

# **Sustainable Tourism Practices in Meghalaya: Balancing Development and Environmental Conservation**

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## Meghalaya: The Abode of Clouds

Meghalaya, a state in northeast India, is a popular tourist destination known for its natural beauty. It is a beautiful place with green landscapes, hills, waterfalls and natural views. There are so many places to visit in Meghalaya, for eg-Cherrapunji and Mawsynram, known as the wettest place on earth; Shillong, the capital city known as the Scotland of the East; Mawlynnong, known as the cleanest village of Asia; Balpakram National Park, Dawki etc. Meghalaya is inhabited by the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes. As the place is full of natural landscapes, it focuses on eco-tourism and sustainability to protect nature and help local communities.

## Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism emerged in 1980s, it aims to protect the environment, preserve local cultures and support local communities. Sustainable tourism had grown and developed similar to sustainable development, which was first defined in the UN's so-called Brundtland Report in 1987. In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro included tourism into Agenda 21. The first Sustainable Tourism Charter was drafted at the first World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, held at Lanzarote in 1995, establishing a global framework. The year 2000 was considered as the strong development of this type of tourism. In 2003, first sustainability label to the tourism sector, Ecolabel was introduced and global studies and collaborations among organizations such as the WTO, UN Environment Program and the International Ecosystem Society advanced the cause. More recently, in 2015 sustainable tourism was recognized by the UN as a key means to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

There are so many benefits of sustainable tourism, which includes protecting the environment, natural resources and wildlife while providing socio-economic benefits to local communities in tourist destination. It also focuses on conserving cultural heritage and offering authentic experiences that helps tourists to connect with the unique traditions of the local communities. Sustainable tourism brings tourists and local communities together for mutual benefits as well as it creates inclusive and accessible tourist opportunities.

There is another term frequently used in tourism industry, which is called ecotourism. Sustainable tourism and ecotourism both are different. While sustainable tourism aims to create travel experiences with less negative impacts and positive benefits to destinations and their communities, ecotourism is more focused on educating tourists about nature and the environment. Ecotourism encourages tourists to engage in conservation efforts and cultural activities.

## Sustainable tourism practices in Meghalaya

In Meghalaya there are so many sustainable tourism practices to preserve its natural beauty and cultural heritage. For example, we can mention about some eco-tourism initiatives like- living root bridge, the bridge is very unique in nature. By promoting eco-friendly tourism through preservation, they are trying to protect the natural resources as well as showcasing the beauty of nature. The Mawphlang Sacred Forest, which are preserved through traditional beliefs and practices. The participation of local communities helps to improve the sustainable tourism. For example, Mawlynnong village, here starting from homestays to food court and shops are run by the local communities and they keep everything neat and clean.

The government of Meghalaya plays an important role in this sense. According to the Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023, the government is working to reduce, recycle and dispose waste responsibly, which includes installing smart dustbins and waste segregation at tourist sites. The government is also developing ecotourism infrastructure including hiking trails, viewpoints, resting decks etc.

Conrad K. Sangma, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya during his budget speech, emphasized the state's commitment to becoming India's leading sustainable tourist destination by adopting global best practices. To

achieve this goal, the government plans to control the visitor limits in the eco-tourism zones. In these areas a green fee will be collected from the visitors which will further distributed fairly among the local communities. For this he mentioned that ₹50 crore will be used to build better facilities in these zones. He also mentioned that the tourism industry is increased with 13.81 lakh visitors in this year, which is higher than before pandemic. To improve tourism ₹200 crore will be spent on new tourist circuits places like Umling, Mawsynram, Sohiong etc. As more tourists visit the state, there is a need for 3000 more premium hotel rooms. For this private companies will build luxury hotels in places like Shillong, Umiam, Sohra and Tura.

#### Balancing development and environmental conservation in Meghalaya

Meghalaya, known as the Abode of Clouds, is rich in biodiversity and unique ecosystem. The state is working to balance economic development while protecting the natural environment. The state is required a proper plan for economic development, which does not harm the environment. There are some initiatives which are taken by both the government and the local communities, which contributes sustainable tourism. For example, GREEN (Grassroot level Response Towards Ecosystem Enhancement and Nurturing) Meghalaya Project, which was started by the government of Meghalaya with the support of World Bank. The project provides financial incentives to communities that protects nature. The aim of the project is to cover 50,000 hectares of forest to create a significant carbon sink and provide sustainable livelihood. Another important initiative is The Community-Led Landscape Management Project (CLLMP). This project is also supported by the World Bank, which focuses on sustainable natural resource management in 400 degraded villages. The aim of this project is to improve the environment, prepare for climate change and create livelihoods. The project tries to empower communities through workshops and collaboration with government bodies. It teaches communities how to plan and manage natural environment in a sustainable way and improve their ability to protect and restore ecosystem. The concept of sacred groves is also important in sustainable tourism practices. Among the Khasi community there are some traditional practices through which they are able to preserve forests. The traditional practices include sustainable farming, organic agriculture and protection of biodiversity.

Balancing economic development with environmental conservation is difficult. This situation can be handled by involving the local communities in decision making process as well as creating solutions that can consider both environmental and economic needs. Meghalaya can only achieve both economic growth and sustainable tourism when the local communities and the government will work together.

#### Case studies and examples of sustainable tourism practices in Meghalaya

##### 1. Living Root Bridge in Cherrapunji and Mawlynnong

The living root bridges of Cherrapunji and Mawlynnong are the unique example of nature and human creativity. These bridges are made by the Khasi and Jaintia tribes, using the aerial roots of rubber fig trees. These are eco-friendly because they are made with natural resources without harming the environment. They are the significant part of sustainable tourism in Meghalaya. Tourists often admire their design and able to know about the harmonious relationship between local community and nature. If we talk about the preservation and maintenance of these bridges, the local communities are mainly related with this. They have the knowledge and techniques of building and caring for the bridges which have been passed through generations. The contribution of local people is very high in terms of maintaining the bridges because tourism is the only source of their income which helps to improve their livelihood. By involving the local communities, the culture and environmental value of these living root bridges is protected and ensuring that they continue to thrive for future generation.

##### 2. EcoNest Project in Mawphlang

The EcoNest Project in Mawphlang is the best example of sustainable tourism. This project features eco-friendly cottages which are built using natural and local materials. These cottages are designed in a way which provides comfortable stays as well as it has no harmful impact on nature. One of the major goals of this project is to support local communities. In the process of cottage making only local materials are used which are made by the local artists. It also helps to preserve traditional craftsmanship and provide income opportunities to local communities. The connection between tourism and local communities makes this project more sustainable. These cottages are also use smart and eco-friendly practices, which includes rainwater harvesting system, solar panels, waste management systems etc. In this sense the EcoNest model shows how tourism can be both enjoyable and eco-friendly at the same time.

##### 3. Community-Led Conservation in Mawlynnong

Mawlynnong, often called as the cleanest village in Asia, which is a great example of how a community can work together to protect environment. The people of this village have adopted certain practices that focuses on cleanliness, proper waste management and sustainable living. This kind of practices make Mawlynnong as a

global model for sustainable living and eco-tourism. Tourists come from different parts of the world to see the village's clean streets, beautiful greenery, unique way of life and to taste local and traditional food items. The only source of income of this village is tourism, it provides economic benefits to the community by creating job opportunities and supporting local businesses. The success of this village shows how a community's collective effort can make a big impact in protecting nature and promoting sustainable tourism.

#### 4. Sustainable Adventure Tourism in Dawki

Dawki is a popular destination known for its crystal-clear Umngot River. It offers tourists the chance to enjoy sustainable adventure tourism. There are so many activities for tourists like boating, kayaking and camping while experiencing the natural beauty of the area. The main focus of this area is eco-friendly tourism which protect the environment as well as create job opportunities for local communities. The local authorities set up certain rules and guidelines to protect the natural surroundings. They reduce or limit the number of motorized boats to reduce the pollution as well as they encourage the tourists to use kayaks, which are non-motorized and made with wood. The tourists are able to enjoy the natural beauty without damaging the environment, which is a great example of sustainable adventure tourism.

#### Education and awareness programs in Meghalaya

One of the major parts of sustainable tourism is education and awareness programs. In Meghalaya these programs include both tourists and local communities. The role of eco-tourism guides is very important in promoting responsible tourism. They are trained to teach tourists about sustainable practices. Here we can mention about the Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023, which focuses on educating tourists about preserving the environment. Meghalaya Tourism Development Plan (2010) is also highlighting the importance of sustainable tourism and visitors' education.

Educating local communities is also important for sustainable tourism practices. Therefore, the Community-Led Landscape Management Project (CLLMP) and the EcoNest Project helps to educate local communities. These projects focus on sustainable resource management as well as ensure that tourism growth supports both the environment and local livelihoods.

In Meghalaya collaboration with non-governmental organizations helps to create education and awareness programs. The Approved Tourism Development Plan for Meghalaya (2010) highlights these collaborations as key to sustainable tourism development. The Meghalaya Tourism Department organizes campaigns like awareness drives, social media promotions and public service announcements to engage tourists and local communities.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, Meghalaya shows how tourism can balance both economic growth and environmental preservation. Through the initiatives like eco-friendly accommodations, community-led conservation the state focuses on sustainable tourism. Case studies like the Living Root Bridges and Mawlynnong's community led efforts shows real life examples of how sustainable tourism can positively impact both nature and local communities. The focus on sustainable tourism in Meghalaya is more than just a regional effort. It serves as a global example of responsible tourism. To improve sustainable tourism in Meghalaya needs stronger rules and the policies should be created by focusing on tourism benefits as well as natural and environmental preservation. If they can use technology to monitor environmental impact it will be easier for them to take steps to save the nature.

Meghalaya's sustainable tourism practices offer valuable lessons for other regions to balance development and conservation. The state shows that tourism can thrive without harming nature by focusing on eco-friendly initiatives, community involvement and cultural preservation. These efforts highlight how protecting the environment and supporting local livelihoods can go hand in hand. By learning from Meghalaya, other areas can adopt similar strategies to create a healthy relationship between tourism and nature, ensuring long-term benefits for both people and the planet.

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