



UNVEILING THE ECOTOURISM GEMS OF MANIPUR

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Abstract: Nestled in the picturesque landscapes of northeastern India, Manipur stands as a hidden gem, blessed with breathtaking natural beauty and a vibrant tapestry of indigenous cultures. This paper delves into the untapped potential of ecotourism as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth in Manipur. Through qualitative research methods, including literature review and realworld case studies, this study sheds light on the ecological, sociocultural, and economic aspects of ecotourism in the region. It underscores the significance of community participation, infrastructural development, conservation efforts, and effective marketing strategies in realizing the benefits of ecotourism. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts between government bodies, local communities, and private enterprises to ensure the success and longevity of ecotourism initiatives. By adopting a holistic and inclusive approach, Manipur can harness the transformative power of ecotourism to safeguard its biodiversity, preserve indigenous heritage, create sustainable livelihoods, and uplift the wellbeing of its people.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Manipur, Sustainable Development, Biodiversity Conservation, Community Participation, Indigenous Culture, Economic Growth, Infrastructural Development, Collaborative Partnerships.

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology serves as a roadmap for navigating the research inquiry. It outlines the research framework utilized for the current study. The review draws upon both primary and secondary sources of information, including articles, magazines, papers, and various other resources.

II. OBJECTIVES

- i. To assess the knowledge and strategies taken by the tourism department of Manipur towards the Ecotourism hotspots.
- ii. To identify the various issues, problems and concerns related to development of ecotourism in Manipur.
- iii. To know more about the scope of growth of Ecotourism in Manipur.

III. INTRODUCTION

Manipur truly shines with its rich heritage, vibrant culture, and stunning natural beauty. It's not just another state; it's a treasure trove waiting to be discovered. Pictureperfect landmarks like Loktak Lake stand as testament to the state's charm and allure¹.

There's something magical about Manipur that calls out to explorers and travelers alike. Its wildlife is a marvel to behold, with the endangered Sangai deer proudly roaming in places like the Keibul Lamjao National Park, also fondly known as the Floating Lake National Park² (UNESCO: Permanent Delegation of India, 2016).

Even though Manipur might be small in size, it packs a punch with its breathtaking landscapes, lush valleys, and enchanting hills painted in hues of blue. And let's not forget its deeprooted cultural heritage, which adds another layer of fascination to this already captivating place (Pisharoty, 2023).

By shining a spotlight on its natural ecotourism sites, Manipur can undoubtedly elevate its status as a mustvisit destination for travelers seeking authentic experiences and breathtaking scenery³.

Ecotourism in Manipur isn't just about sightseeing; it's about immersing oneself in the heart of nature while preserving its essence. Whether it's trekking through dense forests or birdwatching in serene sanctuaries, Manipur offers a tapestry of experiences for nature lovers.

What sets ecotourism in Manipur apart is its commitment to sustainability. Every tourist activity is designed to minimize harm to the environment and maximize benefits for local communities. It's about forging a deeper bond between visitors and the natural world, all while safeguarding the region's biodiversity and cultural heritage⁴.

Embracing ecotourism isn't just about attracting more visitors; it's about uplifting local communities. By involving them in tourism initiatives (Bhattacharya D, 2011), Manipur can create avenues for economic growth and empowerment. Through responsible practices and community involvement, Manipur can carve a niche for itself as a premier ecotourism destination, drawing travelers seeking genuine experiences while safeguarding its natural and cultural treasures for generations to come (Ecotourism: An Introduction, 1999).

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Manipur, nestled in the northeastern region of India, is a treasure trove of natural beauty and cultural diversity, making it an enticing destination for ecotourism enthusiasts. Surrounded by the majestic Eastern Himalayas, the state offers a unique fusion of verdant landscapes, rich biodiversity, and ageold traditions, attracting travelers in search of genuine and ecofriendly experiences (Chaudhury, Sarkar, & Patra, 2013).

Among Manipur's many captivating attractions, Loktak Lake stands out as a jewel. Not only is it Northeast India's largest freshwater lake, but it also boasts the distinction of being home to the world's only floating national park, Keibul Lamjao. Here, visitors can marvel at the beauty of the lake while spotting the rare Sangai deer and immersing themselves in a wetland ecosystem found nowhere else (UNESCO: Permanent Delegation of India, 2016).

¹ <https://manipur tourism.gov.in/aboutus/>

² <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6086/>

³ <https://blog.mygov.in/thethreewondersofmanipur/>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375497799_ECOTOURISM_POLICY_OF_MANIPUR_2023

The lush hills of Manipur beckon adventurers with their winding trails through dense forests teeming with diverse plant life⁵. For those seeking breathtaking views and a glimpse of the exclusive Shirui Lily, Shirui Kashong Peak offers an unparalleled experience that's quintessentially Manipuri⁶ (Meitei, 2023).

What truly sets Manipur's approach to ecotourism apart is its emphasis on sustainability⁷. Local communities actively engage in efforts to preserve their environment and heritage, offering travelers the opportunity to stay in homestays and immerse themselves in the authentic culture of Manipur (Alam, 2019)⁸.

The bond between tourism and the local community in Manipur is special. It's not just about sightseeing; it's about understanding and respecting the environment and culture that make Manipur unique⁹ (WTO.Sustainable Development of Ecotourism: A Compilation of Good Practices in SMEs, 2003).

When travelers explore ecotourism in Manipur, they're encouraged to be mindful of their impact. It's about walking gently¹⁰, leaving behind nothing but footprints and taking away memories that last a lifetime. By embracing this approach, visitors play a vital role in preserving Manipur's natural beauty and cultural heritage for generations to come (Mehrotra & Chaudhury, 2023).

V. PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM IN MANIPUR

The potential for ecotourism in Manipur is truly exciting, offering a myriad of opportunities for the state's economic growth¹¹. Here are some key factors that highlight why ecotourism in Manipur holds such promise:

- a. Rich Biodiversity:** Manipur is blessed with an incredible array of plant and animal species. The presence of endangered animals like the Sangai deer and the unique Loktak Lake, with its floating Phumdis, makes it a haven for nature lovers.
- b. Scenic Landscapes:** The landscapes of Manipur are like something out of a postcard, with rolling hills, serene valleys, and crystalclear lakes that provide breathtaking views. These natural wonders offer endless possibilities for outdoor activities like hiking, birdwatching, and boating.
- c. Cultural Heritage:** The indigenous communities of Manipur have a rich cultural heritage, with traditional dances, festivals, and crafts that are deeply intertwined with the land. Ecotourism allows visitors to immerse themselves in these vibrant cultures, fostering appreciation and understanding.¹²
- d. Unexplored Territory:** Despite its beauty, many parts of Manipur remain undiscovered by tourists, offering a sense of tranquility and adventure for those willing to explore off the beaten path.
- e. Economic Benefits:** Ecotourism has the potential to provide a significant boost to Manipur's economy by creating jobs, encouraging entrepreneurship, and generating revenue from tourismrelated activities.

⁵ <https://manipur tourism.gov.in/shiruililyfestival/>

⁶ <https://medium.com/@TheAdventuresOfNando/trekkinginmanipurshiruipeake4f46d4a8a48>

⁷ <https://lonelyindia.wordpress.com/2017/02/21/thestoryofsiroililymanipurtherarestplantinworld>

⁸ <https://epao.net/GP.asp?src=21..130415.apr15>

⁹ <https://liamtra.com/blog/shiruiakashonganditsbejewelledshiruilily/>

¹⁰ <https://www.businessinsider.in/travel/india/exploringimphalajourneythroughtheenchancingcapitalofmanipur/art icleshow/104795987.cms>

¹¹ <https://www.imphaltimes.com/articles/ecotourismandmanipur/#:~:text=Manipur%2C%20the%20land%20of% 20jewel,ethnic%20heritage%20because%20of%20its>

¹² <https://imphalwest.nic.in/cultureheritage/>

f. Conservation: By promoting responsible tourism practices, ecotourism can also contribute to the conservation of Manipur's natural environment and endangered species, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

g. Infrastructure Development: There is ample opportunity for the development of ecofriendly accommodations, hiking trails, and visitor centers, which can enhance the overall tourism experience while minimizing environmental impact.

h. Adventure Tourism: Manipur's rugged terrain and diverse landscapes offer opportunities for adventure activities such as trekking, camping, and water sports, attracting adventure seekers.

i. Sustainable Development: Promoting ecotourism encourages a sustainable approach to tourism, emphasizing environmental responsibility and cultural sensitivity, ensuring the longterm preservation of natural and cultural resources.

Despite its immense potential, ecotourism in Manipur faces several challenges. These challenges include the need for improved infrastructure, environmental conservation, and managing the impact of tourism on local communities. To fully realize its potential, it is crucial to embrace sustainable practices, invest in infrastructure development, and promote responsible tourism. By addressing these challenges and harnessing its unique offerings, Manipur can emerge as a soughtafter ecotourism destination in India (Chaudhury S. a., 2023).

V.GROWTH OF ECOTOURISM IN MANIPUR

Ecotourism has become a worldwide trend, emphasizing the importance of preserving nature and involving local communities. In India, the term "EcoTourism" was coined in 1983 by Hector Ceballos Lascurian, with a focus on exploring natural areas while learning about conservation. Manipur, despite its small size, has also embraced ecotourism as a means of sustainable development (Ranjith, 2014).

The Tourism Department of Manipur has been instrumental in promoting ecotourism, working to develop ecofriendly tourist spots and infrastructure while adhering to national tourism policies. By following the National Tourism Policy and taking a comprehensive approach, Manipur aims to tap into the potential of ecotourism for economic growth while preserving its unique natural and cultural heritage.

Looking ahead, it's crucial for Manipur to continue its efforts in sustainable tourism, ensuring that economic gains don't come at the expense of the environment or local communities. By doing so, Manipur can establish itself as a premier ecotourism destination, offering authentic experiences while protecting its fragile ecosystems for future generations.

VI.CURRENT SCENARIO OF TOURISM IN MANIPUR

Manipur is blessed with enchanting attractions like the majestic Loktak Lake, the unique floating KeibulLamjao National Park home to the Sangai Deer, and the mesmerizing Dzukou Lilies. Alongside these natural wonders, the state boasts picturesque limestone caves, verdant green hills, meandering streams, and diverse flora and fauna, all complemented by its rich arts, culture, and traditions. It's truly a paradise waiting to be explored, offering an enthralling experience for travelers.

Immersing oneself in Manipur's cultural heritage reveals the beauty of traditional dance forms like RaasLeela and PungCholom, as well as the intricate handloom and handicrafts. The tantalizing cuisine, diverse ethnic communities, and soothing local music further enrich the visitor's experience. Additionally, witnessing indigenous sports like Polo, Yubi Lakpi, and ThangTa adds an element of excitement and adventure to the journey.

Despite its immense tourism potential, Manipur has faced challenges in its development. Issues like restricted entry regulations, infrastructural deficiencies, and occasional disruptions due to unrest have hindered its growth. However, recent improvements in accessibility, infrastructure, and security paint a promising picture for the state's tourism sector.

With strategic initiatives such as the development of tourist circuits, adventure tourism promotion, and participation in national and international events, Manipur is poised to emerge as a preferred tourist destination. By prioritizing infrastructure development, cultural preservation, and human resource enhancement, the state aims to unlock its full tourism potential, generating employment opportunities and economic benefits for its residents.

VII.SWOT ANALYSIS

When assessing Manipur's tourism offerings, it's evident that despite its abundance of natural, religious, cultural, and adventure attractions, the tourism sector has not flourished as expected. One major reason for this is the lack of a conducive environment for tourism to thrive in the state. This environment encompasses several factors:

- **Infrastructure:** There is a need for proper infrastructure, including transportation facilities, affordable accommodation options, and information centers, to cater to the needs of tourists effectively.
- **Amenities:** Wayside facilities and amenities play a crucial role in enhancing the tourist experience, but they are lacking in Manipur.
- **Product Status:** The perception and status of Manipur's tourism products need improvement to attract new visitors and encourage repeat visits.

Despite these challenges, Manipur holds immense potential, especially in terms of its historical sites and landmarks like Kangla, which served as the state's ancient capital and remains a significant archaeological destination. The cultural richness of Manipur is evident in its traditional dance forms, such as Raas Leela, and the vibrant celebrations like Yaoshang, which mark the festivities every year.

Moreover, Manipur's diverse landscape and water bodies offer opportunities for various outdoor activities, including trekking along scenic routes and enjoying the tranquility of Loktak Lake. Adventure enthusiasts can also indulge in sports like boating, parasailing, and fishing, adding to the state's allure as a destination for nature lovers and thrillseekers alike.

While challenges persist, concerted efforts to address infrastructure gaps and enhance the overall tourism experience can pave the way for Manipur to realize its full potential as a premier tourist destination, offering a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, natural beauty, and adventure opportunities.

| Strengths | Weaknesses | Opportunities | Threats |
|--|--|--|---|
| Manipuri dance forms provide a rich cultural experience | Perception of security issues may deter tourists | Border towns like Moreh offer potential for new markets | Security concerns may negatively impact tourism |
| Unique natural attractions such as Loktak Lake, Shirui Hills, and Dzuko Valley | Lack of quality infrastructure, especially roads | Improved regional connectivity through highways and railways | Climate uncertainty could discourage tourism investment |
| - Historical landmarks like Kangla Fort and Keibul Lamjao National Park | | Inter-state collaboration for tourism development | Eco-zone exploitation may lead to environmental degradation |

This table provides a concise overview of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Manipur's tourism industry.

VIII. INITIATIVES TAKEN UP BY THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM, GOVERNMENT OF MANIPUR

To enhance eco-tourism in Manipur, several measures can be implemented in a thoughtful and community-focused manner:

- a. Identification of Potential Eco-Tourism Zones:** Utilizing remote sensing and GIS technology, potential eco-tourism destinations should be identified and designated. Additionally, the use of polythene should be restricted in these zones to minimize environmental impact.
- b. Development of Eco-Tourism Strategy:** A comprehensive eco-tourism strategy should be formulated, involving a collaborative approach with relevant departments such as the Forest Department, Department of Environment, and Loktak Development Authority. This strategy should include regulations for tourism activities around Keibul Lamjao National Park and Loktak Lake to ensure their preservation.
- c. Collaboration for Infrastructure Development:** Close coordination with various departments should be maintained to provide necessary infrastructure and facilities for visitors in public parks, Loktak Lake, and wildlife sanctuaries. This collaboration will ensure visitor satisfaction while promoting conservation efforts.
- d. Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing:** Engagement with local communities is essential to ensure the fair distribution of benefits and upliftment of the local population. Destinations like Dzukou Valley, Tamenglong, and others should involve local communities in decision-making processes to promote economic upliftment and equitable distribution of benefits.
- e. Establishment of Nature Interpretation Centers:** Nature interpretation centers, nature camps, bird-watching programs, and nature tour initiatives should be established to provide educational experiences for visitors and promote environmental awareness.
- f. Training Programs for Guides and Naturalists:** Training programs should be conducted to educate and empower eco-tourism guides and naturalists. These individuals play a crucial role in providing visitors with enriching experiences while ensuring the preservation of natural habitats and wildlife.

VII. CHALLENGES

- a. Loss of Forests and Wildlife:** The ongoing degradation of forest cover and wildlife habitats poses a significant threat to the state's biodiversity and ecological balance. This affects not only the flora and fauna but also the livelihoods of indigenous communities dependent on forest resources.
- b. Water Resource Depletion:** The depletion and pollution of water resources, including rivers and lakes, jeopardize the availability of clean water for both human consumption and agricultural activities. This poses a threat to the overall well-being of the population and the sustainability of agricultural practices.
- c. Impact of Climate Change:** Manipur is experiencing changing climatic patterns, leading to unpredictable weather conditions, altered rainfall patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events like floods and droughts. These changes have profound implications for agriculture, water management, and disaster preparedness.
- d. Demographic Shift and Urbanization:** Rapid urbanization and demographic changes are putting pressure on land use patterns, infrastructure, and social services. This urban sprawl not only strains resources but also challenges traditional livelihoods and cultural practices.
- e. Vulnerability of Agriculture and Livelihoods:** The agricultural sector, which is a primary source of livelihood for a significant portion of the population, faces various challenges, including land degradation, water scarcity, pest infestations, and market volatility. These factors threaten food security and economic stability for rural communities.
- f. Geopolitical and Law Enforcement Challenges:** Manipur's proximity to sensitive geopolitical areas and internal security issues pose challenges to governance, law enforcement, and economic development. Political unrest, insurgency, and border disputes hinder socio-economic progress and investment opportunities.
- g. Coordination among Government Institutions:** Effective governance requires seamless coordination and collaboration among various government departments and organizations. However, bureaucratic hurdles, inefficiencies, and lack of synergy often impede the implementation of development initiatives and policies.

VIII. FUTURE OF ECOTOURISM IN MANIPUR

Ecotourism holds significant potential in Manipur, offering a pathway for the conservation of its natural, ecological, and cultural assets. However, its success depends on comprehensive planning and inclusive approaches. Collaboration with neighboring states and countries can amplify the promotion of ecotourism in the region, involving communities at both micro and macro levels through community-based organizations, NGOs, and governmental partners.

For ecotourism to thrive, institutional interventions from both state and local governments are crucial. This includes initiatives for technical innovations, investment facilitation, policy adjustments, and stakeholder engagement. Scaling up ecotourism or agroforestry-based tourism can create employment opportunities, particularly in managing non-timber forest products, wildlife conservation, and indigenous knowledge preservation.

Developing eco-friendly infrastructure such as eco-towns, parks, camps, and biodiversity reserves can enhance the tourism experience while contributing to conservation efforts. These initiatives promote the preservation of biodiversity, natural resources, and the socio-economic integrity of Manipur.

By prioritizing sustainable development and conservation goals, Manipur can emerge as a leading ecotourism destination in the region, fostering economic growth while safeguarding its ecological and cultural heritage for future generations.

IX. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The tourism potential of Manipur is evident in its nature-based, cultural, historical, and pilgrimage tourism offerings. The state's breathtaking natural landscapes have earned it the title of "Switzerland of the East," as recognized by former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. With its diverse flora and fauna, pleasant climate, and vibrant culture, Manipur presents a rich tapestry of experiences for visitors.

Cultural elements such as theater, dance, and festivals serve as major attractions, drawing a significant number of tourists each year. However, there's a need to focus on branding and positioning Manipur as a unique tourist destination. Currently, branding efforts are lacking, and there's a missed opportunity to showcase the state's distinct cultural heritage and historical significance to a global audience.

Creating a strong brand identity for Manipur in alignment with its unique cultural and historical attributes is essential. This branding should highlight the state's relevance, competitiveness, strategic location, and economic potential. To this end, the government has introduced the theme "Gateway to South-East Asia" to promote tourism in Manipur, aiming to position it as a key tourist hub in the region.

By emphasizing Manipur's cultural richness, historical significance, and strategic importance, stakeholders can unlock its tourism potential and create value not only for travelers but also for various tourism-related sectors within the state.

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