtland Commission, 1987)

12TH FIVE YEAR PLAN (2012-2017), POLICY ON ECOTOURISM, MINISTRY OF TOURISM, GOVT. OF INDIA:

The development of ecotourism in many areas of the world clearly indicates that ecotourism has great potential in India because of the richness of its flora and fauna. Eco tourism in India has some great examples for sustainable development. These are seen in destinations such as Kerala where poachers became guides and have an alternative livelihood from eco-tourism. The hunters of the Blyth's pheasant in Nagaland who became bird watching guides are another example. Getting communities to benefits from snow leopard tracking in Ladakh and thus getting them to protect its habitat is another successful example. The efforts in the Chambal basin to convert former dacoits to become naturalists and guides following ecotourism principle have been a success. It is therefore necessary to implement eco-tourism in a planned and systematic manner to optimise its benefits. Following action has been recommended:

- i) The annual number of tourists must be regulated according to the carrying capacity of parks/hill resorts and other eco sensitive zones after proper assessment of the carrying of each region. The suggested sites for these studies are:
 - a) Mountains- trek to 1) sources of Ganga & Tapovan in Bhagirathii Valley & 2) Markha Valley trek and Stak Kangri trekking peak in Ladakh
 - b) National Parks- Corbett National Park, Bandhavgarh and Gir National Park
 - c) Deserts & Grasslands- Jaisalmer and the Sam Sand dunes, Talchaper and Rann of Kutch
 - d) Wetlands & Lakes- Chilika in Odisha, Tso Moriri in Ladakh and Vembanad in Kerala
 - e) Rivers- Along the Ghats of Varanasi
 - f) Destination Towns- Leh in Ladakh, Manali & Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, Yercaud & Ootacamund in Tamil Nadu and Gangtok in Sikkim
 - g) Islands- Andaman Islands-Havelock

These studies will help establish a Limit of Acceptable Change (LAC) across landscapes.
- ii) Tourism Impact Assessment must be made mandatory for any tourism project proposed to be undertaken in an ecotourism zone with central financial assistance.
- iii) Many of the country's pilgrim sites are located in sensitive eco-zones. Building and expansion activities in these should be controlled under the relevant acts, like the Forest Conservation Act 1980 and the Environment Protection Act 1986
- iv) State Government should be encouraged to evolve ecotourism policies and setup Ecotourism Boards to act as vehicles of eco-tourism policy deliverance.
- v) PPP (Public Private Partnership), as the model is currently, be upgraded to PPPP (People Public Private Partnership) model for tourism development in eco sensitive areas.
- vi) It is recommended that the gate receipts should flow back to the respective national parks and reserves in order to improve protection and to facilitate the upkeep of their ecology in original and pristine form.
- vii) Some reasonable portion of the revenue from tourism may be shared with local communities for common benefits- for instance, by creation of vocational facilities, community resources, and improved water & eco system services. Local communities should also benefit directly from tourism-through employment as naturalists/guides or in other tourism related activities, promotion of local crafts, cuisine, home stays and other vocations. 40% of employment in tourism establishments in ecotourism zones may be reserved for local communities.
- viii) Capacity building for ecotourism service providers, namely naturalists, forest guides, drivers, forest guards, etc. across the country on a regular basis will go a long way in promoting ecotourism.
- ix) National and International Travel Associations like TAAI, IATO, Eco Tourism Society of India, PATA, ASTA need to champion the cause of ecotourism. Seminars, Workshop and Conferences should be undertaken for stakeholders and NGOs to be involved in the process of local community/host community education and sensitization.
- x) Ecotourism goes beyond protected areas and sanctuaries. Promotion of such initiatives through adventure tourism in a sustainable manner must be encouraged, for ex., through educational institutions, school and adventure associations.

- xi) Evolving effective monitoring mechanism through involvement of agencies, both Government and Non-Government bodies, on development activities in and around eco-zones is crucial. Regular monitoring of tourism development in such zones should be undertaken. Funds should be provided for setting up and operation of such monitoring bodies.
- xii) For each ecotourism site, a site specific association, which acts as watchdog for the welfare of wildlife and conservation, with tourism forest officials, NGOs and representatives of local communities, takes up various issues related to the park, reserve or eco-region, and has a core group of volunteers that can help the forest department in crisis-i.e. firefighting, for conflict issues, capacity development and the like, should be set up.

GENERAL PRINCIPLE OF ECOTOURISM GUIDING THE INITIATIVES OF THE MINISTRY OF TOURISM

- The local community should be involved leading to the overall economic development of the area
- The likely conflicts between resource use for eco-tourism and the livelihood of local inhabitants should be identified and attempts made to minimize the same
- The type and scale of eco-tourism development should be compatible with the environment and socio-cultural characteristics of the local community
- It should be planned as a part of the overall area development strategy guided by an integrated land use plan avoiding inter-sectoral conflicts and ensuring sectoral integration, associated with commensurate expansion of public service

NEW ECO TOURISM POLICY, 2018

- Ministry of environment and forest has prepared an eco-tourism policy that will provide livelihood opportunities for the local communities as well as educate visitors and enhance their understanding of nature.
- Tourism policy proposes that “the members of local communities can be employed as nature and tourist guides for providing hospitality as ‘nature science interpreters’ and ‘patrol partner’ to protect nature.
- The policy also seeks to encourage home stead-based hospitality enterprises for enhancing local livelihood, which includes small scale entrepreneurs and operation of souvenir shops and equipment for hiring for photography.
- Establishing partnerships with all stakeholders to develop and promote nature tourism, bio diversity richness and heritage values of India’s wilderness, as well as adopting low impact nature tourism to ensure ecological integrity are some of the other objectivity of the policy
- Infrastructure Development should be designed in a manner that merges with the ambient environment. No permanent structures will be established in violation of the forest conservation act, 1980 and home stead hospitality should be encouraged.
- Conservation fee for development of local communities, human wildlife conflict management and conservation should be charged from the tourist.
- The rate of conservation fee should be based on the scale of tourism designed at each place.
- The policy has laid down a model to share revenue collected from the tourism activities. Local communities running eco-tourism facilities would be paid 40%, an equal share would be paid to maintain the tourism facilities while 10% each would be paid as incentive to local eco-development committee and as revenue to government.
- For coordination among state govt., district administration, local communities and eco-development committees, a local level committee has to be set up, according to the draft policy.
- Each state also has to establish an eco-tourism development board that will supervise eco-tourism modalities and oversee implementation of the policy

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

As in many other countries, eco/agro tourism in India is receiving increased recognition as a rural economic development vehicle. Eco/agro tourism is increasingly attracting many tourists and has shown a sustainable approach to preserve local culture, traditions, customs, crafts etc.

The revenue earned from agro tourism activities is an additional source of income for farmers and local people. Agri Tourism Development Company Pvt Ltd. (formerly Agri Tourism Development Corporation) played a vital role in empowering the agricultural families. The study shows that agro tourism can become a strong economic drive for rural development. Agro tourism activities lead to diversification of farms and of activities in rural areas which gives incentives to many farmers. But more awareness among hosts and guests is needed and private players like Agri Tourism Centre should start an aggressive marketing to promote Agro tourism.

Furthermore, the most important point of the paper is that the government has focussed on Eco tourism and prioritized it as a primary tourism. Planning Commission of India in its 12th Five Year Plan has established strategies and action plans for implementing ecotourism in a planned and systematic manner. Policies and guideline focussed on environmental issues and established sustainable approach to tourism. Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment and forest have established important policies and guidelines for inclusive growth as to uplift the community of rural areas.

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