

**Research Article****ECOTOURISM AS A MEANS OF SUSTAINING LIVELIHOOD, WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION-A CASE IN NAMERI NATIONAL PARK OF ASSAM: INDIA****\*Dr. Niranjan Das**

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**Abstract**

Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) has been gaining credibility as an emerging concept. It is being debated upon as important tool for economic upliftment of communities that have something to offer to fill a tourist's desire for its uniqueness. Ecotourism have always been deemed as important resources for livelihood among the communities reside nearby protected areas. Here an attempt has been made to evaluate the ecotourism initiatives in Nameri National Park that have been introduced by Assam (Bhorelli) Angling and Conservation Association (ABACA), an organization started nature-based tourism ventures in the year 1956 benefiting local populace in terms of income, improved infrastructure, employment opportunities and exposure. The community's capacity to facilitate resource related conflicts has improved following support from development institutions and facilities provided by the organization. An expanding livelihood base and sustainable biodiversity management measures is reducing local vulnerability of resources and man-animal conflicts. The present research is based on data collected using semi-structured interviews, and update using information gathered during successive local meetings. A process of triangulation was ensured where by key informants and focus group were interviewed and different sites (e.g. homestead, ecocamp, village market, river bank and in the forest) visited. Snowball sampling procedure was used to collect information. Interview questions touched on livelihood options, wildlife conservation, and tourist resource management. Despite the conventional practice, there is evidence that the numbers of wildlife (including charismatic species) in the park have either remained stable or increased. The number of White Winged Wood Duck (*Cairina scutulata*) a critically endangered avian species stands at 424, having risen from almost few at the time of project inception in 1981. Elephant, bird species and bush-loving wildlife have more than doubled following the increase in biomass and anti-poaching campaigns spearheaded by community reside near by the park. This paper tries to highlight on the community-based ecotourism that implies sustainable management initiatives and its impact of on livelihood in the fringe of Nameri National Park.

**Keywords:** Nameri National Park, Local community, Ecotourism, Livelihood, Economic Values and Tourist resources..

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**INTRODUCTION**

Protected areas have great potential for recreation and ecotourism. Recreation and ecotourism have been introduced into protected areas which have helped to reveal the ecological value and fragility of the area (Brechin *et al.*, 1991). The impression of Nameri National Park on tourists and visitors has always been associated with outdoor recreation. Despite being small in area, it has a significant array of landscape, scenic beauty and cultural variety of the communities residing near the park. This natural setting also embraces a variety of ecological habitats and various animals and plant species, essential for the development of ecotourism (Bhattacharya, 2004). As mentioned in the previous section, Nameri National Park and its adjoining areas are rich in culture with different communities inhabiting there. Ecotourism tries to preserve cultural integrity because human value cannot be separated from natural value. Most potential ecotourism sites are inhabited by ethnic minorities (Nepal, 2000). The principle of 'encouraging community participation in ecotourism activities' create income and maintain cultural identity of the host community. These communities have a deep understanding of traditional festivals, cultivation and land use customs, culinary culture, traditional lifestyle and handicrafts including historical places (Zurick, 1992). Ecotourism highly depends on the elements available in a particular tourist destination.

The strength of these elements directly affects the flow of tourists into the spot (Gee, 1959). The Objectives of the present study is i. to highlight the resource base of the Nameri National Park; and ii. to evaluate the ecotourism on livelihood, wildlife management and biodiversity conservation of the park.

**METHODS AND STUDY AREA**

The present research is based on data collected between January and April 2020 using semi structured interviews, and update using information gathered during successive local meetings. A process of triangulation was ensured where by key informants and focus group were interviewed and different sites (e.g. homestead, ecocamp, village market, river bank and in the forest) visited. Snowball sampling procedure was used. Interview questions touched on livelihood options, wildlife conservation, and tourist resource management. The operation of ecocamp and the tourism management committee was also investigated. A total of 28 individuals (10 local tour guide, 6 women group, 14 boatman, 14 cultivator and 12 four forest personal) interviewed during the visit. The study region covers Nameri National Park of Assam located in 26°50'48"N to 27°03'43"N Latitudes and 92°39'E to 92°59'E Longitudes covering an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup> in the northern bank of river Brahmaputra, in Sonitpur district of Assam (India). Nameri is covered by tropical evergreen, semi-evergreen, moist deciduous forests with cane and bamboo brakes and narrow stripes of open grassland along rivers. Grassland comprises of less than 10 per cent of the total area of the park while the semi-evergreen and moist deciduous species dominate the area.

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The park is enriched with threatened plants and animal species under International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List categories (Barua *et al.*, 1999). Parts of the area were declared as Nameri Reserve Forest (Present East Buffer) in 1876 and Nameri Wildlife Sanctuary in the year 1985. The Nameri National Park was formed in the year 1998.

## RESULTS

The Assam (Bhorelli) Anglers and Conservation Association (ABACA) is a joint venture between the local community and the tourism entrepreneur. Since its inception in 1956, ABACA has contributed to livelihood opportunities and natural resource management initiative to the local community in Nameri National Park in different way. The community has been benefitting from a fee that is paid by ABACA for the lease of land. About 10 hectares of land have been leased at a fee of INR 150,000 per year. Over and above the community receives amounts ranging between INR. 5000 per year as bed charges (local accommodation) paid by the tourist who visits the area. The community uses these earnings to support different community livelihood initiatives such as the provide money to self-help group, construction of schools, community houses, roads and expenses for community festivals. Eco-camp (accommodation in the park) provides eco-friendly accommodation in the park and pays monthly salaries to 35 members of staff, drawn from the local community who serve at the camp. The workers include security guard, camp attendants, maintenance and clerical staff as well as cultural troops (performing local dances in the camp during tourist seasons) from nearby villages. More and more local people are complementing their sources of income with payments receive as casual workers. Up to 20 casual workers are absorbed by ecocamp especially during construction and repairs. Individual households benefit from the sale of firewood and charcoal and the different organic food stuff/vegetables that are sold at the camps and tourist. Earnings received from ecotourism are used in various ways, including purchase of livestock; land as well other necessary item, initiatives that are contributing towards livelihood in general and local food security in specific. The community reside nearby the park is benefitting from improved infrastructural systems. These include over 18 km earth road network that has been constructed by the forest department in the conservation area and outside. The all-weather road has improved community accesses to outside markets. To increase the resident wild life and bird, the community constructed five small barrages on the tributaries and planted fruit bearing trees and trees which is most favourable for wildlife habitation. These water sources and plantations have reduced competition for grazing resources between livestock and wildlife. The forest department allowed to the community to use grazing especially during drought. Access to the new water sources has reduced community vulnerability to drought related disasters. Community contact to the outside world has improved following access to electricity and telephone line provided by ecocamp authority and forest department. More benefits to the local community come in a form of contribution from the department of forest and environment, Government of Assam. The forest department has been involved in the establishment of ABACA to promote ecotourism in the park and also facilitated negotiations between the community and ABACA through workshops and exposure tours, helped to build trust for the project among the members of the community. Amounts are paid to local people in the area who have livestock and have

agreed to share grazing resources with wildlife. This contribution is meant to offset the costs incurred by the communities for living with wildlife and, build trust and ownership of wildlife resources among the local people. The major investment of ecotourism-related earnings is used for livelihood because there is no other foremost means of income generation. Awareness and mobilization workshops that were funded by department of forest and ABACA have improved the capacity of individuals working in different sectors. The members have been empowered through exposure tours organized to surrounding areas. Selected members were exposed to different ecotourism complementary technologies in the other parts of the states like Kaziranga, Dibru-Saikhowa, Mazuli River Island and Manas National Park etc. Tour participants identified organic fodder production, handicraft, local cuisine eco-friendly accommodation and beekeeping as ecotourism complementary packages suitable to the local setting and conditions. Following exposure tours and consultative meetings local members have identified various forums for sharing information on technological innovations and possible funding. Tour participants have been instrumental in facilitating negotiations on wildlife-related conflicts, using experience gained as they listened to narration by host institutions during the tours.

## DISCUSSION

Wildlife Management, Biodiversity Conservation and Sustaining Livelihood have made little positive impact on natural resource management in Nameri National Park. This is primarily because of lack of a national policy to integrate the initiatives with resource management and conservation. Conservation is still being influenced by the premise that wildlife needs to be protected to avoid overutilization and/or through competition with livestock. Despite this orthodox practice, there is evidence that the numbers of wildlife (including charismatic species) in the park have either remained stable or increased. The number of White Winged Wood Duck (*cairina scutulata*) stands at 424, having risen from almost few at the time of project inception in 1981. Elephant, bird species and bush-loving wildlife have more than doubled following the increase in biomass and anti-poaching campaigns spearheaded by community reside near by the park. ABACA has plans to introduce certain floral species to meet 'customer demand'. Following exposure tours, the community has expressed interest to introduce an orchid sanctuary, vermicomposting unit and an organic orchard. Through exposure tours and consultative meetings, the community member has been sensitized to the need to reduce livestock numbers. The membership consists of individuals who are engaged in cultivation along buffers in the Nameri National park. To reduce pressure on natural pastures and dependence on forest most of these members use complementary pastures such as nappier grass and maize stalks. Improved maintenance of community pond, dependence on piped water and the construction of private water pans/barrages over tributaries have reduced competition between livestock and wildlife over water resources. Consequently, formerly degraded sites around community watering points are regenerated. Pressure on grazing resources has also reduced following the construction of ponds and development of grassland under eco-restoration programme in the conservation area funded by Department of Forest and Environment, Government of Assam. The different interventions have reduced competition on resources available for livestock, especially from resident wildlife species. Object

poverty, improved contact with the outside world and increased numbers of resident wildlife have contributed to poaching. This situation leads to either the community losing valuable sources of income or the numbers of the specific animal species exceeding the ecological limit leading to environmental degradation. Respondents confirmed that poaching was caused by individuals who feel that they do not own ecotourism initiatives. In a way, this reaction reflects a problem that ecotourism has either failed to address or one that is beyond its scope in the context of existing institutional frameworks. Wildlife Management, Biodiversity Conservation and Sustaining Livelihood have made little positive impact on natural resource management in Nameri National Park. This is primarily because of lack of a national policy to integrate the initiatives with resource management and conservation. Conservation is still being influenced by the premise that wildlife needs to be protected to avoid overutilization and/or through competition with livestock. Despite this orthodox practice, there is evidence that the numbers of wildlife (including charismatic species) in the park have either remained stable or increased. The number of White Winged Wood Duck (*cairina scutulata*) stands at 424, having risen from almost few at the time of project inception in 1981. Elephant, bird species and bush-loving wildlife have more than doubled following the increase in biomass and anti-poaching campaigns spearheaded by community reside near by the park. ABACA has plans to introduce certain floral species to meet 'customer demand'. Following exposure tours, the community has expressed interest to introduce an orchid sanctuary, vermicomposting unit and an organic orchard. Through exposure tours and consultative meetings, the community member has been sensitized to the need to reduce livestock numbers.

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### Conclusion

This paper has established how pilot ecotourism initiatives under the Assam (Bhorelli) Angling and Conservation Association (ABECA) have changed local practices and attitudes towards wildlife management, biodiversity conservation and livelihood generation in the area. The impacts that include accumulation of savings by individuals are leading to social differentiation beyond traditional realms further marginalizing the already impoverished groups/individuals at the expense of the elite. Young well-to-do local who are increasingly controlling power in the community following their exposure to the outside world and the wealth they have accumulated, are eroding long-established settings. This new form of marginalization has to be addressed, especially through empowerment of individuals and are motivated to actively participate in emerging livelihood options.

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