

Linking nature and culture for sustainable tourism development: A study of Eco-cultural tourism prospects in North east India

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Abstract

Eco-cultural tourism is a concept in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create a site for tourists. North east India is the most mesmerizing part of the Indian sub-continent that mirrors the perfect blending of life, culture and ecology. It is relatively an unexplored and unique area in terms of both geography and cultural diversity and is characterized by the abundance of natural endowments such as dense and thick forests, variety of flora and fauna, meandering rivers, enchanting hills, waterfalls, snowcapped mountains etc. There are approximately 65 indigenous tribes in North-east India along with a host of sub-tribes having their own distinctive cultures, customs and traditions that are preserved till today. Thus eco-cultural tourism is a tool for economic empowerment and development of indigenous communities.

This article provides a broad conceptual framework for eco-cultural tourism and tries to argue that eco-cultural tourism is a potent force for overall economic, social and cultural development as well biodiversity conservation in northeast India. This paper also seeks to examine the prospects of eco-cultural tourism in northeast India.

The data is mostly obtained from secondary sources. Observation method is employed to collect primary data. The research work gives a broad conceptual framework for eco-cultural tourism as a tool for sustainable development. The paper also brings to light that Northeast is tremendously rich in natural and cultural resources which can be utilized judiciously for touristic utilization in order to achieve sustainable development of the region.

Keywords: Eco-cultural, conservation, habitat, sustainability, community, indigenous, development

1.1. Introduction

Travel to tourism sites of cultural and natural significance have existed at least since the time of Greek Antiquity, as reflected by Hellenistic world's invention of the Seven Wonders of the World. In more recent times, 157 countries have ratified the World Heritage Convention of 1972 (protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage), and 582 sites are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Together with other cultural and natural areas, these World Heritage Sites are important tourist attractions that form the backbone of the tourism industry. In short, tourism's economic impact is significant and still growing and much of employment and associated income involves foreign exchange earnings. In addition, though there is wide variability across destinations and regions, tourism generally provides jobs of various types (from unskilled to skilled, part-time to full-time) for both genders.

Eco-cultural tourism is an area of bio-cultural and economic development as it helps to improve the economy of an area as well as preserve and protect both culture and the environment. However it is essential that sustainable tourism enhance economic development and also generates a variety of other positive impacts such as, keeping

traditions alive and supports the protection of both cultural and natural heritage thereby increasing visitor appreciation. It is a recent offshoot of tourism sector that has grown up to be a potential business in its own space. Ecocultural tourism is an alternative form of tourism that showcases the natural beauty of the area, endemic flora and fauna, wildlife, local culture, art and heritage at rural locations, thereby favoring the local communities socially and economically. Such form of tourism can create tremendous impact on the local economy, environment and socio-cultural scenario of the concern area if managed in a sustainable manner (Sinha, 2012).

1.2. Objectives :

- To provides a broad conceptual framework for eco-cultural tourism
- to examine the prospects of eco-cultural tourism in North-east India

1.3. Study area

North-east India, popularly known as the land of 'seven sisters' and 'one brother' comprises of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland Tripura and Sikkim. The total area of the region is 25.5 million kms² (i.e 7.8% of the total landmass of the country). Recently Sikkim, though not

contiguous in area has been included in this region for the purpose of area development. Northeastern region of India is located between 20°N - 29°30'N latitudes and 87°59'E - 97°30'E longitudes. Its northern and eastern boundaries are natural barriers represented by the high Himalayan Mountains and Patkai Hill ranges respectively.

The region has a unique geographical and socio-cultural personality. About 70% of the total area of the northeastern region is mostly hilly. Hilly areas cover most parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Sikkim and eastern part of Tripura. The plains of the region are the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley in Assam, the Imphal valley in Manipur and the Tripura plain.

The northeastern region of India is a land of *Blue Mountains*, green valleys and white rivers. Nestled in the eastern Himalayas, the region is exquisite in natural beauty. A blend of wild life, flora and fauna, tribal and non-tribal populations with unique cultural identity, colourful festivals and arts and crafts makes the north-east India the most beautiful and attractive region of India known as 'paradise unexplored'.

North-east India is very rich in forest resources. Three types of forest are found in this region i.e. very dense forest, medium dense forest and open forest. The state wise distribution of forest cover in north-east India in 2011 is given in the table below:

Table 1.3.1. Statewise Distribution of Forest Cover in North East India, 2011

States	Total Geographical area of the state (kms ²)	Very Dense Forest (kms ²)	Medium Dense Forest (kms ²)	Open Forest (kms ²)	Total Forest cover (kms ²)
Arunachal Pradesh	83743	20868	31519	15023	67410
Assam	78438	1444	11404	14825	27673
Manipur	22327	730	6151	10209	17090
Meghalaya	22429	433	9775	7067	17275
Mizoram	21081	134	6086	12897	19117
Nagaland	16579	1293	4931	7094	13318
Sikkim	7096	500	2161	698	3359
Tripura	10486	109	4686	3182	7977
Total	262179	25511	76713	70995	173219

Source: www.fsi.org.in

North-East India is well blessed by rich cultural and ethnic heritage. Culturally Northeast India represents the Indian ethos of 'unity in diversity', and 'diversity in unity'. The majority of the populations are descendants from those who migrated here centuries ago from Mongolia, Tibet, China, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. There are more or less 65 indigenous tribes of the region along with their host of sub-tribes with their distinctive cultures, rituals and heritage and their own dialect that has preserved their cultural identity through the social systems, customs, dresses, festivals, songs, dances, myths and beliefs.

Table 1.3.2. Statewise distribution of major tribes in North east India

States	Tribes
Arunachal Pradesh	Nishi, Adi, Monpa, Wancho, Nocte, Mishmi, Tangsa, Singpho, Khampati, Apatani, Singpho, Aka, Sherdukpen.
Assam	Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, Deori, Singpho, Tai Khamiyang.

States	Tribes
Manipur	Thado, Thangkul, Mao, Kabui, Paite, Hmar, Vaiphei, Liangmei, Kuki, Maring, Gangte, Kom, Anal
Meghalaya	Khasi, Garo, Jayantia
Mizoram	Lushai, Lakher, Pawi
Nagaland	Ao, Sema, Konyak, Angami, Lotha, Phom, Chakru, Sangtham, Rengma, Zou
Sikkim	Lepcha, Nepali, Bhutia.
Tripura	Tripuri, Mogh, Halam

1.4. Eco-cultural tourism: a Concept for Development and Conservation

Ecotourism and cultural tourism industry is becoming increasingly prevalent around the world (Hendry, 2005; Richards, 2007). The term eco-cultural tourism is framed by integrating the concept of ecotourism and cultural tourism. The term ecotourism can be defined as: "Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be

low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented for control, benefits, and scale”(Fennel, 1999).

Eco-cultural tourism is a concept in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create a site for tourists. It can be defined as travel to destinations where the cultural and natural endowments are the prime attractions and is thereby considered to be a potential strategy to support conservation of natural habitats along with economic sustainability. Eco-cultural tourism can be typically defined as travel to destinations where flora and fauna and cultural heritage are the prime attraction. Thus eco-cultural tourism is a tool for economic empowerment and development of indigenous communities. Eco-cultural tourism can be a positive force in sustaining the natural, historic and cultural environment where visitors are properly informed.

A key element to the success of eco-cultural tourism is local control in planning, development and maintenance of sites. This form of tourism can make a practical and positive contribution to the alleviation of poverty by helping local communities to draw maximum benefit from the tourism potential areas.

1.5. Eco-cultural tourism and Sustainability

Eco-cultural tourism should be seen as a potential tool for conservation and sustainability, rather than as an urbanizing development tool. In other words, eco-cultural tourism should be seen as a form of sustainable tourism that is “tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems” (World Tourism Organisation, 1996). For promotion and development of eco-cultural tourism major construction is not necessary rather than only minimal requirement essential for tourism is developed. The culturally significant villages located in or close to reserve forests, national parks, sanctuaries, biosphere reserves, lakes/water bodies, hills/plateaus and other geographically attractive areas are normally chosen for eco-cultural tourism. Touristic activities are eco-friendly so as to conserve natural habitats and culture. This would enhance management, conservation and regeneration of forests and also revival and maintenance of cultural heritage in the area.

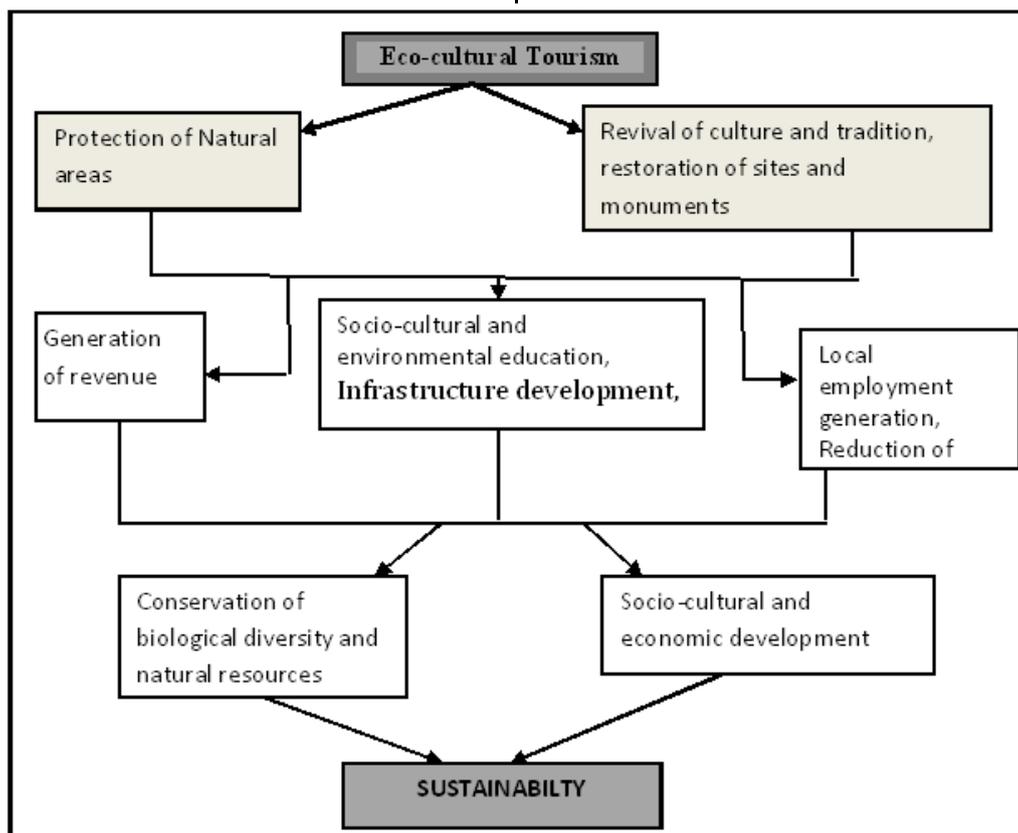


Figure. 1.5.1. Eco-cultural Tourism model

1.6. Potentialities of Eco-cultural tourism in Northeast India

Though NE India is still backward in different levels of economic development yet it has tremendous scope for developing eco-cultural tourism that would contribute largely to the local economy of the region. Natural endowments such

as hills, mountains, plains, plateaus, rivers, waterfalls, forests with different varieties of exotic flora and fauna and such other attractions provides ample scope for eco-cultural tourism. The region is also a conglomeration of various ethnic tribes and groups each having a distinct language, culture, way-of-life, festivals, songs and dances. Songs and

dances, display of colourful dresses, tasting of innumerable varieties of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes mark these festivals. In fact, Northeast India has the entire physical and human element that provides tremendous prospects of eco-cultural tourism.

a) **Topography and Wildlife:** All the eight states of Northeast India have some distinctiveness on its own and the region as a whole is known for its bio-geographic richness. Dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, and many rare species of animals and with such rarity, North-east India is endowed with nature's bounty.

Arunachal Pradesh also known as the 'land of rising sun' is the remotest and is known as the 'loveliest' state of North-east India. Arunachal Pradesh is a land of immense beauty with glaciers, high altitude meadows, dense forests, snow clad peaks, high mountain ranges and roaring rivers. Such diverse topography makes Arunachal Pradesh one of the most unique geographical zones in India. Arunachal Pradesh is also a home to two (2) national parks and seven (7) wild life sanctuaries. Some of the rare and endangered species that can be seen in Arunachal Pradesh are the *mishmi*, *takin*, *hoolock gibbon*, *bharal*, *hisbid hare*, musk deer, the flying squirrel and a host of birds of over 500 species. Namdapha National Park, one the famous national park of India is situated in Arunachal. Places of interest like Tawang, Bomdilla, Ziro, Khonsa and Pasighat are perched at an altitude giving a panoramic view of the eastern Himalayas where one can enjoy the scenic beauty.

Assam is bestowed with numerous rivers, green hills, lush tea gardens and various communities with their own distinctive cultures that are astonishing to offer to the tourists. Dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, national parks like Kaziranga, Manas, Pabitora, Dibru-Saikhowa, Pabitora etc. are endowed with many rare species of flora and fauna. Kaziranga National Park, the home of the one horned rhinoceros attracts tourists from all over the world. Assam is also famous for tea gardens where each of these lush green gardens (about 1000 in number) is a treasure house of exotic beauty of nature with colourful people and their enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows, and residential facilities. Many of these gardens have polo fields and golf courses. There are as many as 30 air strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. These facilities can form into an attractive package for eco-cultural tourism.

Nagaland is a state of exquisite picturesque landscape. Along with appealing natural features such as Dzuku valley, Saramati peak, Intaki wildlife sanctuary, Nagaland provides ample scope for wildlife safari and adventure sports.

Meghalaya is also bestowed with unique geographical and geological features. Meghalaya known as Scotland of the east have many natural attractions such as Nohkalikai waterfalls, Elephant falls, potholes of Sohra, Mawmai caves, the sacred groves, misty hills of Mawsynram and Cherrapunjie, the canyons and diversity of flora and fauna. The state is bestowed with immense natural beauty and mesmerizing climate for which Shillong is one of the best tourist destination of India.

Mizoram the southernmost state of the region has many tracts suitable for adventure sports and many forests containing rare tropical orchids.

Manipur has the unique distinction of having the inhabited floating island known as Keibul Lamjao floating national park in Logtak fresh water lake. The main wildlife attraction of the state is the very rare endangered dancing deer.

Sikkim is one of the most attractive and a popular tourist destination, owing to its biodiversity. Situated in the Himalayan ranges, the state is entirely hilly with elevations ranging between 300 metres and 8583 metres. The highest elevation is Mt. Khanchendzonga, the third highest peak of the world, which is worshipped as the guardian deity of the state. The state is also a store house of exotic and beautiful orchids and flora that bloom during different parts of the year.

Tripura is dotted with wooded hills, lush green valleys, rivers and lakes and innumerable trekking routes exist through the forests and traditionally and culturally rich hamlets, which have potential to provide a deep insight into the cultural and ecological diversity of the state.

The entire region is well endowed with abundance of fast flowing rivers and streams teeming with fish and other exotic water denizens like the exotic mahseer, trouts and Brahmaputra dolphins which provides ample scope of angling. The fast flowing rivers like Teesta of Sikkim, Kameng of Arunachal Pradesh and Jiya Bhoroli of Assam are ideal for exciting water sports like white water rafting, canoeing and kayaking. Besides that the hilly and mountainous terrain of the region can provide tremendous delight to the trekkers and mountain bikers.

b) **Handloom, handicrafts and agro-products:** The tribes of the area are skilled weavers, adept in cane and bamboo craftsmanship as well as good cravers and weavers. Assam has the distinction of being the only state producing the rich muga and endi handloom, cane and brass metal products. The wide variety of brightly coloured woolen shawls of Nagaland with their exquisite designs and motifs are the pride of the state. Mizoram is famous for their delicately patterned *puan* or wrap around worn by Mizo women and exquisite bamboo craftsmanship. Moreover the simple but beautifully bordered *lungis* of Manipur

and the distinctive *Garo dakmandas* with their diamond patterned borders also make excellent souvenirs for any visitors to take back home. The cane products and the fantastic artistry of the Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh which bear the imprint of their religious beliefs and practices can cater to the cultural taste of tourist from all over the globe.

c) Pilgrimage centres: North east India has many ancient temples and shrines, some of which like Kamakhya date back to pre-historic time. Situated in Assam, Kamakhya becomes a centre of attraction in the month of June when it celebrates the Ambubchi mela. An average of 1000 visitors visit the Kamakhya temple every day throughout the year. Beside Majuli, one of the largest riverine island of the world is the hearth of rich Kshatriya culture of Assam. There are other religious places in the region where visitors often come from different parts of the country. Sikkim has the highest concentration of Buddhist monasteries and shrines. There are about 80 Buddhist monasteries and more than 150 holy places and shrines which are dedicated to different orders of Buddhism. Moreover Arunachal Pradesh has the highest Buddhist monastery located at Tawang at an

altitude of 13714 ft. Arunachal Pradesh is also glorified with other religious places like Malinithan and Parashuram Kunda. Tripura is also a land whereby one can enjoy pilgrim sites like Matabari temple, Sipahijala lake, Shiva of Unakoti and various fairs and festivals. Besides Manipur has also many holy places.

d) Historical sites: The region has a glorious historical background. Assam is glorified with numerous historical importance such as Ahom royal palaces, monuments, temples and massive ponds in Sivasagar, the first oil refinery in Asia and war cemetery of World War II in Digboi and the ruins of an ancient capital of the Mahabharata time, famous for the love story of Usha-Anirudha viz. Tezpur. Moreover the grand palaces of Tripura and numerous splendid buliding such as the floating water palace named Neermahal. Ujjayanta Palace etc are great attraction to the history lovers. Other places of historical importance in the region includes the extremely beautiful stilwell road in Assam, Moirang INA memorials and Khongian War memorials of Manipur, monoliths of Meghalaya, Indo-China War memorials of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh and second world war cemeteries of Nagaland.

Table 1.3.3. Prospective eco-cultural tourism sites in Northeast India

Site	Location	Description
Mawlynnong	East Khasi Hills district of Meghalya, 90kms from Shillong, the capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Khasi ethnic village. • Known as the cleanest village in the whole of Asia, a title bequeathed by the Discover India Magazine in 2005 • Around 15 minutes away from Mawlynnong is a living root bridge, of about 500 years old, formed by the twisting roots of the Indian rubber tree
Khonoma	20 kms to the west of Kohima, capital of Nagaland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Angami village with cultural and historical significance. • The Khonoma Nature Conservation and TragopanSanctury (KNCTS), set up by the ecologically conscious people of Khonoma in 1998, is rich in biodiversity, thereby an ideal place for nature study and adventure.
TipamPhakey Village	Naharkatia subdivision of Dibrugarh district , Assam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A village of the Tai-Phakey community, a branch of the great Tai race • Situated on the northern bank of the river Burhidihing, the village is charecterised by scenic beauty and serenity. • Rich in Buddhist culture, traditions and natural resources, • The Joypur rainforest lie close to the village making the village where activities like trekking, camping, bird-watching, elephant-riding can be done.
Dhuba-ati village	Eastern most fringe of Kaziranga National Park Assam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Mishing tribal village to showcase Mishing culture and tradition promoted by North East Social Trust • Kaziranga National Park, a world heritage site, is well known for tourist attraction all over the world and famous for activities like elephant riding, safari, bird watching and so on
Margherita	Tinsukia district ,Assam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heartland of Singpho community • Presence of Singpho eco lodge in the Inthong village of Margherita, showcases Singpho culture, traditions, Buddhist monasteries, Singpho cuisine, art and crafts. • Presence of other tribes such as Taikhamti, Taikhamiya, Tai Ahom, Semanaga, tea tribes, Sonowal Kacharies • Dehing Patkai festival, an ethno-cultural festival held here annually • Lies in the vicinity of Dehing Patkai Wildlife sanctuary where tourist can perform the activities such as trekking, camping, birdwatching, rafting etc

Site	Location	Description
Miao	Changlang district in Arunachal Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beautiful town where Namdapha National Park , the largest National Park of North east India is located • Homeland of Khamptis, Tangsa, Nocte, Wangcho and Mishmi tribe • Rangfrah, an indigenous religious group resides in this region.
Yuksam	West Sikkim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gateway to Khanchendzonga National Park and base for mountaineers and trekkers. • Typical Bhutia Village with religious and cultural significance. • Villagers are stakeholders in the bio-diversity preservation of the Rathong-chu valley where the village is situated
LingeePayong	South Sikkim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A typical Lepcha village wherein one can experience the life and culture of the Lepchas • Bird watching, trekking, camping in Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary • Caving in Mahadewthan
Lachung	North Sikkim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • described as the "most picturesque village of Sikkim" by British explorer Joseph Dalton Hooker in his definitive, The Himalayan Journal (1855). • Located adjacent to Yumthang Valley where Skiing is conducted. • Experiencing of lepcha and tibettan culture.
Jampui Hills	North Tripura (200 kilometers from Agartala)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a hill covered by green forest and beautiful orange garden • Vangmun, a forest village inhabited by Lushai tribe enables the tourist to experience the life and culture of Lushai tribe • Orange and tourism festival organized every year by the Tourism department in the village
Hmuifang	50 kms south of Aizawl, Mizoram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience typical rural life and culture of Sailo tribe. • Virgin forest, ideal for trekking and camping. • Thalfavangkut, an ethno cultural festival is organized for tourist attraction by tourism department of Mizoram

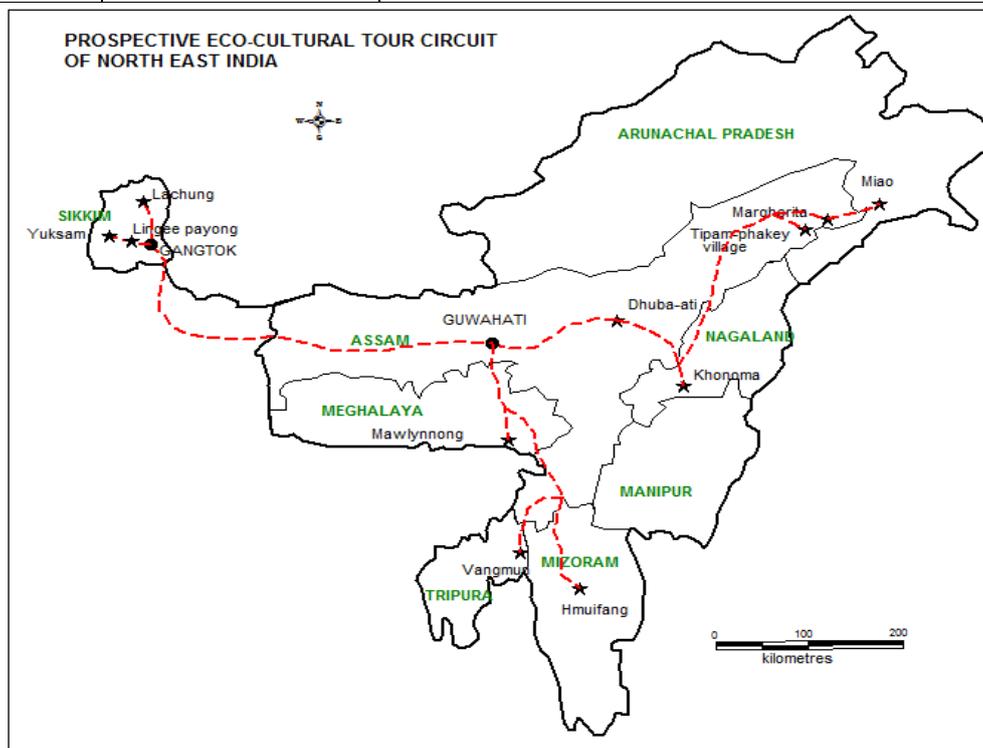


Figure 1.7.1. Prospective Eco-cultural Tour-circuit of Northeast India

1.7. Conclusion

It is needless to mention that Northeast India is bountiful both in ecological and cultural resources. These ecological and cultural resources, if combined, can provide immense potential for development of eco-cultural tourism in the region. Designing of workable guidelines for educating visitors' about environmentally fragile areas and cultural issues is paramount for eco-cultural tour packages. Proper awareness to all stakeholders as well as tourists about these issues is essential for

decreasing negative environmental and social impacts. Natural and cultural resources are the engines that drive the tourism industry, whereby, those involved in the tourism industry have a responsibility to protect the environment, culture and the visitors where concrete action plan needs to be prepared for development of eco-cultural tourism in the region and where benefits are to reach the local communities so as to raise the local economy of the region.

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