Biolife AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF BIOLOGY & LIFE SCIENCES 2(4):1332-1338

ISSN (online): 2320-4257
www.biolifejournals.com

BIOLIFE RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prospects of ecotourism in Jeypore rainforest of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people. The present study is done to evaluate the prospect of Eco-tourism in the only rain forest of Assam named Jeypore Rainforest. The Jeypore Rainforest is spread over an area of 108.3 sq. km. in Dibrugarh District of Assam. The study reveals that the forest has great potential for the development of ecotourism. It has very rich biodiversity including various rare and endangered flora and fauna. The rainforest also has potential for development of jungle trekking, bird watching, elephant riding etc. The beautiful natural scenery of the forest also makes it a rich potential source for development of nature photography. Immense natural beauty & diverse biotic components of the reserve forest makes it a suitable site for picnic, educational tour and research. The diverse culture and lifestyle of the nearby indigenous people can attract a number of tourists. Another great attraction for tourists' is the Sitakunda Mela of Jeypore. Thus all the essential components of tourism are available in the forest and if properly utilized Jeypore Rainforest will surely turn into a major Eco-tourism site of North East India.

Key Words: Ecotourism, Jeypore Rainforest, Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

INTRODUCTION

Now a days 'Tourism' is a big industry & the key resource for the most popular tourist destinations are the natural environment, coastal areas, tropical rainforests, wildlife in national parks & so on. Among all these destinations, the rainforests attract the people the most for its beauty & rich biodiversity. Its beauty cannot be compared with other type of forests. They once covered 20% of the earth's land surface, but at present they occupy less than 7% area of earth's surface in the America, South East Asia and Africa (Richards, 1952; Whitemore, 1998).

Tourism as an industry is the largest in terms of revenue as well as employer in the world. Ecotourism is the latest trend among tourists today. Although ecotourism accounts for a merely 2-4% of the entire tourism industry, it is the fastest growing industry (KKHSOU).

According to International Ecotourism Society, "Ecotourism is a responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people" (TIES, 1990).This new form of "responsible travel" focuses on flora, fauna and culture. It is based on the principles of sustainable development.

India has spectacularly attractive natural and cultural tourist attraction. The geographical diversity of India makes it home to a wealth of ecosystem which are well protected and preserved. Although India has some of the best ecosystem in the world for tourist attraction but many of these are still unexplored. One of the best examples of such ecosystem is the Jeypore Rainforest of Assam. Keeping all these views in mind the present study is conducted in the rainforest to study the prospects of ecotourism in the Jeypore Rainforest.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected by visiting the rainforests and interviewing the local people of the forest. Secondary data are collected from different published and unpublished sources like books and journals, reports (both government and non government), written records of district and state offices. Different data are also collected from articles published in different newspapers and journals.

Study Area:

The Jeypore Rainforest is located in Dibrugarh District of Assam which is between $27^0 06^/$- $27^0 16^/$N and $95^0 21^/$- $95^0 29^/$ E(Figure 1). The total area of the study site is 108km^2 and it falls under the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hot spot. The forest is continuous with the forests of Arunachal Pradesh. The study site is under the Jeypore-Dehing landscape of Assam valley semi-evergreen rainforest (Champion & Seth, 1968).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the collected primary and secondary data it is clear that the Jeypore Rainforest promises an array of fun and adventure. There is every possibility to develop the Jeypore Rainforest to an ecotourism centre. Located just 75 km. from Dibrugarh town it is well connected by air, bus, train and private taxi. For accommodation Inspection Bunglow of Govt of Assam is available at Jeypore. Various resources of the rainforest which are sources of attraction for ecotourism can be developed into different activities which include (1) bird watching, (2) mammal watching (3) elephant riding (4) jungle trekking (5) rafting (6) camping inside the forest (7) nature photography (8) educational tour etc. All these activities and cultural attraction of the neighbouring areas are discussed bellow-

Bird Watching:

Jeypore along with five other protected areas form the Upper Dihing West Complex, an Important Bird Area (IBA) of eastern Assam, IBA Site No. IN-AS-45 (Islam and Rahmani, 2004). The presence of large number of species of birds is the main part of this rain forest. There are a total of 270 species of birds identified in the rainforest (Saikia *et al.*, 2011). It harbours 5 species of hornbills including the rarer Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus tickelli* and the Rufous-naked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* (Choudhury, 2000). It is also famous for the largest known population of the endangered White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata* (Choudhury, 1996, 1998). Some other birds found in this rainforest are Brown Fish Owl, Peacock Pheasant, the Lesser Adjutant stork, Long billed Vulture, Beautiful Nuthatch, Marsh Babbler, Tawny-breasted Wren Babbler, White-cheeked Hill Partridge, Oriental Darter and Painted Stork etc.

Mammal Watching:

About 40 mammals have been reported from this Jeypore rainforest. Some of the important species are Elephant, Himalayan Black Bear, Indian Wild Dog, Sambar, Indian Bison, Chinese Pangolin, etc. The most important points are (1) the rainforest harbours seven cat species which is the highest number in this country are tiger, leopard, clouded leopard, marble cat, jungle cat, golden cat, leopard and leopard cat.(2)The primate species of this rainforest are Hoolock gibbon, Slow loris, Capped langur, Pigtailed Macaque, Assamese Macaque, Rhesus Macaque and Stump tailed Macaque. Hoolock gibbons are the only ape species of India which are found in large no. in Jeypore, Upper Dihing and Dirak rain forests of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia Districts. These rainforests are still considered to be the richest primate habitats of India. Watching

primates in their wild habitat, their behaviour, jumping tricks from branch to branch is very enjoyable. 3) Large no. of elephants in herds are seen in this rainforest due to presence of Dibru-Deomali interstate elephant corridor in the middle of the Sanctuary. As there is no man elephant conflict, tourists can come and enjoy watching elephant in their wild habitat without any fear.

Elephant Riding:
Elephant riding is one of the most exciting activities and if it happens in rainforest like Jeypore, the enjoyment will be of different because the slow and silent movement of the elephant is very exciting to watch the varieties of plants, animals, birds and other creatures in their natural habitat. At the same time visitors will enjoy the natural beauty of the forest.

Figure-1 . The satellite map of Study area (Dibrugarh District of Assam-Red colour in map)

Jungle Trekking:
Jungle trekking gives immense happiness to the tourists. Now a days people have ultramodern life which reduces their activity to a great extent. So it will be refreshing and entertaining to trek in the natural environment. The highland of Jeypore Rainforest has several routes through which visitors can trek at any season and at any time throughout the year.

Rafting:
Rafting is a very exciting and adventure game among all the aquatic games. About 8 km waterway from Sukanjuri which meet the river Namsang at the border of the Arunachal Pradesh to the Nagaghat of Jeypore through the upstream of the river Buridihing is suitable for rafting. During the rainforest festival in 2001, many tourists took part in rafting in this route and passed a good comment on it.

Camp inside the Forest
The only way to enjoy the breeze of open air, a vast open sky and a silent peaceful environment is possible only in the deep forest. Many tourists want such an experience through jungle camping and if it happens in Jeypore rainforest then it will attract a lot of tourists to the rainforest.

Nature Photography:
Nature photographers always hunt for rare photography of the nature which is possible in the Jeypore rainforest. The great variety of plants and orchids and animals like mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, insects, butterflies, etc could be the resource for natural photography.

Educational Tour:
The main aim of the educational tour is to acquire knowledge. Educational tour to Wild life sanctuary, Bird sanctuary or National park gives not only the pleasure but also knowledge on wildlife and their habitat. Rainforests are believed to be living laboratories supporting multifaceted ecological, biological and evolutionary processes. Data can be collected from these areas for various research works which is very necessary in various aspects. As the Jeypore rainforest has a very rich biodiversity, researchers of advanced universities of the world have been doing research here. Now "Environmental Science" has been included as a compulsory subject in schools and colleges of our state. So, if the authorities of these institutes send their students for field study to these areas then they will be benefitted through their practical knowledge. At the same time local people will be aware of the importance of the rainforest which will keep them away from destructing it by various devastating activities like illegal trading of timber, hunting of wild animals and collecting forest products. Thus the visit of students and researchers will help the rainforest to become a tourist hot spot.

The Cultural Activities:
The neighbouring areas of the rainforest are inhabited by indigenous and tribal people such as Tai-Phake, Nakte, Sonowal Kachari, and tea tribes etc. who have their rich traditional culture. Besides this, Kamargaon of Ahom kings' days is near the Jeypore. Another village called Keduguri which is already famous for its about 500 years old "kendu" tree is only 2km away from the forest. A Manipuri village is also here where traditional flattened and popped rice is famous for them. All these people have their own language, traditional food habits, traditional culture, etc. which can attract people from all over the world.

Natures's Beckon, an NGO organized the rainforest festival at Jeypore for the first time in India in Nov' 2001 where many naturalists, journalists, tourists and other representatives from different parts of the world like Thailand, America, Indonesia, Bolivia, Australia and India had participated. In this festival along with the seminar and cultural programme, activities like trekking, rafting, bird watching, etc. were also organized. All the participants opined that the rainforest has all the potentials to become an ecotourism centre.

Sitakund:
Sitakund is approximately 1 km.east from Jeypore at the bank of the river Buridihing on the opposite side of the Jeypore. It has very beautiful natural scenario and can be termed as

Umananda of upper Assam. The highland has named Sitakunda by the name of wife of Ramdev Thakur who was the owner of Oauguri Satra established at Jeypore at the time of Ahom Sargadeo Lakshmi Singha. Deities from various places come here at the "Makar Sankranti" (uruka of Magh Bihu) to take holy bath. The deities mainly the Nepalis people enjoy the whole night by singing and dancing which changes the whole area into a festive mood. So, Sitakunda festival or mela can be another attractive event to the tourists.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the Jeypore Rainforest has a rich potential for development of ecotourism. Expansion of ecotourism in the Jeypore Rainforest will lead to:

1. Employment of local people which is a perceived need to increase and diversify the sources of income at the community level to help arrest migration and reduce dependences on the government. There is rising unemployment among the educated person which poses a serious threat to the social, political and economic stability of the state (Ray and Baishya, 1998). Development of ecotourism will employ a number of local people in hotels, airline services, travel services, making handicrafts, undertaking cultural activities and other tourism related tasks.
2. Conservation of Biological diversity and cultural diversity.
3. Promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity by providing jobs to local people.
4. Increase of revenue for the Government
5. Improvement of transportation facilities.
6. Decrease of unwanted situations like insurgency.
7. Development of nearby areas such as Namrup, Naharkatia Duliajan, Bhadoi PanchAli etc

RECOMMENDATION

Here an attempt is made to elaborate some recommendation to develop Joypur Rainforest to an ecotourism centre:

(1) Standardized Accommodation Facilities: The Forest Department of Assam has an Inspection Bungalow at Jeypore which has capacity for only 6 persons at a time. So, both Govt. and private sector may come forward for providing standardized accommodation facilities. For different income group of people different type of accommodation facilities such as star hotels, low rate hotels, dormitories may be constructed.

(2) Transportation: The rich tourists require luxurious safaris. Air Conditioned cars that may be provided at the entrepreneur level. For middle- income group of tourists transportation at reasonable rate can also be provided by individual entrepreneurs.

(**3) Mass Communication**:
Establishment of modern communication system such as E-mail, fax, post & Telegraph etc will attract tourists.

(4) **Entertainment Business**:
Providing cultural programme of local communities, playing centres, gymnasium centres and other entertainment amenities as per demand of the tourists and tourism industry can attract people.

(5) **Dietary section:** Standardized dietary section where various dishes of local communities and different countries may be prepared and offered. This will make the tourists satisfied and comfortable during their stay in the tourist spot.

(6**) Market complex**:
Marketing of local and regional products can be done by energetic and young entrepreneurs which comprises of selling of Souvenirs, Handicraft and Handloom products and so on.

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7247280
Received: 11 October 2014;
Accepted; 27 November 2014;
Available online : 16 December 2014