

Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism in the North-East: Pathways, Prospect, and Policy Challenges

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Abstract:

Sustainable tourism and ecotourism have become important approaches for promoting economic development while conserving natural and cultural resources. The North-East region of India, known for its rich biodiversity, scenic landscapes, and diverse indigenous cultures, possesses significant potential for the development of sustainable tourism. The region's national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, hills, rivers, and traditional lifestyles provide unique opportunities for ecotourism that can support livelihood generation and regional development. However, the growth of tourism in the North-East is constrained by several challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, poor connectivity, environmental degradation, and limited policy coordination. Unregulated tourism activities may also threaten fragile ecosystems and local cultural heritage. This paper examines the pathways, prospects, and policy challenges of sustainable tourism and ecotourism in the North-East region. Based on secondary sources and existing literature, the study highlights the importance of community participation, effective policy frameworks, and environmentally responsible tourism practices for ensuring sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, Pathways, Prospects and Policy Challenges.

1. Introductions:

The Concept of tourism and ecotourism are defined in different ways. These two concepts are interlinked to each other. There are various definition or explanations of tourism. Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes (UNWTO, 1995, *Recommendations on Tourism Statistics*).

Simultaneously, according to Mathieson and Wall (1982) tourism is “the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay, and the facilities created to cater to their needs.”

Sustainable tourism has become an important concept in tourism studies as it emphasizes the balanced development of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism refers to tourism that considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of visitors, industry, the environment, and host communities.

On the other hand, Ecotourism is comprehensive form of tourism that focused on nature, conservation and local communities. The most popular definition on ecotourism is given by The International Ecotourism

Society (TIES). According to TIES it is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education. Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) has explained that Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features), that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

The northeastern region of India comprises of eight states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. The NE region is most culturally rich and ecologically diverse areas. With its pristine landscapes, unique tribal cultures, and abundant biodiversity, the region holds enormous potential for tourism and, increasingly, for ecotourism. Recognizing this potential, governments, communities, and businesses are turning tourism into a key driver of sustainable economic development.

In recent years, tourism and ecotourism have become as a complementary and in many respects, transformative approach to destination development in the north-east. Emphasizing responsible travel to natural areas, ecological preservation, and meaningful engagement with indigenous communities, ecotourism offers a pathway to balance economic development with stewardship. These changes regulate with global priorities such as sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and inclusive growth, while responding to local aspirations for livelihood enhancement and cultural preservation.

2. Review of literature:

Richard Buckley (2012) argued that sustainable tourism research focuses on minimizing environmental degradation while ensuring long-term economic benefits for local communities.

Similarly, Jarkko Saarinen (2006) explained that sustainable tourism involves responsible management of natural resources and community participation in tourism development.

Katarina Kuščer (2024) noted that effective tourism policies, stakeholder participation, proper planning is needed for sustainable tourism development. In addition, studies highlight that sustainable tourism supports biodiversity conservation, cultural preservation, and local employment generation.

Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) explained ecotourism as visit to natural areas which consists of friendly environment and maintain local well-being. He also emphasized in conservation, interpretation, and local involvement, and these are related to biodiversity-rich regions like NER.

Honey (2018) in his article found seven principles of authentic ecotourism, including minimizing impact, building environmental awareness, and delivering financial benefits to local people. Her model supports community-based tourism approaches suitable for tribal regions of North-East India.

Das (2011) has analysed the tourism prospects in North-east India in his article. He has emphasized the natural and cultural heritage in the local region. However, he has also discussed about the key constraints and thus suggested some integrated planning and public-private partnership.

Saikia (2012) examined prospect for development of eco-tourism in Assam and also discussed importance of community participation for sustainability. The study focussed on capacity building, skill development, and equitable benefit-sharing to ensure long-term viability.

Barbhuiya (2014) in his study has empathized on sustainable ecotourism for balanced economic growth with environmental conservation. The study also emphasised against mass tourism and advocated eco-friendly infrastructure and community-based model.

Barman and Goswami (2016) in their paper discussed how ecotourism is important for rural livelihood diversification in forest fringe villages. The author also emphasised on contribution of ecotourism in employment generation for youth and women.

Nath and Dutta (2018) have analysed ecotourism in reserved areas and discussed on the need of conservation management, carrying capacity assessment, and environmental education.

Ministry of tourism (2022) emphasized sustainability, stakeholder consultation, biodiversity conservation, and community benefit-sharing. it suggested ecotourism management plans aligned with forest and environmental laws.

3. Methodology:

The present study is based exclusively on secondary data analysis and adopts a descriptive-cum-analytical research design.

The study systematically reviews existing literature, government reports, policy documents, and statistical databases to analyse the growth trajectory, potential prospects, and policy challenges of tourism and ecotourism in North-East India.

4. Objectives:

- To analyse the growth trends and current status of tourism and ecotourism in North-East India.
- To assess pathways and prospect sustainable tourism and ecotourism development in the region.
- To identify challenges that affecting sustainable tourism development in the region and policy measures for promoting inclusive and environment friendly ecotourism in north-east India.

5. Discussion:

5.1 Growth Trends of Tourism in North-east India:

5.1.1 Long-Term Growth (2000-2019):

The tourism sector of North-east India has been achieving fast growth over the last two decades. The domestic tourists have been increased over the years from about 3.13 million in 2003 to around 95 million in 2019 which is reflecting strong expansion and growth interest in the region's natural and cultural attraction. This growth was driven by some factors such as improved road and air connectivity, government initiatives towards promotion of tourism such as "Incredible India", rising domestic travel demand, increasing awareness on ecotourism and adventure tourism and providing them security during visit, etc.

5.1.2 Pandemic Shock and Post-Pandemic Recovery:

During the pandemic period (2020-2021) tourism has major shock like rest of the country which declined tourists visit due to travel restriction. However, tourism sector has shown fast recovery in las two decades. The following table clearly indicates the trend of tourist visits pre- and post-pandemic period.

Table1: Domestic Tourist Visits

Year	Domestic Tourist Visits (in Lakh) (Approx.)	Trend
2014	70	Growing tourism sector
2019	95	Pre-pandemic peak
2022	118	Post-pandemic recovery

2023	125	Continued growth
2024	127.8	Moderate growth

Source: Ministry of Tourism, India.

It is seen that arrival of Tourists has increased significantly after the pandemic, surpassing pre-COVID levels by 2022. In 2024, the eight North-Eastern states collectively hosted about 12.78 million domestic tourists and around 0.244 million foreign tourists, showing moderate annual growth.

5.1.3 Growth in Individual States:

Amongst the eight states. Some states have emerged as major tourism hubs in the region. As for example the Assam have emerged tourists' arrival after the Pandemic period. The following table shows tourists arrivals in Assam. It shows large fluctuations but significant growth.

Table2: Tourists Arrivals in Assam

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists
2019–20	5,146,307	18,594
2020–21	1,351,690	347
2021–22	1,701,701	1,231
2022–23	9,812,195	18,946
2023–24	7,041,206	26,129

Source: Assam Tourism Development Corporation.

The above table clearly indicates that the tourism has increased significantly after the end of pandemic in Assam and able to attract more foreign tourists in the region. The states like Assam, Meghalaya and Sikkim have succeeded to attract more tourists while Nalgand, Mizoram and Manipur failed to attract more due to communication constraints.

5.2 Current Status of North-east India Tourism:

The arrival of tourists in North-east India has increased significantly. Despite these growths the region has managed to contribute for a very small share in the tourism sector of India.

It is found that 0.43 % of India's domestic tourist visits and 1.17% of foreign tourists visits in that region which indicates the underutilized tourism potential of the region.

5.2.1 Infrastructural and Connectivity development:

Improvement in the connectivity and infrastructure has been gradually transforming tourism sector in the region. There have been major developments taken place which includes:

- Operational airports have been increased from 9 (2013) to 19 (2024)
- Expansion in the railway connectivity and road networks
- Improvement in the hotel business and investments in hospitality

Moreover, expansion in those developments have increased passenger traffic and tourist accessibility.

5.2.2 Emerging Tourism Segments:

Diversification of tourism sector in North-east India can be classified in to various segments:

Wildlife Tourism:

- Kaziranga National Park

- Manas National Park
- Namdapha National Park

Adventure Tourism:

- Trekking in Arunachal Pradesh
- River rafting in Siang and Subansiri
- Caving in Meghalaya

Cultural Tourism:

- Hornbill Festival (Nagaland)
- Ziro Music Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)
- Cherry Blossom Festival (Meghalaya)

Spiritual Tourism:

- Kamakhya Temple (Assam)
- Tawang Monastery (Arunachal Pradesh)

These diversified segments of tourism have helped to increase the inflows of tourists in the region in last two decades

5.3 Pathways for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism Development:**5.3.1 Community-Based Tourism Development:**

Community-based tourism is one of the best and effective pathways which help local communities to participate actively in respect of tourism planning, management, and benefit-sharing. Key aspects of that development include:

- Homestay tourism in rural and tribal areas
- Local guides and cultural interpreters
- Community-managed eco-lodges and camps

These models enable local communities to earn from tourism while preserving their identity, culture and lifestyle. This involvement also strengthens environmental conservation because local people become stakeholders in protecting forests, wildlife, and ecosystems.

5.3.2 Development of Eco-Tourism Circuits:

The creation of integrated tourism circuits is another major pathway. Government agencies have identified several tourism circuits to assist sustainable visit across multiple destinations.

For example:

- Wildlife circuits (Kaziranga–Manas–Nameri)
- Cultural circuits (Majuli–Ziro–Hornbill Festival)
- Spiritual circuits (Kamakhya–Tawang–Unakoti)

The Ministry of Tourism has implemented the Swadesh Darshan scheme, which has been revamped as Swadesh Darshan 2.0, focusing on developing responsible and sustainable tourism destinations with better infrastructure and visitor experiences.

5.3.3 Infrastructural development and Connectivity Improvement:

Improved infrastructure and connectivity play a pivotal role in sustainable development. The major initiatives include:

- Expansion of airports and heliports
- Development of highways such as the Trans-Arunachal Highway
- Railway expansion in Assam, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh

- Construction of the Sela Tunnel and other strategic roads.

These developments are significantly improving accessibility and facilitating tourist movement in the region. However, these developments must be guided by eco-friendly planning to minimize environmental degradation.

5.3.4 Promotion of Green and Responsible Tourism Practices:

Sustainable tourism depends on environment friendly practices such as:

- Waste management in tourist sites
- Renewable energy use in eco-lodges
- Restricting tourist numbers in fragile ecosystems
- Promoting low-impact activities such as trekking, birdwatching, and nature trails.

These practices will enable to conserve biodiversity and reduce the ecological footprint of tourism.

5.3.5 Capacity Building and Skill Development:

Local communities participate in tourism management but they don't have proper professional training. They have to be provided capacity building training which includes:

- Hospitality training
- Eco-guide certification
- Handicraft and cultural tourism promotion
- Digital marketing for local tourism enterprises.

This capacity building significantly increases the service quality and also increases employment opportunities.

5.3.6 Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):

Public-private partnerships can help mobilize financial resources and expertise for tourism infrastructure development.

PPP initiatives may include:

- Eco-resorts and eco-lodges
- Adventure tourism facilities
- Tourism transport and hospitality services.

Such partnerships can accelerate sustainable tourism growth while maintaining environmental standards.

5.4. Prospects of Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism in North-East India:

5.4.1 Rich Natural and Biodiversity Resources:

North-East India is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, with dense forests, rare wildlife species, and unique ecosystems. This natural wealth provides strong prospects for:

- Wildlife tourism
- Birdwatching tourism
- Forest-based ecotourism
- River and wetland tourism.

5.4.2 Cultural and Ethnic Diversity:

The region is home to hundreds of tribal communities with rich traditions, festivals, music, and handicrafts.

Major cultural tourism attractions include:

- Hornbill Festival (Nagaland)
- Ziro Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)

- Sangai Festival (Manipur)
- Bihu Festival (Assam).

These cultural assets can attract both domestic and international tourists.

5.4.3 Growing Demand for Nature-Based Tourism:

Globally, there is increasing demand for eco-friendly and nature-based tourism. The North-East region's pristine landscapes and relatively unexplored destinations provide a competitive advantage in this market. Nature tourism activities such as trekking, rafting, camping, and wildlife safaris are becoming increasingly popular.

5.4.4 Government Policy Support:

Various government schemes are supporting tourism development in the region, including:

- Swadesh Darshan 2.0 (sustainable tourism development)
- PRASHAD scheme (spiritual tourism development)
- North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS)
- Integrated tourism master plans prepared by the North Eastern Council.

These initiatives aim to develop tourism circuits and strengthen tourism infrastructure in the region.

5.4.5 Employment and Rural Development Potential:

Sustainable tourism can generate significant employment in rural and tribal areas through:

- Homestays and eco-lodges
- Local transport services
- Handicrafts and cultural products
- Food and hospitality services.

Tourism thus contributes to poverty reduction and inclusive development in the region.

5.5 Constraints:

Despite of significant improvement and vast potential in tourism and ecotourism sector of North-east India still note free from constraints in respect of structural, environmental, institutional and socio-cultural.

5.5.1 Infrastructural Constraints:

This is one of the most significant constraints to tourism growth in the North-east is inadequate infrastructure.

- **Transport Facilities:** Transport facilities have been improved although many places have been remaining poor which is not properly connected through roads, railways, and airways. The tourism destinations of the regions often lack reliable transport networks which is discouraging both domestic and international tourists.
- **Accommodation and hospitality facilities:** There is a shortage of good quality hotels, eco-lodges and international standardized homestay facilities as per required by tourists. In many tourism places accommodation facilities unable to meet global standard of hygiene, safety and comfort.
- **Basic Amenities:** Tourism sector is still lacking behind in terms of inadequate water supply, sanitation facilities, healthcare infrastructure, and internet connectivity especially in rural and ecologically sensitive zones.

5.5.2 Environmental Vulnerability and Ecological Risks:

The North-East region is ecologically fragile, forming part of global biodiversity hotspots. Tourism, if unmanaged, can accelerate environmental degradation.

Over-tourism and Habitat Disturbance: Popular destinations such as Kaziranga National Park and Cherrapunji face increasing visitor pressure. Unregulated footfall can disturb wildlife, damage ecosystems, and increase pollution.

Waste Management Problems: Solid waste disposal remains a major challenge. Plastic waste, improper sewage systems, and lack of recycling facilities pose threats to forests, rivers, and wildlife.

Climate Change Impacts: Frequent floods in Assam, landslides in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, and changing rainfall patterns impact tourism seasonality and infrastructure durability. Climate vulnerability increases the risks associated with tourism investments.

5.5.3. Institutional and Policy Constraints:

Lack of Coordinated Planning: Tourism development often lacks an integrated regional master plan. Fragmented policies between states lead to inconsistent standards and weak inter-state tourism circuits.

Regulatory Complexities: Protected Area Permits (PAP) and Inner Line Permit (ILP) systems, though important for security and cultural preservation, can discourage spontaneous travel and foreign tourist inflow if procedures are not streamlined.

Limited Public-Private Partnerships: Investment in tourism infrastructure remains relatively low compared to other regions of India. Private investors often perceive the region as high-risk due to perceived instability and logistical challenges.

5.5.4 Socio-Political Challenges:

Perception of Insurgency and Instability: Historically, certain parts of the North-East experienced insurgency and ethnic conflicts. Although the situation has improved significantly, outdated perceptions of insecurity continue to influence tourist decisions and investor confidence.

Border Sensitivities: The region shares international borders with several countries. Border tensions and security restrictions can occasionally affect cross-border tourism prospects.

5.5.5 Human Resource and Skill Gaps:

Tourism requires skilled manpower in hospitality management, foreign languages, eco-guiding, digital marketing, and event management.

- Many rural communities lack professional training in service delivery.
- Limited tourism education institutions restrict capacity building.
- Youth migration to metropolitan cities reduces the availability of skilled local workforce.

Without systematic skill development, the region may struggle to provide world-class tourism experiences.

5.5.6 Limited Marketing and Branding:

The North-East suffers from weak global branding compared to destinations like Kerala or Rajasthan.

- Insufficient digital promotion and storytelling.
- Lack of cohesive branding as a unified tourism circuit.
- Underutilization of social media and international travel platforms.

As a result, the region remains underrepresented in mainstream travel itineraries.

5.5.7 Cultural Sensitivity and Commodification Risks:

The region's strength lies in its diverse tribal cultures. However:

- Excessive commercialization may dilute indigenous traditions.
- Cultural performances may become staged solely for tourist consumption.
- Local communities may experience cultural intrusion and loss of privacy.

Balancing cultural preservation with tourism commercialization remains a delicate challenge.

5.5.8 Financial Constraints and Investment Gaps:

Tourism infrastructure requires high initial investment with long gestation periods.

- Limited access to institutional finance for local entrepreneurs.
- High transportation costs increase operational expenses.
- Small-scale operators struggle with formal credit systems.

Without adequate financial support mechanisms, grassroots tourism initiatives remain vulnerable.

5.5.9 Seasonality and Market Volatility

Tourism in the North-East is highly seasonal due to monsoons and climatic extremes. This results in:

- Irregular income flows.
- Underutilized infrastructure during off-season.
- Reduced employment stability.

Additionally, external shocks such as pandemics (e.g., COVID-19) reveal the vulnerability of tourism-dependent economies.

5.5.10 Sustainability Governance Challenges

Ecotourism requires strict adherence to environmental standards, but:

- Monitoring mechanisms are often weak.
- Environmental impact assessments may not be rigorously implemented.
- Carrying capacity limits are rarely enforced.

Without strong governance, ecotourism risks becoming conventional mass tourism under a different label.

5.6 Solutions for Strengthening Tourism and Ecotourism in North-East India:

To transform tourism and ecotourism into sustainable engines of economic growth in North-East India comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim a comprehensive, multi-level strategy is required. Solutions must address infrastructure, sustainability, governance, community participation, and market integration.

5.6.1 Strengthening Infrastructure and Connectivity:

a) Integrated Transport Development:

- Expand regional air connectivity under UDAN and international linkages with Southeast Asia.
- Improve last-mile road connectivity to eco-destinations and rural tourism sites.
- Promote river tourism infrastructure along the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers.

b) Sustainable Accommodation Development:

- Encourage eco-friendly resorts and homestays using green building standards.
- Provide financial incentives and subsidies for community-based accommodation.
- Establish quality certification systems for homestays and eco-lodges.

c) Digital Infrastructure:

- Expand high-speed internet in rural areas.
- Promote digital booking platforms for local tourism enterprises.
- Develop integrated tourism mobile applications for the North-East circuit.

5.6.2 Promoting Sustainable and Responsible Ecotourism:

a) Carrying Capacity Regulation:

Protected areas such as Kaziranga National Park and Namdapha National Park must implement strict visitor limits, environmental impact monitoring, and zoning regulations.

b) Waste Management Systems:

- Introduce plastic-free tourism zones.
- Establish decentralized waste segregation and recycling units in tourist hotspots.
- Encourage eco-certification for tourism operators.

c) Climate-Resilient Infrastructure:

- Build flood-resistant and landslide-resilient structures.
- Promote renewable energy use in hotels and eco-resorts.
- Integrate climate adaptation strategies into tourism planning.

5.6.3 Enhancing Skill Development and Capacity Building:

a) Tourism Education and Training:

- Establish regional hospitality and tourism management institutes.
- Provide short-term certification programs for eco-guides, language skills, digital marketing, and hospitality management.

b) Community Skill Empowerment:

- Train local youth as nature interpreters and cultural ambassadors.
- Encourage women-led enterprises in homestays, handicrafts, and food services.
- Promote entrepreneurship development programs for rural communities.

Skill enhancement ensures improved service quality and enhances tourist satisfaction.

5.6.4 Strengthening Institutional and Policy Frameworks:

a) Integrated Regional Tourism Policy:

- Develop a unified North-East Tourism Master Plan.
- Promote inter-state tourism circuits (e.g., wildlife circuit, cultural circuit, Buddhist circuit).

b) Streamlining Permit Systems:

- Digitize Inner Line Permit (ILP) processes.
- Simplify procedures for foreign tourists while maintaining security protocols.

c) Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):

- Encourage responsible private investment in eco-resorts and adventure tourism.
- Offer tax incentives and viability gap funding for sustainable projects.

5.6.5 Branding, Marketing, and Destination Promotion:

a) Unified Branding Strategy:

Create a strong regional identity such as “North-East India: India’s Green Paradise.”

b) Digital Promotion:

- Use social media campaigns, influencer collaborations, and virtual reality previews.
- Partner with global travel platforms to enhance international visibility.

c) Festival and Event Tourism Promotion:

Promote major cultural events as global tourism products, ensuring responsible visitor management.

5.6.6 Community Participation and Inclusive Growth:

a) Community-Based Tourism (CBT):

- Ensure local communities have ownership and revenue-sharing mechanisms.
- Promote cooperative models for tourism enterprises.

b) Cultural Preservation Safeguards:

- Protect indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices.
- Develop codes of conduct for tourists to respect local customs.

Inclusive participation strengthens social cohesion and ensures equitable income distribution.

5.6.7 Financial and Investment Support Mechanisms:

a) Access to Credit:

- Provide microfinance and low-interest loans to rural tourism entrepreneurs.
- Establish tourism development funds for start-ups.

b) Investment Promotion:

- Organize tourism investment summits focused on the North-East.
- Encourage diaspora investment in sustainable tourism ventures.

5.6.8 Cross-Border and Regional Integration:

Under India's Act East Policy:

- Develop cross-border tourism circuits with Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.
- Promote river cruises linking Assam with Bangladesh.
- Enhance cultural exchange tourism programs.

Regional cooperation can increase foreign tourist inflow and strengthen economic linkages.

5.6.9 Strengthening Monitoring and Governance:

- Establish Tourism Sustainability Audit Mechanisms.
- Regularly conduct environmental and socio-economic impact assessments.
- Develop real-time visitor data systems for planning and regulation.

Strong governance ensures that ecotourism does not degenerate into unsustainable mass tourism.

Conclusion:

Tourism and ecotourism in North-East India have experienced steady growth over the past two decades, with significant recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the region currently accounts for only a small share of India's total tourism market, its immense natural, cultural, and ecological resources provide vast opportunities for sustainable tourism development. Strengthening infrastructure, promoting ecotourism, improving connectivity, and enhancing global visibility will be crucial for transforming the North-East into a major tourism destination in India.

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