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Rural Tourism

**Rural India:
The Ecotourism Frontier**

**Homestays: India's
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Rural India as a Hub of Ecotourism

National initiatives such as the National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022), *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, and PRASHAD have been instrumental in developing eco-circuits, sustainable infrastructure, and capacity building through hospitality institutions. Strengthening eco-certification systems, managing visitor flow, and promoting lesser-known destinations can ensure long-term sustainability. Harnessing this untapped potential can transform rural India into a global exemplar of inclusive, responsible, and regenerative tourism—advancing the nation’s journey toward sustainable development and green economic resilience.

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Ecotourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of India’s tourism industry, offering a model that links economic growth with environmental sustainability and social inclusivity. Defined by the International Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural

are as that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education,” ecotourism resonates strongly in the Indian context, given the country’s rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and rural landscapes. In recent years, India has witnessed a transformation in how tourism is perceived and practiced. Travelers

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increasingly seek authentic experiences that minimise environmental footprints, empower local communities, and preserve natural habitats. At the same time, policymakers and state governments have recognised ecotourism's potential to drive rural development and conservation. This article explores India's ecotourism landscape—its growth trajectory, policies, impacts, and challenges—while drawing lessons from successful community-led models across the country.

Policy Landscape and Government Initiatives

The rise of ecotourism in India has been shaped by deliberate policy interventions and institutional support. The National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022) provides a comprehensive framework that aligns the Ministry of Tourism's development agenda with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change's (MoEFCC) conservation goals. It focuses on promoting responsible tourism in ecologically sensitive areas, setting standards for eco-certification, and encouraging community participation.

Among the flagship government programs, the *Swadesh Darshan* Scheme has been particularly influential. Since its inception in 2014–15, the Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned ₹5,292.91 crore for 76 tourism infrastructure projects, of which 75 were physically completed by 2024. Under its upgraded

version, *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, the focus has shifted to sustainable and responsible tourism. In 2023–24, 29 projects were sanctioned, followed by five eco-circuit projects in 2024–25. Notable examples include the Pathanamthitta–Gavi–Vagamon–Thekkady circuit in Kerala, emphasising rainforest trekking and birdwatching, and the Dalma–Betla–Netarhat circuit in Jharkhand, with a focus on forest and wildlife conservation.

The PRASHAD scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive) has also contributed indirectly to ecotourism, with ₹1,646.99 crore sanctioned across 48 projects, some overlapping with eco-spiritual tourism destinations. Other initiatives, such as the *Dekho Apna Desh* People's Choice campaign and the *Paryatan Mitra/Didi* program, emphasise responsible and inclusive tourism, particularly involving women and youth in rural areas.

Importantly, the government has invested in human capital for the sector. As of 2024, India had 56 Institutes of Hotel Management and 13 Food Craft Institutes, many of which offer specialised training in sustainable hospitality and ecotourism. This focus on skill development ensures a pipeline of professionals equipped to manage the growing demand for eco-friendly services.

Rural India: Growth and Market Dynamics in Ecotourism

India's ecotourism sector is witnessing rapid expansion, offering substantial opportunities for rural transformation. In 2024, the market was valued at USD 19.8 billion and is projected to rise to USD 50.4 billion by 2033, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.8 per cent (IMARC Group, 2024). The broader tourism sector contributed about 5 per cent to the national GDP in 2024, underscoring its role as a major economic driver. The domestic tourism continues to dominate this landscape, with 2,509 million domestic tourist visits recorded in 2023, reflecting strong internal demand for rural and nature-based experiences. The foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) reached 9.66 million in 2024 marking a 19.8 per cent increase over the previous year, while foreign exchange earnings from tourism touched ₹2,77,842 crore (MoT, 2024). Importantly, changing consumer behavior is reshaping this growth—82 per cent of Indian travellers now prioritize sustainability when planning their trips (IMARC Survey, 2025). This shift in consumer preferences is driving new demand for eco-lodges, green resorts, homestays, community-based tourism, and nature-based experiences particularly in rural and semi-rural destinations known for biodiversity, culture, and traditional knowledge (such as wildlife safaris, trekking, and birdwatching).

Government policies— particularly the National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022), *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, and PRASHAD schemes—are fostering eco-circuits, sustainable infrastructure, and skill development through 56 hotel management and 13 food craft institutes (MoT, 2023). The rural impact is substantial: communities engaged in ecotourism earn 35–60 per cent higher household incomes, while women lead over 18,000 tourism enterprises in Kerala (Kerala Tourism, 2023). Youth-led initiatives in villages like Khonoma (Nagaland) have reduced migration and cut poaching by 70 per cent, and models such as Mawlynnong (Meghalaya) and Periyar Tiger Reserve (Kerala) demonstrate how ecotourism can sustain clean, conservation-oriented economies.

Such preferences are also transforming the hospitality industry, which is increasingly adopting energy-efficient, waste-reducing, and culturally integrated practices aligned with the Government's National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (2022) and Travel for LiFE mission. Tourism remains one of India's largest employment generators—12.57 per cent of total jobs are linked to travel and tourism (MoT, 2024). The sector supports 42 million jobs currently, with projections to reach 48 million by 2025 (WTTC, 2024). For rural and ecologically sensitive regions, ecotourism presents a



Eco Homestays, Kerala

Table 1: Key Policies related to Rural Eco-tourism and their Features

S.No.	Policies	Key Objectives Relevant to Rural Eco-tourism	Rural Components
1.	National Strategy & Roadmap for Rural Tourism	Promote rural tourism as driver for job creation, local culture, convergence with other welfare schemes; make rural tourism sustainable & inclusive.	Cluster development, local crafts, homestays, marketing support for villages, governance/institutional support.
2.	Swadesh Darshan / Swadesh Darshan 2.0	Thematic circuit development (including Rural Circuits), improving infrastructure, visitor experience, community participation, sustainability.	Rural circuits: specific projects in Bihar, Kerala under “Rural Circuit” theme. Also rural tourism infrastructure in identified circuits.
3.	PRASHAD Scheme	Develop pilgrimage-spiritual tourism infrastructure; improve access, amenities; integrate with heritage. Some sites are rural/spiritual in villages.	Some pilgrimage destinations are in rural areas; projects include amenities that benefit local communities.
4.	Ecotourism / Sustainable Tourism Strategy & Guidelines	Promote conservation, biodiversity protection, regulate ecotourism around protected areas; ensure ecological & socio-cultural sustainability.	Rural areas near forests, wildlife, and biodiversity zones are targeted; community involvement required; advisory for protected area buffer zones.
5.	National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays (2022)	Standardise and promote homestays in rural areas, enabling rural households to earn income; ensure quality, marketing, capacity building.	Homestay owners in villages; support/training; link to scheme projects under Swadesh Darshan etc.

Source: IMARC, 2024

vital opportunity for income diversification, women’s entrepreneurship, and youth employment, offering sustainable alternatives to migration and resource exploitation.

By aligning community participation with market-driven sustainability, rural India stands at the forefront of India’s green growth story—emerging not only as the heart of ecological preservation but also as the engine of inclusive economic progress.

Economic, Social and Environmental Impacts

a) Economic Impact

The ecotourism generates substantial benefits in rural and remote regions. It provides an alternative to agriculture and extractive activities, reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems while enhancing household incomes. Studies show that communities engaged in ecotourism report a 35–60 per cent increase in annual incomes compared to those outside the sector. It

fosters micro-entrepreneurship, skill diversification, and income stability, especially in ecologically sensitive and remote regions. For instance, the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala generates ₹60–80 crore annually, with over 50 per cent of revenues benefiting local communities (Kerala Forest Department, 2023). Similarly, Mawlynnong in Meghalaya—hailed as Asia’s Cleanest Village—has witnessed a 60 per cent rise in household incomes since 2010, driven by bamboo homestays, eco-guiding, and waste-free tourism models (Meghalaya Tourism Report, 2023).

b) Social Impact

The social dividends are equally transformative. It has empowered women, youth, and marginalized communities through participation, leadership, and equitable benefit-sharing. For instance, in Kerala, 18,000 women manage microenterprises linked to ecotourism, ranging from homestays and handicrafts

to guiding services. This has strengthened women's financial independence, increased their participation in decision-making, and reduced seasonal migration. Youth engagement has also been profound. In Khonoma, Nagaland, ecotourism has reduced youth outmigration by 30 per cent, as young people now find meaningful employment as guides, hospitality staff, and conservation workers. Such outcomes underline ecotourism's role not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a tool for social empowerment and rural revitalisation.

c) Environmental Impact

Ecotourism is increasingly recognised as a conservation financing mechanism. Visitor fees, eco-lodge revenues, and community contributions are channelled into biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration. In Madhya Pradesh, tiger conservation programs receive funding from tourism revenues, ensuring healthier prey bases and forest regeneration. In the Western Ghats and the Sundarbans, ecotourism revenues support mangrove protection, coral restoration, and anti-poaching patrols.

Challenges and Risks

Despite its transformative potential, ecotourism in rural India faces significant challenges that could undermine its sustainability. One major concern is

the risk of over-commercialisation and greenwashing, where superficial 'eco' labels mask unsustainable practices. This not only dilutes the authenticity of cultural and ecological experiences but also threatens long-term sustainability. Another challenge lies in managing carrying capacity. Popular destinations such as Ladakh, Jim Corbett National Park, and parts of Kerala have witnessed overcrowding, which strains local ecosystems and infrastructure. Without strict visitor management and ecological guidelines, these destinations risk degradation. Climate change poses additional threats. Glacial retreat in high-altitude areas, sea-level rise in coastal ecosystems like the Sundarbans, and increased forest fires all jeopardise the ecological foundations of tourism. Finally, there is a pressing need for stronger regulatory mechanisms for eco-certification, standardisation, and monitoring to prevent exploitation and ensure accountability.

Conclusion

Ecotourism in India holds immense potential as a catalyst for rural transformation, blending economic growth with social empowerment and environmental conservation. Achieving this requires a multi-dimensional approach: promoting decentralised and diversified destinations to ease pressure on flagship sites; integrating ecotourism with climate-resilient livelihoods such as organic farming, renewable energy, and handicrafts; and expanding capacity-building programs for guides, entrepreneurs, and hospitality workers to ensure quality and inclusivity. Strengthening partnerships between government, private sector, and communities is essential, particularly for financing conservation-linked enterprises. Equally critical is enforcing ecological carrying capacities and robust certification standards to preserve authenticity and sustainability. Addressing challenges such as greenwashing, overcrowding, and climate impacts will require innovation, regulation, and strong governance. If pursued responsibly, ecotourism can become a scalable pathway to rural prosperity, biodiversity protection, and resilient livelihoods, cementing India's role as a global leader in sustainable development. □



A TRADITIONAL HOMESTAY IN NORTH EAST