



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERPRETING ECO-TOURISM: THE SCENARIO OF ODISHA

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Received 17th December, 2017; Accepted 20th January, 2018; Published Online 28th February, 2018

ABSTRACT

Eco-tourism means “travelling to relatively undisturbed or unexplored natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery, its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations”. It is a new concept with tremendous potentiality for sustainable development of nature based tourist resources. Odisha is a great hub of Eco-Tourism. It is said that “this land is a paradise of eco-tourism unexplored”. The district is endowed with famous natural eco-tourism centres like Similipal National Park, Bhitarkanika National Park, Chandka Elephant Sanctuary, Lakhari Valley Sanctuary and Mahendragiri which attracts thousand and thousands of tourists and natural lovers. An humble attempt has been made here to highlight the unexplored eco-tourism glory of Odisha.

Key words: Odisha, Scenario, Mahendragiri.

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Citation: Dr. Siba Prasanna Pathy, 2018. “Interpreting eco-tourism: The scenario of Odisha” *International Journal of Current Research in Life Sciences*, 7, (02), 874-876.

INTRODUCTION

Eco-tourism has emerged as a special branch of tourism sector. It means ecological tourism, where ecological has both environmental and social connotations. It is defined both as a concept-tourism movement and as a special tourism sustainable section. One of the fastest growth segments of tourism is travel with nature. Nature based tourism is promoted by the travel industry as a unique opportunity to see and experience natural environment and local customs in many ways not available to participants in mass tourism. The International Eco-Tourism Society (IETS) founded in 1991, with its head quarter at Burlington, Vermont, U.S., and with global network of about 1,600 members in 110 countries, defines “*Eco tourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well being of local people*”. The term “Eco-tourism” was first coined in 1983 by the Mexican architect- environmentalist Hector Ceballos Lascurain, who today is an international consultant on the subject. Eco-Tourism and its ethics are environment and culture specific and were initially used to describe the nature based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with an emphasis on education. The concept of eco-tourism is new with tremendous potentiality for sustainable development of nature based tourist resources. According to Heather Robinson (2006), it is a subject of sustainable tourism, differing by its focus on ecology. Eco-tourism is sustainable tourism that “contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage” (Taj Rawat, 2009).

Eco-tourism in simple words means management of tourism and conservation of nature in a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirement of tourism and ecology on one hand and the needs of local communities for jobs, new skills, income generating employment and a better status for women on the other (Indira, 2014). In nut shell eco tourism means is to get involve in eco restoration, bio-diversity restoration and eco development local people in any degraded tourist eco-system. It also means ‘ecologically sound tourism’ or ‘ecologically sensitive tourism’. It is generally used when describing any manner of recreation or vacationing in a natural setting. Ceballos-Lascurain defines eco-tourism as “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural 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” (Shores, 1999). The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) has developed the following guidelines for the eco-tourists or natural travelers and they are called the Ten Commandments on Eco-tourism.

- Respect the frailty of the Earth.
- Leave only footprints, Take only pictures.
- To make your travels more meaningful, educate yourself about the Geography, Customs and Manners.
- Respect the privacy and dignity of others.

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India, with kaleidoscopic eco system and a wealth of cultural heritages of great antiquity has immense scope for eco-tourism.

The government should liberalize several infrastructural constraints facing foreign eco tourists to India. The tourism domain has focused its interest on new area 'Eco-Tourism'. The year 2002 was declared as the International year of Eco-Tourism. It has been referred as 'Nature tourism'. Steps are being taken up by the Centre as well as state government to attract domestic as well as foreign tourists to explore India's nature spots.

Similipal National Park

Similipal is one of the Wildlife Sanctuaries in India. It is declared as a Tiger Reserve under "Project Tiger". It is situated in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. It is part of the Similipal-Kuldiha-Hadgarh Elephant Reserve popularly known as Mayurbhanj Elephant Reserve, which includes three protected areas- Similipal Tiger Reserve (2750.00 km²), Hadgarh Wildlife Sanctuary (191.06 km²) and Kuldiha Wildlife Sanctuary (272.75 km²). It is the second largest national park in India. The park has a protected area of 845.70 square kilometres (326.53 sq mi) and has some beautiful waterfalls like Joranda and Barehipani. Similipal is home to 99 royal Bengal tigers and 432 wild elephants (*Monalisa Jena, 2005*). Besides, Similipal is famous for gaurs (Indian bison), chausingha, as well as an orchidarium. Thick and green forests, extensive grassy lands and meadows, precipitous and sparkling waterfalls, meandering rivers, roaring tigers and trumpeting tuskers, fleeing deer and flying squirrels, talking myna and dancing peacocks are quite appealing. Sweet scented champak flowers freshen the air. In the midst of the dense forests, the summer stands humbled. Several rivers like Budhabalanga, Khairi, Salandi, Palpala, etc. originate from the hills and meander through the forest. Many of them have cascading rapids and foaming falls before leaving for the plains. The panoramic views of the waterfalls at Barehipani (217 meters) and Joranda (181 meters) are enchanting. The dense forest and riverine system serve as an excellent home to some of the most beautiful creatures. Herds of elephants majestically walking across the roads and rivulets could be a regular sight. While one is moving on the hilly tracts, predators like tiger and leopards might be obliviously lulling under the shade. Similipal Elephant Reserve is an ecosystem complete with forest vegetation (mainly sal trees), fauna and the adjoining Ho or Santhal tribal settlements. The park is a treasure house of 1076 species of plants belonging to 102 families. 96 species of orchids have been identified here. The grasslands and the savannas provide grazing grounds for the herbivores and hiding place to the carnivores. The forest boasts of innumerable medicinal and aromatic plants, which provide a source of earnings for the tribal people. One can enter Similipal through Pithabata (22 kilometres from Baripada) and 98 km via Jashipur. Entry permits can be obtained from the Range Officer, Pithabata check gate upon paying prescribed fees. Day visitors can enter between 6 AM and 12 noon and visitors with reservation between 6 AM and 9 AM (*The Samaj, 2016*).

Bhitarkanika National Park

Bhitarkanika National Park is a national park located in Kendrapara district of Odisha. It spreads over 672 km² (259 sq mi) and is surrounded by the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary. It was designated as national park on 16 September 1998. Gahirmatha Beach and Marine Sanctuary lies to the east, and separates swamp region cover with canopy of mangroves

from the Bay of Bengal. The national park is home to Saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*), White Crocodile, Indian python, King cobra, black ibis, darters and many other species of flora and fauna. It hosts a large number of mangrove species, and is the second largest mangrove eco-system in India. The national park and wildlife sanctuary is inundated by the rivers Brahmani, Baitarni, Dhamra, Pathsala (Bhitarkanika Wetlands of Odisha, 2017). The Mangrove forests are good habitat for King Cobra, Indian Python and Water Monitor Lizard. A large number of water birds visit Bagagahan heronry which is an area of approximately 4 hectare within the Bhitarkanika Forest Block near Suajore creek from the month of June to October. Most of the Birds are Asian open bill, Egrets, Black Ibis, Cormorants, Darters & etc. It is a very good place to sight the giant Salt Water Crocodile, some growing to 23 feet in length, along with other reptiles like the Water Monitor Lizard and the King Cobra. Spotted deers and Wild Boars are abundant in the park and can be spotted at all the major locations. Eight varieties of Kingfishers are found here and can be spotted along the many creeks and riverines within the park. The boat ride from Khola to Dangmal or vice versa is highly recommended. Khola is one of the gateways into the park. This is along an artificial creek and it passes through dense mangrove forest providing a glimpse into the estuarine ecosystem and its wealth of fauna. Sightseeing is done on boats which have got forest department licenses. Main entrance to the forest is from Khola Gate. Odisha Tourism is displaying Bhitarkanika as a destination for eco-friendly and rich nature where tourists can enjoy variety of wildlife and birds (*The Orissa Review, 1995*).

Chandka Elephant Sanctuary

Chandka Elephant Sanctuary is a wildlife reserve located in the north western fringe of Bhubaneswar in Odisha. Nestled on Khurdha uplands of the Eastern Ghats biotic region, Chandaka forest is spread over 175.79 square kilometres (67.87 sq mi) of rolling table land and small sprawling hillocks of Khurdha and Cuttack Districts. It was declared as an elephant reserve in December 1982. Among reptiles, rock python and Bengal monitor lizard are quite common. Chameleon, common skink, Indian flap shell turtle, Russell's viper, bamboo pit viper, common krait, common vine snake, kukri snake, and Indian bronze back are indicative reptiles. Mugger crocodiles have remarkably adapted to large water bodies after their release. The leopard is in the apex of biological pyramid. Chital, barking deer, mouse deer, wild pig, common langur, rhesus monkey, small Indian civet, common Indian mongoose, small Indian mongoose, ruddy mongoose, pangolin, sloth bear, ratel, Indian wolf and hyena are other mammals of the area. Chital or spotted deer are commonly encountered in groups of 3-7 on forest roads. Wild dogs are occasionally seen (*The Times of India, 2015*).

Lakhari Valley Sanctuary

Lakhari Valley Sanctuary is situated in the district of Ganjam in Odisha. It is 60 km from Berhampur. Taptapani (well-known for its warm water spring) and Chandragiri. Spread over an area of 185 sq km, it offers a rare feast of rich tropical forest, hills, valleys, perennial water sources. The sanctuary is full of rich tropical forest, valleys, hills, water sources etc. The Lakhari Valley Sanctuary is perhaps, best known for its spectacular elephant population, which is arguably one of the most concentrated population of elephants found in any of the

countless wildlife sanctuaries of India. Besides providing tourists with a glimpse of the majestic elephants, Lakhari Valley Sanctuary also offers other attractions which include Blackbucks, which abound the areas (Sharad Singh Negi, 1993). Eco-tourism destinations of Orissa needs more care and proper protection, preservation and presentation as they are the most important source of State's economy. Eco-tourism has emerged as the industry of industries with high economic effects and earned foreign exchange. Therefore steps may be taken to develop its infrastructure not only to attract tourists but also to beautify and increase economic prosperity of the State.

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