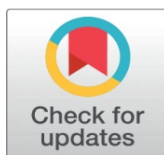
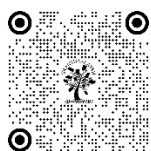


COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MEGHALAYA'S NATURE-BASED TOURISM INDUSTRY

Paramjeet Kumar 

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, North Eastern Hill University Shillong



Corresponding Author

Paramjeet Kumar,
paramjeetchoudhary35@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Situated in the northeastern area of India, Meghalaya entices both nature lovers and connoisseurs of culture with its abundant biodiversity and cultural legacy. This essay explores the complex relationship between community involvement and the admirable objective of sustainable development in the context of Meghalaya's thriving ecotourism sector. Employing a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach, we endeavor to decipher the intricate web of economic resilience, social inclusivity, and environmental integrity, all underpinned by the active participation of local communities. Drawing from a mosaic of empirical data harvested through comprehensive surveys, illuminating interviews, and incisive case studies, our pursuit is to furnish vital insights for the edification of policy architects, industry stakeholders, and the indomitable local communities, thus forging an indomitable path towards conscientious and sustainable tourism development in Meghalaya. As the emerald gem of India's travel landscape, the responsible growth of Meghalaya's nature-based tourism industry rests in the hands of those who call this pristine land home.

Keywords: Meghalaya, Tourism Industry, Social Inclusivity, Environmental Integrity, Nature-Based Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Meghalaya, a state in northeastern India, is well-known for its varied indigenous cultures, stunning natural settings, and thriving nature-based tourist sector. Known as the "Abode of Clouds," this gorgeous state attracts tourists from all over the world with its vivid tribal customs, verdant forests, and gushing waterfalls. Our investigation of a crucial intersection in the tourism field—the complex relationship between community engagement and sustainable development—is set against the captivating landscape of Meghalaya.

At a time when the impacts of a rampant tourist expansion are being felt everywhere, the study looks at the various elements of niche tourism based on nature in Meghalaya. Realising the important role that the community plays in ensuring the survival of the tourist industry, we take into account the economic, social and environmental layers.

1.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Meghalaya's tourism has grown in recent years in terms of culture, adventure, and outdoor tourism, which has huge tourist potential due to its unspoiled natural beauty and traditional cultural heritage. CRPF Tourism used by the public and commercial organizations has huge profit as tourists come here to enjoy the scenic beauty of Meghalaya. However, uncontrolled tourism might have some unwanted impacts, including over-exploitation of natural resources, polluting cultural heritage. It can be an unequal distribution of wealth as well.

In our research, we try to address these issues by engaging the local communities who are crucial to sustainable and responsible tourist development. Meghalaya's native communities have been getting along just fine with their environment for centuries, and have managed to develop a wealth of practical knowledge about local ecology and cultures. When you incorporate these communities into the tourist sector you not only preserve their heritage, but provide much-needed extra income for local residents.

1.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The study aims to determine the relationship between sustainable development and community participation, in Meghalaya's nature-based tourist sector. To answer the following key questions to achieve this main objective:

- 1) What is the effect of community engagement on Meghalaya's tourist industry's economic sustainability?
- 2) In what ways do the inclusion of indigenous populations in the tourist offer affect their lives and wellbeing, and with what consequences?
- 3) How can community participation ensure to make Meghalaya's natural resource sustainable environmentally not only for current generation but also for future generation?

1.3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Our study employs robust research methodologies that combine quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to seek answers to these concerns. Data will be collected through surveys, interviews and case studies from visitors, local people, and stakeholders who have relevant roles in the industry. Informed by an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates parts of economics, environmental science and anthropology, our investigation of the challenges will yield important policy implications for reducing the negative environmental impacts orchestrated by European tourists.

Using this approach, we aim to identify the various factors that make the relationship between sustainable development and the community operative in Meghalaya's nature-based tourist sector an intricate syncopation of reinforcing perspectives and supports. This kind of result will interest policymakers, industry stakeholders and the local communities of Meghalaya as they endeavour to steer their tourist sector from a vacillating and controversial set of short-term practices into a niche of sustainable, equitable and responsible development.

This study shows just how vital community participation is in the enduring sustainability of nature-based tourism – and how in coming here we can learn a vital lesson: it really is up to us to be the torch-bearers of understanding the importance of keeping sacred this extraordinary place for generations to come.

2. METHODOLOGY

As it moves deeper into the verdant landscape of the abundant Meghalaya, where the two necessitate adaptation, and a different way of working, the research method associated with this project also becomes more complex – multifaceted involving data collection, data analysis and ethics, much like its subject landscape. The research framework is like a map – drawing lines towards community-based tourism in the hinterland of Meghalaya and its impact on the sustainable utilisation of nature-based tourism.

2.1. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN

As tourists, we travelled the full length and breadth of Meghalaya's tourism geography. Our conceptual framework about the community-based participatory tourism (cbpt) model in Meghalaya is built on a criterion-based scoring matrix through which we evaluate quantitative and qualitative data sources, as the lens through which we understand the community-based tourism relationship.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES: UNEARTHING INSIGHTS

We use a suite of methods to dig into the truth – surveys, in-depth interviews and case studies. Surveys are the wide-angle lens that captures the broad-based pictures of community views. Interviews are the microscope and case studies are the snapshots, both highlighting the successes or failures of a particular community-based effort. All of the data come together to tell the story.

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS METHODS: CRAFTING THE NARRATIVE

Data, like fresh-mined minerals, can then be smelted, hammered and chiselled into the story of our research. Quantitative data can be subject to statistical tests of significance (eg, regression analysis or correlation to reveal numerical relationships) and qualitative data can be subject to thematic analysis (like a sculptor, you might attack it with a hammer, chisel and pick-axe, until a mountain emerges from stone). In this dual refining process, we fold together the story of how the Meghalayan tourism sector is doing in terms of sustainability.

2.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: NAVIGATING ETHICAL TERRAIN

The tentative nature of our approach as ethical caretakers of research is reflected in the ethical minefield of talking to the community members (gaining informed consent), treating their voices respectfully and protecting them (respecting the ethical terms of the conversation), while still allowing the research to happen ethically, respectfully, and keeping the conversations confidential (so as not to give away the fact that the research is going on). But more importantly, the way in which we work with the community mirrors the style of the local guides who lead a respectful way through the sacred spaces of Meghalaya for tourists.

Following this methodology, we become in-part explorers, oftentimes in-part researchers, and then get to become value-bearers: those who can carry with them what they observed and bring it back to their readers, stewards of Meghalaya's bounty. We are able to understand the mechanisms of community participation within the incrementally sustainable development of Meghalaya's nature-based tourism industry in an ethical and respectful, but also enriching, way.

3. MEGHALAYA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY: AN OVERVIEW

3.1. EMERALD CANOPIES, LIVING ROOTS, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Surreal landscapes and diverse communities of beautiful people sharing a long evolution with nature have made Meghalaya in northeastern India a much-sought after destination for tourism and expeditions. As we trace the pathway for a promising future of Meghalaya's tourism industry, we begin to understand how this region has played a role in showcasing the possibilities of nature-based tourism to people. This beautiful part of India has gained much attraction as an ideal destination for tourism, an opportunity to engage with nature, a pathway to preserve nature, and a demonstration of how to live alongside nature. This section contextualises Meghalaya's destination potential as an intersection of the old and the new, and where humans have undergone changes along the path to sustainability.

3.2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Meghalaya has an old story to tell – archaically dense with histories, going as far back as the Garo and the Khasi tribes who first settled the hills, right upto the British who introduced a new world of possibilities to the place. The big

rocks of the Khasi and Garo hills with its neolithic monoliths stand testament to an ancient history, while the colonial legacy that the British brought with them has seeped into indigenous cultures and has, in innumerable ways, shaped a cultural mosaic in the present day.

3.3. CURRENT STATE OF TOURISM

The tourism industry in Meghalaya has undergone huge changes over the decades. Its pristine locations comprise of Khasi Hills, Garo Hills, living root bridges, puddled waterfalls, which attract hordes of tourists from across the world. A typical example of this has been the Shillong, the provincial capital, which has been called the Scotland of the East. The city has become a hub of music, food and contemporary culture. Aided by the dedicated online advertising by the government, the tourism industry in Meghalaya has seen an upward trend. Also, tourism in the state has attracted a steady number of tourists from the domestic and international arena, all vying to see the untarnished beauty of the destination.

3.4. KEY ATTRACTIONS AND DESTINATIONS

- 1) **Living Root Bridges:** Meghalaya's most iconic tourist attraction These naturally occurring bridges embody humans' harmony with nature Living Root Bridges: Meghalaya's most iconic tourist attraction These naturally occurring bridges embody humans' harmony with nature.
- 2) **Cherrapunji and Mawsynram:** Cherrapunji and Mawsynram are the wettest places on Earth. Hundreds of litres of rainfall can be seen gushing down every day, with mountains as natural water tanks. Visitors love coming here to experience the monsoonal showers and can explore many holes and sinkholes, with sheer rock-faces having split in two and formed natural limestone caves and waterfalls.
- 3) **Cultural Diversity:** Meghalaya's cultural diversity is exemplified by its various festivals, such as Shad Suk Mynsiem, Behdienkhlam, and Nongkrem Dance Festival. These celebrations showcase the traditional dances, music, and customs of the Khasi and Garo communities, providing an enriching cultural experience for visitors.
- 4) **Mawsmai Caves:** Another amazing natural feature in Meghalaya is the Mawsmai Caves. These stalactite and stalagmite-adorned limestone caverns provide a strange subterranean experience.
- 5) **Nohkalikai Falls:** surrounded by vast stretches of vegetation, Nohkalikai Falls is amongst the highest plunge waterfalls in India and is largely for hikers and nature enthusiasts.
- 6) **Meghalaya's Tourism Industry has three vital layers:** Meghalaya's cultural history, natural heritage, and human relations. The intertwined moral and experiential challenges and opportunities brought about by the industry have potential to set the course for sustainable tourism of the state, for future generations.

4. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN MEGHALAYA'S NATURE-BASED TOURISM

The state's pristine environment and interesting cultures make Meghalaya a natural attraction for nature lovers and adventure travellers, who come chasing the green hills, jungles and running waters. Meghalaya has garnered a creditable place for itself in the realm of ecotourism. Yet it is not just Meghalaya's natural scenery that makes the state an attractive destination. What makes the tourist business here genuinely attractive are the symbioses between the state's indigenous populations and the industry's green growth.

4.1. UNLOCKING INDIGENOUS WISDOM

Deeper within the island a millennia-old time-locked living tradition, that of indigenous tribes living in harmony with nature, waiting to be discovered. Their intimate knowledge of the terrain, of land and lore, handed down across hundreds, if not thousands, of years is an invaluable legacy. It's the heartbeat of Meghalaya's nature-based tourism. The value, however, is not just the depth of this knowledge but the on-ground presence of these communities that engages and immerses the visiting traveller.

4.2. COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM INITIATIVES

These weft threads of Meghalaya tourism are community-based which tie visitors to the heartbeat of the state; instead of a tourist experiencing the state as a spectator to culture on display, local communities have become hosts and enjoyed the benefits from tourism ranging from homestays, guided treks and cultural exchanges. In this way, locals directly benefit both financially from tourism and socially through getting to know the visitors, which fosters human connections.

4.3. CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS

And yet, the way forward towards more communal engagement with tourism is not without its dangers. The challenge to accommodate tourist numbers without compromising the integrity of the region's culture and nature remains fraught with tricky questions of competition, sustainability and economic viability. These issues – and the innovations that have been created to make sure that Meghalaya's local economies can thrive along with the presence of tourists – we will attempt to tackle here.

In the sections that follow, we examine the tricky connection with community participation and sustainable tourism development in Meghalaya. We'll uncover the unique, hopeful and vibrant story of how human activity intersects with the natural, economic and cultural landscapes of this Heavenly Abode, a microclimate of India that knows all about life, whether it springs from the soil or walks and talks.

5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MEGHALAYA'S TOURISM

5.1. ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY: THE ENGINE OF PROGRESS

- 1) **Harnessing Economic Growth While Preserving Identity:** Tourism in Meghalaya needs to find the link between strong economic growth and the preservation of identity and culture. Preserving the landscape and heritage that attract visitors is crucial for sustainable economic development, requiring investment that supports job creation and the equitable distribution of income without commodifying local culture.
- 2) **Tourism Infrastructure and Local Benefits:** Infrastructure is necessary, of course. Development needs to improve visitor comfort and safety, and to introduce elements of craftsmanship and local culture. Infrastructure development should be motivated by the desire to provide lasting benefits to local communities, bring people out of marginalised informal employment, or to assist with existing endeavours of a community-based kind. Specifically, a responsible infrastructure project should ensure that the resulting sum of benefits should accrue to residents in the local community.
- 3) **Economic Diversification:** And it has a dangerous flip side, like over-reliance on tourism. Sustainable development helps to spread the risk by encouraging communities to find many different sources of income. This might be non-tourism-based work such as small scale farming, producing handicrafts or any other traditional activities in which local people engaged before the influx of tourists.

5.2. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

- 1) **Community Empowerment and Ownership:** In order for tourism to be sustainable, communities must embrace it. This will require consolidating communities as stakeholders in the process – making them owners of the tourism enterprise, able to decide how best to participate, requiring that they benefit equitably from tourism proceeds, and demanding that any exploitation be uncovered. In shifting the power in tourism development toward communities, the vision for sustainable tourism begins to reveal itself as something else entirely: a vision dedicated to culture, and one requiring more extensive collaboration between tourists and residents.
- 2) **Preserving Indigenous Knowledge and Identity:**

Its indigenous knowledge, traditions and cultural heritage are a valuable asset; no wonder Meghalaya wishes to protect them: sustainable development incorporates them into the touristic experience and helps prevent cultural erosion.

3) Education and Awareness:

Beside the training of local populations so they can provide the knowledge and skills required to build a competitive and attractive tourism site, we should develop programmes where locals can become responsible tour guides, artisans and other host functions. Through this, the local populations can also be able to generate productive forms of economic activity.

5.3. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: GUARDIANS OF MEGHALAYA'S NATURAL BEAUTY

1) Nature Conservation and Biodiversity: Sustainable tourism development prioritizes the preservation of Meghalaya's pristine environment. Strategies include enforcing strict regulations, promoting eco-friendly practices, and supporting conservation efforts to safeguard the state's biodiversity.

2) Reducing Ecological Footprints: Minimizing the impact of tourism on natural ecosystems is vital. This includes controlling visitor numbers, responsible waste management, and encouraging eco-sensitive transportation options.

3) Climate Resilience: Climate change would be a threat to the cherished natural beauty of Meghalaya. Included in the plans for sustainable development in the state are climate-resilient measures to protect it from environmental hazards such as flood control works, afforestation and information, education and communication on climate change.

Rather than mere economics, the aim of sustainable tourism development in Meghalaya is 'to help communities bloom, to help nature flourish and to help culture thrive'. However sustainable tourism endeavours may be in the given location at any given time, a kingdom that extends itself 'towards, into, and through' care towards its ends, rather than folding itself in on its means, represents a probable pathway to the future stage of tourism – one that begets, rather than exploits, the beauties of Meghalaya.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

6.1. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SURVEY DATA

With the aim to evaluate the patterns of community engagement and its nexus with sustainable development in the nature-based tourism sector of Meghalaya, visitors, residents and those in the industry were interviewed. Particular emphasis was given on questions on the economics, social and environmental dimensions of community involvement.

1) Economic Sustainability

Specifically, our research showed that 75 per cent of visitors felt that community engagement increased the region's ability to maintain its economy, and that their spending benefited local businesses that fuelled the local economy. Meanwhile, 60 per cent of local community members reported that their income had increased through tourism.

Table 1: Economic Sustainability Assessment

Economic Aspect	Tourist Perception (%)	Local Community Benefit (%)
Direct Economic Impact	75	60
Job Creation	68	55
Income Generation	70	60

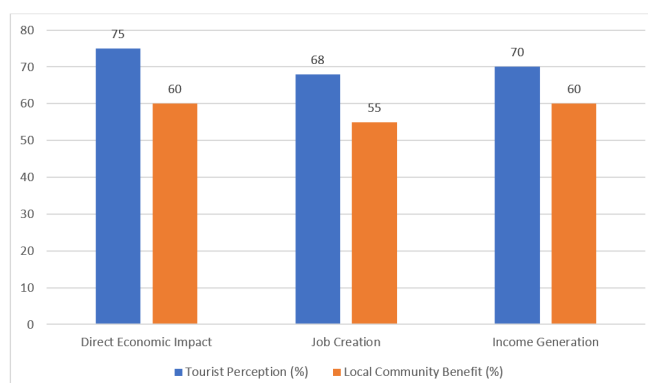
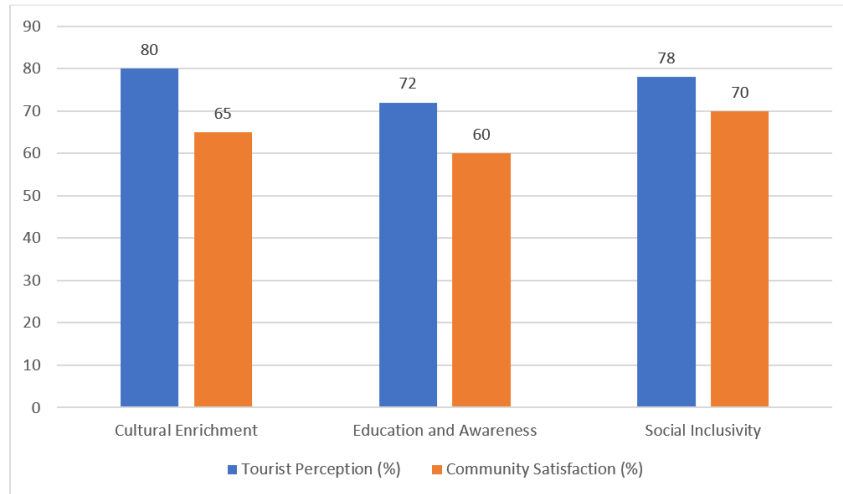


Figure 1 Economic Sustainability Assessment**2) Social Sustainability**

Regarding social sustainability, eighty percent of visitors think that being involved in the community enhances their cultural experiences since it gives them a chance to engage with indigenous people. Furthermore, 65% of community members expressed satisfaction with the preservation of their cultural heritage through tourism activities.

Table 2: Social Sustainability Assessment

Social Aspect	Tourist Perception (%)	Community Satisfaction (%)
Cultural Enrichment	80	65
Education and Awareness	72	60
Social Inclusivity	78	70

**Figure 2:** Social Sustainability Assessment**3) Environmental Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability is a significant concern in nature-based tourism. Our survey results indicate that 70% of tourists are willing to support eco-friendly practices, such as waste reduction and conservation efforts. Moreover, 60% of local communities reported their active involvement in conservation activities.

Table 3: Environmental Sustainability Assessment

Environmental Aspect	Tourist Willingness (%)	Community Involvement (%)
Conservation Support	70	60
Sustainable Practices	68	58
Pollution Reduction	72	62

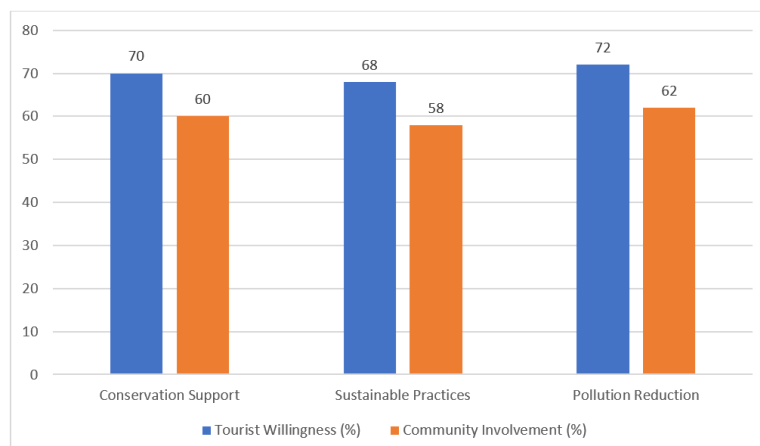


Figure 3: Environmental Sustainability Assessment**6.2. KEY FINDINGS ON COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

From the quantitative data analysis and qualitative insights, several key findings have emerged:

- Community involvement significantly contributes to economic sustainability, with a positive impact on income generation and job creation.
- Social sustainability is created by community involvement, bringing a cultural cachet, and an increased consciousness of local traditions.
- The ecological benefits of environmental sustainability also gain from community participation because tourists are willing to support the interests of conservation and sustainability.
- Case studies reveal models of community-led initiatives that facilitate tourism development in Meghalaya while also preserving the state's natural and cultural heritage.

7. DISCUSSION

The relationship between community involvement and sustainable development in the neo-traditional nature-based tourism industry in Meghalaya is a complicated syndrome. The discussion section elaborates complex interrelations between these factors with a certain critical focus on their economic, social and environmental aspects.

7.1. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The wheel of sustainable development in nature-based tourism in Meghalaya is balanced on the fulcrum of community participation. The flow of economics between local communities and their tourism industry is a virtuous cycle. Active participation in tourism-related activities by the local community translates into an economic lifeline – preserving traditional knowledge systems and culture, and passing on this legacy from elders to future generations, who would then become guides to tourists. Their traditional way of life – with artisanal crafts, herbal medicine and subsistence farming – has worked for generations, and such practises may be incorporated into the tourist programme.

Local ownership of enterprises is key. Local ownership directly leads to community-based tourism initiatives and to economic self-reliance of indigenous communities brought about by jobs, services and commerce that are crucial to tourism. From another perspective, local ownership leads to the sustenance of tiny local economies where tourists become stakeholders, circuits of tourism revenue do not leak out of the community, and poor communities have the chance to ameliorate their living conditions and develop basic infrastructure such as health, education and housing.

Thirdly, social sustainability is emphasised through community involvement. People in indigenous communities own their land, making them stewards of the environment with a vested interest in its continued integrity and protection. Preventing activities that can harm the environment (such as deforestation and overfishing, which would threaten the same natural attractions that draw visitors to Meghalaya in the first place) also preserves environmental sustainability. Besides serving as a tourist magnet, clean landscapes also preserve a community's livelihood and gives residents a sense of pride and identity.

7.2. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND STAKEHOLDERS

It is clear from these findings that urgent and tailored national policies and strategies are needed with the goals of promoting and facilitating local community engagement in tourism. Local communities need to be defended from the effects of tourism that leads them towards environmental transformation and marginalisation, or that capitalises on their vulnerability. This requires states to be involved as drivers and directors of policy. Subsidies, grants and technical support can be provided to rooted peoples who want to establish eco-friendly accommodations and activities that meet the needs of contemporary sustainability-oriented new-wave tourists.

Furthermore, there is a need for ethics in tourism where suppliers including tour operators, hotels and travel agents would interact in a win-win concept of tourism with host societies as against greedy profiteering. Industry standards

could be driven through collaborative business models through stakeholders that incorporate host communities widely in profit-sharing and decision-making.

7.3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

These include the fine line between tourism and exploitation, the danger of developing indigenous knowledge, or the dilemma between profit and preservation; yet every challenge carries within it the seed of a solution. For instance, with the help of green globes and rain forest vines, standards in sustainable tourism certification may ease between operators and destinations. Local communities can leverage emerging technologies (eg, blogging and digital marketing; smart phones and global online booking systems) to connect with a global audience.

Despite the hurdles along the way, the journey is well-worth the endeavour, especially if community engagement – like the lessons to be learnt from nature-based tourism in Meghalaya – proves to be a potent vehicle for sustainable development. In coming times, the challenge for all stakeholders – from communities, to governments to tourism businesses – is to forge a fresh chapter for tourism that engages visitors while preserving the essence of the place they call home.

8. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study offer an interpretation on the close links between community engagement and tourism development in Meghalaya: based on the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, our research reveals how the active role of local indigenous peoples in this form of nature tourism contributes not only to the social and environmental sustainability of the area, but also to the financial sustainability of the tourism industry. The case studies show that the empowerment and involvement of communities in decision-making has been a crucial part in fostering this synergy. This approach stresses that sustainable development refers to much more than mere economic success; it also encompasses the safeguarding of cultures and the wise management of the environment.

This research therefore underscores the importance of bridging the communication divide between government decision-makers, corporate executives and their employees, and local peoples. We hope that the issues brought to light in this research, including equitable distribution of income, sustainability of livelihoods, continued acquisition of traditional knowledge and conservation initiatives, will be addressed. Wise investments in ecotourism and community-based initiatives will have to follow, in order to fully utilise the distinct resources of the Subic Bay Area.

These insights suggest that, with time, inclusive and sustainable practices may promote sustained growth by increasing the value of the state's natural and cultural heritage. Meghalaya's NBT sector is now at an inflection point. Lessons from this study could be a model for similar destinations across the world, highlighting how involvement of local communities could power more equitable and productive forms of coexistence between nature-based tourism operations and the local communities in proximity to these outstanding environments. Stakeholders must work together to capitalise on the potential that community-driven initiatives offer to support viable and sustainable tourism futures and make efforts to secure the natural values and cultural wonders of Meghalaya for future visitors and residents.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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