



## Stakeholder involvement in fostering ecotourism: A study in Manipur

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### Abstract

Ecotourism represents a sustainable development approach that fosters environmental conservation while generating economic and social benefits for local communities. In the context of Manipur—a state in Northeast India known for its rich biodiversity, scenic landscapes, and indigenous cultures, ecotourism holds significant potential. This research aims to identify key stakeholders in Manipur's ecotourism development, explore their roles and contributions, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges they face. The study is descriptive in nature utilizing secondary data collected from government reports, policy documents, tourism department statistics, academic journals, media sources, etc. Diverse stakeholders, including local communities, government, NGOs, private sectors, and tourists, actively shape Manipur's ecotourism with varying involvement levels, led by communities and authorities. Initiatives like homestays, policies, campaigns, and infrastructure promote empowerment and sustainability but are hindered by bureaucracy, limited access, security, and environmental strains such as waste and encroachment. Collaborative governance with enhanced coordination and community management is vital for meeting tourist expectations and securing long-term benefits. Stakeholder mapping highlights key ecotourism players in Manipur local communities, NGOs, academics, private sector, government contributing to heritage, training, investment, and policies amid coordination and funding challenges. Opportunities include biodiversity-driven homestays, trails, partnerships, and digital cultural marketing. Recommendations urge multi-stakeholder coordination, capacity-building, equitable policies, and eco-infrastructure for sustainable economic, cultural, and environmental growth.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, stakeholder, local community, environment conservation, sustainable development

### Introduction

(Ce / & Madrid, 2022) One of the biggest and fastest-growing sectors in the world, tourism plays a significant role in employment, economic expansion, and cross-cultural exchange. Within this industry, ecotourism has become a viable substitute for traditional mass tourism, focussing on environmentally conscious travel to unspoiled locations that promotes the welfare of nearby communities. "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education" is what The International Ecotourism Society defines as ecotourism. Ecotourism is frequently seen as a means of attaining sustainable development in developing nations, especially in areas with rich cultural heritage but delicate ecosystems.

Since the late 1990s, the idea of ecotourism has grown in popularity in India, with a growing focus on improving rural livelihoods, community involvement, and biodiversity conservation. With its remarkable ecological diversity and indigenous cultural legacy, the Northeastern part of India offers enormous potential for the growth of ecotourism. In this area, Manipur, which is near the Indo-Myanmar border and is frequently referred to as the "Gateway to Southeast Asia," has special natural resources like the Shirui Hills, Loktak Lake, Keibul Lamjao National Park, and Dzuko Valley. These regions support the livelihoods of numerous ethnic communities and are home to rare species, such as the endemic Sangai deer (*Rucervus eldii eldii*). Therefore, the ecological and sociocultural environment of Manipur provides an ideal setting for the growth of ecotourism as a conservation and socioeconomic development tactic. Nonetheless, the growth of ecotourism is a multifaceted and intricate process. (Waligo *et al* 2013)<sup>[13]</sup> The availability of

natural and cultural resources is only one factor that determines the success of ecotourism projects; other factors include the active involvement, cooperation, and coordination of different stakeholders, such as government organisations, local communities, private businesses, NGOs, educational institutions, and travellers. The interests of stakeholders frequently collide or overlap, which affects how ecotourism development projects turn out. In order to promote inclusive and sustainable ecotourism in Manipur, it is crucial to comprehend the roles, viewpoints, and interactions of stakeholders. In Manipur, government agencies like the Department of Tourism are principally in charge of creating policies, enforcing laws, and building infrastructure. Community involvement, environmental sustainability, and capacity building are emphasised as top priorities for the state's tourism development. Yet, policy implementation frequently encounters challenges, including bureaucratic delays, insufficient local capacity, limited funding, and inadequate coordination among agencies. Local communities, who are the custodians of the natural and cultural heritage that underpin ecotourism, often face marginalization in decision-making processes. Recognising their traditional ecological knowledge, encouraging benefit-sharing arrangements, and guaranteeing their active participation in planning and management are all necessary for effective ecotourism. NGOs and civil society groups serve as a bridge between the public and the government, promoting participatory governance, environmental education, and community training. Whether ecotourism in Manipur develops as a sustainable development model or succumbs to environmental degradation and commercialisation depends on how these various actors interact. Global frameworks like the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 15 (life on land), further reiterate the significance of stakeholder collaboration. By striking a balance between conservation and livelihood needs, ecotourism can help achieve these goals if it is managed through inclusive and participatory methods. Given the ecological fragility and sociopolitical sensitivities of the region, such a balance is crucial in biodiversity-rich states like Manipur, which is a part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. There is currently a paucity of empirical research on stakeholder roles and their interactions in Manipur's ecotourism sector despite strong policy support for sustainable tourism (Banerjee & Sharma, n.d.) (Mohanty *et al* 2024)<sup>[5]</sup>. Much of the academic work on Indian ecotourism has focused on states such as Kerala, Uttarakhand, or Sikkim leaving a clear knowledge gap in relation to the northeastern states. Given Manipur's unique ecological and cultural context, it is thus both timely and important to carry out a comprehensive investigation into the roles, responsibilities, challenges, and cooperation among all relevant actor such as local communities, government agencies, NGOs, private enterprises, and research institutions in its ecotourism ecosystem. With an emphasis on how their involvement affects planning, management, and sustainability results, this study aims to examine the role of stakeholders in the growth of ecotourism in Manipur. It seeks to pinpoint current coordination gaps and offer solutions for improving multi-stakeholder cooperation. The study aims to add to the larger conversation on sustainable tourism governance in environmentally sensitive areas by investigating the relationships between governmental entities, local communities, non-governmental organisations, private businesses, and visitors. In the end, the results should help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who want to use ecotourism as a tool for socioeconomic development and environmental preservation in Manipur and other comparable settings.

### Review of Literature

(Wondirad *et al* 2020)<sup>[14]</sup> Ecotourism originated in the 1980s as a reaction to the adverse effects of mass tourism, promoting positive environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts. Initially defined by Ceballos-Lascurain in 1987, its interpretations emphasize nature, conservation, education, and local development. Views on its effectiveness vary, with criticism regarding its failure to achieve objectives and collaboration among stakeholders. This study examines ecotourism in Southern Ethiopia, focusing on stakeholder interactions, factors affecting collaboration, and recommendations for sustainable practices. It finds ecotourism underdeveloped and poorly managed, leading to community exclusion and resource degradation. Effective stakeholder collaboration is hindered by poor governance and lack of awareness. The research advocates for community involvement in planning to align benefits with local needs and proposes a framework combining stakeholder theories with triple-bottom-line principles to enhance sustainability and cooperation, providing practical guidance for policymakers and communities.

(Salman *et al* n.d.) The study examined the ecotourism development in Penang Hill, focusing on stakeholders'

perspectives on long-term sustainability. Management authorities prioritize balance between economic and conservation efforts, ensuring active involvement and collaboration between management and commercial sectors. (Sun *et al* 2021)<sup>[10]</sup> The concept of ecotourism has gained prominence since the 1980s for its potential benefits in development, conservation, and community enhancement in protected areas. Effective management and community involvement are essential due to the local reliance on natural resources. The case of Xingkai Lake National Nature Reserve highlights the need for clear communication between stakeholders to balance ecotourism and resource conservation. Currently, weak relationships among tourism, resources, and communities stem from complexities in land ownership and management. The study indicates that while ecotourism can improve environmental protection, living standards, and economic growth, it necessitates careful planning. It also has broader implications for ecotourism development and community engagement in China and similar developing countries, and it points out the challenges posed by international jurisdiction over shared resources like the lake adjacent to Russia.

(Ursa, 2021)<sup>[11]</sup> Rural tourism refers to experiences and activities in agricultural or non-urban areas that promote local culture and heritage while economically benefiting host communities. It involves various forms, beyond just farm-based tourism, including nature holidays, eco-tourism, and other special interests. This type of tourism has grown in popularity, fueling economic development, creating jobs, and revitalizing local crafts. Addressing rural depopulation due to urban migration, it emphasizes community involvement in tourism planning, particularly in regions like Manipur, where local residents are emerging as key stakeholders. The government plays a crucial role in supporting such community engagement to enhance tourism and preserve rural characteristics.

(Salman *et al* 2024)<sup>[8]</sup> The global tourism trend is increasingly focused on a green economy, with ecotourism defined as environmentally sustainable and nature-based tourism that educates about the natural environment. In Asia, ecotourism helps create jobs and enhance community livelihoods. However, misinterpretations of ecotourism pose risks of environmental degradation and socio-cultural harm. Addressing these challenges requires the engagement of local communities, governments, NGOs, and businesses. Despite existing research, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on multi-stakeholder roles in sustainable ecotourism in Asia. This research highlights the importance of diverse stakeholder involvement and suggests solutions to overcome obstacles to sustainable practices. Key contributions include an analysis of stakeholder dynamics, recommendations for building local capacities, and collaboration strategies for environmental conservation and economic development, framed within Stakeholder Theory. Findings indicate a need for improved governance and engagement to attain sustainability in Asian ecotourism, advocating for investment in local skills, partnerships with the private sector, and international cooperation that honors cultural heritage. Overall, the study identifies challenges and offers practical policy solutions to benefit local communities and enhance conservation efforts across Asia.

### Objectives

- To identify the key stakeholders involved in the development of ecotourism in Manipur

- To explore the roles and contributions of stakeholders
- To evaluate the opportunities and challenges faced by stakeholders in development of ecotourism

### Materials and methods

This study adopts a descriptive research design to enable a comprehensive and systematic study of ecotourism in Manipur. Descriptive research is appropriate for gaining in-depth insights to identify key stakeholders in Manipur's ecotourism development, explore their roles and contributions, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges they encounter. The research relies on secondary data sources to gather relevant information. These sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and other scholarly publications. In addition, data will be sourced from credible digital databases, and institutional repositories.

### Key Stakeholders Involved in the Development of Ecotourism in Manipur

(George *et al* 2024)<sup>[4]</sup> Ecotourism is increasingly recognised as a powerful tool for combining cultural preservation, environmental conservation and locally driven economic development. In Manipur, a state endowed with rich biodiversity, unique landscapes and diverse ethnic cultures, the growth of ecotourism relies heavily on mapping and engaging the right stakeholders. These include government agencies, local communities (especially marginalised and indigenous groups), NGOs, the private sector, academic and research institutions, and tourists themselves. At the government level, the Manipur Tourism Policy (2022) provides a formal framework: The Department of Tourism leads planning and promotion, while the Forest Department and other agencies help steward natural assets like national parks and community reserves. (Raghumani Singh & Prakash Arya, n.d.) The state's ecotourism policy places additional focus on inclusive, sustainable travel and departmental collaboration to include local populations. (Ursa & Cha Arunkumar, n.d.) Local communities play a key role as stakeholders by providing traditional food, hosting eco-homestays, serving as guides, and imparting cultural information. Research in Andro village, Manipur, shows that community-based tourism (CBT) has improved livelihoods, empowered residents socially, and helped preserve local traditions. Active participation ensures that benefits are shared fairly and that tourism remains rooted in the community's identity. NGOs and civil society organisations play a key role in bridging community needs and government mechanisms. (Ursa & Cha Arunkumar, n.d.) NGOs are crucial in directing community conservation, capacity-building, and sustainable tourism strategies, according to larger studies in Northeast India, even if specific NGOs in Manipur are less well-documented in open-access research. The private sector, including eco-lodge operators and tour companies, contributes by investing in green infrastructure and developing ethically designed packages. This partnership is vital: as the Tourism Policy notes, private sector growth must be supported, but regulated to ensure sustainability. Academic and research institutions also play a unique role. (Oinam *et al* 2024)<sup>[6]</sup> For instance, studies assessing ecotourism site suitability using GIS and AHP methods highlight how spatial data and evidence-based planning can guide sustainable ecotourism in Manipur's Imphal Valley. Such research helps identify

areas for conservation, capacity development, and infrastructure investment. (George *et al* 2024)<sup>[4]</sup> Finally, tourists themselves are stakeholders: their behaviour, preferences, and feedback influence how ecotourism grows. Their demand for responsible travel can drive better community practices, conservation standards, and local entrepreneurship. Together, these stakeholders form a network of interdependent actors. To promote truly inclusive and sustainable ecotourism, it is essential to map their roles, incentivise collaboration, and build mechanisms for shared decision-making especially giving voice and power to indigenous and marginalised communities.

### Roles and Contributions of Stakeholders

(Chetia, n.d.) The cooperation of numerous stakeholders who support the marketing, administration, and maintenance of tourism projects is essential to the success of ecotourism in Manipur. When these actors coordinate effectively, Manipur-rich in biodiversity, lake ecosystems, hill environments, and vibrant cultural heritage can become a leading model of sustainable ecotourism in Northeast India. The Government of Manipur is at the forefront of policy development, infrastructure creation, and destination promotion. The Manipur Tourism Policy 2022 emphasises sustainable tourism, community participation, and environmental protection, offering a guiding framework for ecotourism development across the state. The Forest Department, which manages national parks, community reserves, and wetlands, ensures protection of fragile ecosystems such as Keibul Lamjao National Park and Loktak Lake. Its publicly available conservation directives show a commitment to ecosystem management and community coordination in protected areas. Local governing bodies also contribute to aligning tourism development with community aspirations and traditional land-use systems, enabling better governance at the grassroots level. The local population forms the foundation of sustainable ecotourism. Their role in running homestays, guiding treks, showcasing traditional cuisine, and promoting indigenous crafts reinforces cultural identity within tourism experiences. (Ursa & Cha Arunkumar, n.d.) A community-based tourism study in Andro village confirmed that such involvement promotes environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and equitable economic benefits at the household level. Examples such as homestays around Loktak Lake and eco-camps near Shirui Hills highlight how community stewardship enhances both conservation and livelihoods. NGOs and civil society organisations strengthen ecotourism by supporting community-led models, offering environmental education, and building local capacity. They provide training in entrepreneurship, responsible waste management, and hospitality skills that enable communities to run ecotourism operations effectively. Research on ecotourism practices in Manipur indicates that improving skill development and stakeholder participation is essential for long-term sustainability. The private sector also plays a major role by investing in eco-lodges, tour operations, and adventure activities. Eco-friendly enterprises help market Manipur's unique ecological and cultural assets to wider audiences. According to open-access research, private operators increasingly adopt ethical practices such as renewable energy use, local procurement, and low-waste operations when working within community-oriented tourism systems. This integration of commercial activity

with environmental values strengthens sustainability. Academic and research institutions contribute through training, impact assessments, and data generation. Their work supports planning by evaluating carrying capacity, visitor flows, and environmental risks. (Chetia, n.d.) For instance, open-access ecotourism studies in Northeast India provide evidence-based strategies for visitor management, local participation, and policy design—all essential for sustainable tourism in states like Manipur. Finally, visitors themselves are crucial stakeholders. Environmentally conscious tourists those who minimise waste, respect local cultures, and choose sustainable services play an active role in maintaining ecological integrity and supporting community livelihoods. Their behaviour influences the direction and quality of ecotourism development. In summary, ecotourism in Manipur depends on the coordinated participation of government agencies, local communities, NGOs, private enterprises, academic institutions, and tourists. Strengthening transparency, cooperation, and capacity among these groups will ensure that ecotourism contributes meaningfully to both conservation and socioeconomic development in the state.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Faced by Stakeholders in the development of Ecotourism in Manipur**

(Chetia, n.d.) Ecotourism development in Manipur presents a blend of persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, NGOs, private enterprises, and academic institutions. One major challenge is the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in remote and ecologically sensitive regions, which restricts accessibility and limits the potential for community-based tourism initiatives. In addition, communities often face insufficient training in hospitality, waste management, and entrepreneurship, making it difficult for them to manage ecotourism activities independently. Environmental pressures, such as habitat degradation and unregulated tourism practices, further complicate efforts to ensure ecological sustainability. Limited financial resources and inconsistent coordination among government departments, NGOs, and tour operators also hinder long-term planning and implementation.

(Ursa & Cha Arunkumar, n.d.) Despite these challenges, stakeholders have significant opportunities to strengthen sustainable and community-driven ecotourism. Local communities possess rich indigenous knowledge, cultural assets, and traditional ecological practices that can be mobilized to create authentic tourism experiences. Studies from Andro village demonstrate that community involvement enhances livelihood security, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship when supported by institutional cooperation. Government policies, particularly the Manipur Tourism Policy 2022, provide a framework for promoting eco-friendly infrastructure, responsible travel, and community participation. Public-private partnerships also offer opportunities for investment in eco-lodges, adventure tourism, and green technologies. A flagship project combining flood control, water storage, and ecotourism development over about 300 acres. Funded at approximately ₹650 crore, with around 140 acres planned as a recreation and ecotourism zone linked to Imphal View Tower via a proposed cable car. ₹89.48 crore has been sanctioned by the Central Government for the Loktak Lake Experience Project under the Special Assistance to States

for Capital Investment (SASCI) – Development of Iconic Tourist Centres to Global Scale. Tamenglong Eco-Tourism and Carbon Finance Initiatives. The Manipur Forest Department and Tamenglong Forest Division are developing ecotourism at Arai Bat Cave and Khoupanglang Cave, along with carbon finance projects in a 5.81 sq km community reserve at Azuram village. These initiatives are reported as community-centric and income-generating; while exact rupee amounts are not specified in the articles, they involve department-backed support and collaboration with The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) for carbon finance and eco-tourism infrastructure.

Overall, sustainable and community-based ecotourism in Manipur can grow effectively when stakeholder collaboration, capacity enhancement, and policy implementation are strengthened. Addressing current challenges while capitalizing on cultural, ecological, and technological opportunities can ensure that ecotourism contributes meaningfully to conservation and rural development.

## **Results**

### **1. Active Stakeholder Involvement**

The study revealed that multiple stakeholder groups local communities, government agencies, private entrepreneurs, NGOs, and tourists play interdependent roles in shaping the ecotourism landscape of Manipur. However, their levels of involvement vary considerably, with community and government participation being the most prominent.

### **2. Empowerment and Community Involvement**

Through homestays, cultural events, and local tour guides, local communities in places like Loktak Lake, Shirui Hills, and Dzukou Valley have started to actively participate in ecotourism initiatives. Both cultural preservation and livelihood opportunities have improved as a result. However, depending on institutional support, training, and awareness, the level of empowerment varies by district.

### **3. Institutional Support and Government Policies**

A number of policies, such as eco-cottage schemes, capacity-building workshops, and conservation programs, have been launched by the Manipur Department of Tourism with the goal of encouraging sustainable tourism. However, the efficient execution of these programs has been hampered by bureaucratic hold-ups, poor interdepartmental coordination, and insufficient oversight.

### **4. The function of NGOs and The Civil Society**

Campaigns for local residents' awareness, environmental education, and capacity building have been greatly aided by NGOs and civil society groups. Their participation has been crucial in advancing environmentally friendly behaviours like biodiversity preservation and waste management. Their reach is still restricted to specific ecotourism areas, though.

### **5. Initiatives from the Private Sector and Entrepreneurship**

Small business owners have helped build infrastructure, particularly in the areas of lodging, transportation, and adventure travel. However, because of Manipur's limited marketing as an ecotourism destination, security concerns, and infrastructure issues, the private sector's investment is still quite small.

## 6. Tourist perception and expectation

Authentic, nature-based, and culturally immersive experiences have become increasingly popular among domestic and foreign tourists. Although they acknowledged the area's natural beauty and native customs, they pointed to issues like limited amenities, poor accessibility, and a lack of information as the main drawbacks.

## 7. Sustainability Issues in the Environment and Culture

Even though ecotourism has increased revenue and conservation awareness, uncontrolled tourism, waste buildup, and encroachment are putting more and more strain on some locations. If tourism is not properly managed, local customs and traditional practices could also become commercialised.

## 8. The necessity of cooperative governance

The results highlight the need for a collaborative governance model that involves all stakeholders in order to develop sustainable ecotourism in Manipur. Improved communication, transparent decision-making, and community-led management systems are essential to ensure long-term ecological and socio-economic benefits.

## Discussions

Thorough stakeholder mapping is necessary for the growth of ecotourism in Manipur in order to identify all important players, including local communities, private sector players, NGOs, academic institutions, and government agencies like the Department of Tourism and Forest Department. Indigenous and marginalised groups must be given special consideration. Every stakeholder makes a unique contribution: communities protect natural and cultural heritage, NGOs help raise awareness and provide training, academic institutions support research, private companies invest and innovate, and the government creates policies and builds infrastructure. But issues like inadequate infrastructure, poor coordination, a lack of funding, inadequate training, lax enforcement of policies, ecological risks, and poor marketing still exist. Despite these challenges, Manipur's rich biodiversity and cultural heritage present vast opportunities for community-based ecotourism, eco-homestays, nature trails, public-private partnerships, digital marketing, and integration of local crafts and culture into tourism. It is advised that multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms be put in place, that community capacity-building be strengthened, that clear and equitable ecotourism policies be developed, that inclusive decision-making be ensured, that eco-friendly infrastructure be promoted, that impact monitoring systems be improved, and that academic institutions and government agencies work together for evidence-based planning in order to improve sustainability.

## Conclusion

The study highlights that stakeholders are the backbone of ecotourism development in Manipur, with their roles extending beyond mere participation to actively shaping the sustainability and success of the sector. Local communities, government agencies, private enterprises, and NGOs collectively influence the planning, implementation, and promotion of ecotourism initiatives. The engagement of local communities ensures that tourism development is culturally sensitive, environmentally responsible, and

economically beneficial at the grassroots level. Their involvement in providing homestays, guiding tourists, and preserving traditional practices not only enhances the visitor experience but also strengthens local livelihoods. Government agencies have been instrumental in providing policy support, infrastructural development, and capacity-building initiatives, which are essential for the long-term sustainability of ecotourism. Private enterprises bring in investments, modern amenities, and professional management, improving accessibility and the overall quality of services, while collaborating with local communities ensures shared benefits. NGOs and community-based organizations play a crucial role in environmental conservation and awareness, promoting responsible tourism practices among both visitors and residents. Despite these positive contributions, challenges such as fragmented stakeholder coordination, limited funding, and dependency on external investment persist, which can hinder holistic development. The study emphasizes that overcoming these challenges requires an integrated approach, where all stakeholders actively collaborate, communicate, and share responsibilities for sustainable ecotourism growth. So, the development of ecotourism in Manipur is not merely a tourism strategy but a comprehensive process that balances economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. The study underscores that sustained engagement and cooperation among all stakeholders are essential to transform Manipur into a model for ecotourism, benefiting both local communities and the broader ecological landscape. Effective stakeholder participation can thus ensure that ecotourism becomes a vehicle for sustainable development, cultural conservation, and inclusive economic prosperity in the region.

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