

FOLK TALES IN PROMOTING ECOTOURISM AT KLNP, MANIPUR

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Abstract : The study reveals how historical memory and destination appeal can be enhanced by folktales and myths revealing a close link between culture and tourism. It also focuses on the collaborative effort by different stakeholders so as to turn local knowledge into tourism assets, promoting cultural sensitivity and community involvement in the creation of tourism narratives emphasizing the necessity of continuous observation and community input for efficient tourism planning.

Key Words: Folktales, Local Knowledge, Community input, Tourism asset

INTRODUCTION

Traditions or living expressions such as oral traditions which include myths, legends and folk tales inherited from our ancestors are part of our cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). The most important way to preserve cultural diversity and the diversity of the living heritage of the human race is through intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which encompasses all immaterial expressions of culture.

Myths, legends and folk tales constitute intangible Cultural Heritage enhancing the image of a tourist attraction and can even be a powerful force leading to successfully sustainable tourism and local development in destination areas (Girard & Nijkamp, 2009).

POWER OF LEGENDARY TALES IN ATTRACTING TOURISTS

Linking myths, legends and folk tales to tourist's attractions could animate and instigate people to travel as they not only instigate but also enhance the image of a destination. The inclusion of legends as a description of tourist attractions, projects their indigenusness thereby promoting oriental themes. The inclusion of legends as a description of tourist attractions, projects their indigenusness thereby promoting oriental themes. Legends have inspired people to travel to far off destinations (Laing and Crouch, 2011).

INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL HERITAGE VIS-A-VIS TOURISM: ITS ROLE AND IMPORTANCE

The Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development-OECD (2009) stated that culture is increasingly becoming an important element of the tourism product, which also creates distinctiveness in a crowded global marketplace. Cultural features of a region play major contribution towards a preference of tourist destination; the notion is in line with Qian *et al.* (2016) that one of the key factors of sustainable tourism is the development of local-oriented tourism in which the community contributes the most. Scholars believe that folk narratives can be used to promote tourism on a global scale and for the survival of tourism (Rahman, 2019) acknowledging the vital role played by myths and legends in tourism marketing and promotion. Myths and legends could be used as word clouds which could help communicate about the tourist destination (Perez-Aranda, et al, 2015), improve attractiveness by generating place narratives that impact consumption experience. It is evident that places connected with myths and legends has the power to attract tourists and packaged as a product (Razak & Romle, 2016).

Intangible cultural heritage like myths, legends and folk tales have important historical value. Incredible India ad campaigns highlights Pung Cholom (Drum Beating), Mukna (Traditional Wrestling), Khamba Thoibi folkdance of Manipur as tourist attraction thereby emphasizing and using the folk-culture to promote tourism. Thus, oral traditions are being used as a successful promotional strategy.

ABOUT MANIPUR

Manipur state belongs to Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. A gateway to South East Asia and acclaimed as Switzerland of India., the state is renowned for its rich art and traditions, amazing heritage, beautiful lakes, exotic flowers, orchids and medicinal plants.

Keibul Lamjao National Park (KLNP), the only floating park of the world

The Keibul Lamjao National Park is recognised as the only floating National Park in the world (Fig1). Uniqueness of the park lies with its floating Phumdi i.e. floating mass of vegetation which is the most important and special characteristics of the park and which forms the habitat of Manipur's Brow Antlered Deer and its associate species. The park is also a paradise of water birds. Loktak (93° and 93° 55' East and latitudes 24° 25' and 24° 42' N) located in the Bishenpur district of Manipur, is the largest freshwater lake in northeastern India and a famous Ramsar Site. The presence of floating mat of various sizes known locally as Phumdi, is unique feature of Loktak Lake over which grow the diverse plants. The phumdi, the

characteristics of this lake ranges in thickness from a few centimeters to almost 2.5 meters and float on the surface of water (Moirangthem et al 2026).

Keibul Lamjao National Park on the southern edge of Loktak Lake is famous as the only floating park of the world. Uniqueness of the park lies with its floating Phumdi i.e. floating mass of vegetation which is the most important and special characteristics of the habitat which form the habitat of Sangai and its associate species. Phumdi has been source of several plants used as food and shelter of the Sangai and its associated wildlife species in the park (Moirangthem et al 2026).

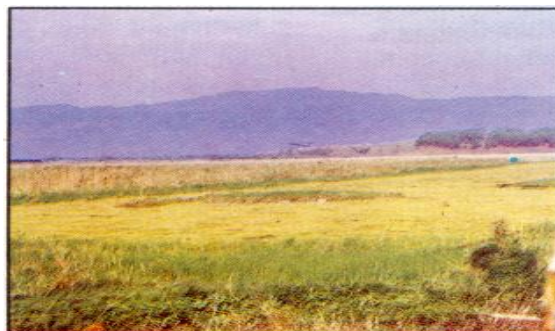


Figure1 Keibul Lamjao National Park, the only floating Park of the world

The Dancing Deer (Sangai)

Manipur's Brow Antlered Deer (*Rucervus eldi eldi*, M'Clelland, 1842) also referred to as "Sangai" locally is referred to as one of the endangered deer species in the world. During a tour to Manipur in 1838-39; the Assam's Assistant Political Agent Lt. Percy Eld, made the initial discovery of the deer species. John McClelland gave in 1844 the scientific name as *Cervus eldi eldi* Mc Clelland in honor of Lt. Percy Eld, Later on this name was changed to *Rucervus eldi eldi*. The deer is also known as the "Dancing Deer" because of its unusual way of running as per the renowned naturalist E.P. Gee (Fig 2).



Figure 2 *Rucervus eldi eldi*, the dancing deer Sangai

PARK CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSOCIATED SPECIES

The park protects 40 (forty) square kilometers of this unusual floating phumdi, surrounding the park on the east, west, and south sides are present the settlements. The majority of the park is made up of floating grass mats, or "phumdis," of various thicknesses that float on the water's surface. The remaining portion is covered by open water bodies, marshy land, thin phumdis and small hillocks. The grasses that cover the phumdi range in height from roughly 10 cm to over 2 to 3 meters. In KLNP, phumdi thickness ranges from a few inches to almost five feet. Other wild animals besides Sangai in the park are Kharsa (hogdeer), barking deer, wild boar supported by vegetative mats (Moirangthem et al 2026).

THREATS TO SANGAI POPULATION

Even though the number of Sangai in KLNP has gradually grown from 14 to 260 over the past 40 years, there are still threats to their survival because of habitat encroachment, a lack of park boundary, private land within the deer's only habitat, floods, other environmental disturbances, like water pollution from catchment areas, changing composition of habitat vegetation, the possibility of spread of epidemic diseases and risks due to collection of park's resources and poaching in this 40 square kilometre small park, the Sangai's range is restricted comprising only 15 to 20 square kilometres in the park; other threats to Sangai include disease outbreaks, natural disasters and greater inbreeding (Moirangthem et al 2026).

SANGAI, THE STATE ANIMAL

The Manipur Brow-antlered Deer is seen in the floating park of Manipur called as Keibul Lamjao National Park only. The term "Sangai" comes from the indigenous language of Manipur. "Ngai" means waiting while looking on and "sa" means "animal." The deer mostly the male because of the position it takes while running gets its name. The deer stops abruptly and momentarily, after going a certain distance, before starting to run again, seemingly awaiting someone eagerly.

Sangai was designated as a state animal by Government of Manipur in 1989. Sangai gets high reverence in the Manipuri Society. Sangai was called "Ningthem," which means "loved son," at the Fifth National Game, and served as the mascot

which was held in Imphal in 1999 (Figure 3). The Manipur Tourism Department renamed the State Level Tourism Festival as the "Sangai Festival" since starting in 2010. Additionally, All India Radio in Imphal launched the "Sangai Channel," an FM broadcast that has been in operation since the start of 2012.



Figure 3 Mascot for the Fifth National Game, Imphal (1999)

All of these demonstrate the Manipuri society's deep love and care for Sangai. There are numerous companies, goods, or brands that go by titles "Ningthem" or "Sangai." It has a great cultural significance for Manipuri Society. For example, Manipuri traditional clothes are named after Sangai like Sangai Lengyan, Moirangphi.

NATIONAL PARK AND ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism - responsible travel to natural area that conserves environment, sustains well-being of the local people, creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education (TIES, 2022). Manipur tourism policy 2022, aims at promoting sustainable tourism by minimizing the negative impact of tourism on social, environmental, and economic aspects and maximizing the positive impact. According to (Duffy 2008), ecotourism focuses on community development, poverty reduction, biodiversity conservation and traditional economic activity including agriculture, livestock and hunting. Local Community can benefit from ecotourism in various ways. Today the tourism sector is changing. Tourists are more demanding. They want to have new experiences and to know more other cultures. Myths and legends add value to the tourist experience, increase the attractiveness of destinations, and are promoted in destination marketing. Tourism destinations associated with the myth phenomena often experience increased visitation and marketing opportunities. Considering the popularity of the Sangai myth in Manipur, the state has a great opportunity to improve its image as a unique destination on the international tourism market.

USING SANGAI MYTH IN PROMOTING ECO- TOURISM

It is believed that embracing the Sangai myth will provide a unique competitive advantage for KLNP as a tourism destination. Ecotourism for the Unique floating Park, the only natural abode of the brow antlered deer, revered in Manipuri folk lores will sustain local communities, and involve learning experience about the endangered deer. The park is a potential site for promotion of Ecotourism in Manipur meeting the both ends of conservation and nature tourism. The local community with distinct cultural identity can participate in ecotourism development as per (Cole, 2006) and govern and manage local tourist, thus local participation will boost the socio-economic development. Thus, promoting Ecotourism will become a catalyst by becoming a learning tool for all ages, for locals as well as for visitors and will strengthen the link between conservation and sustainable development by involving local stakeholders.

Our Study

A combination of primary & secondary data collection methods (surveys, interviews, and literature review) were utilized to understand if the folk tales, legends and myths have the potential for development of Ecotourism in KLNP.

Folk Tales in promoting ecotourism at KLNP, Manipur

There are three legendary stories associated with sangai. One of such legend is: a prince of Luwang clan (one among the nine clans of Meitei –the traditional inhabitants) of Manipur had transformed himself into a majestic deer to be known as Sangai. Second, the ancient royal boat (Hiyang Hiren) had the decoration of Sangai head on its head part (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Ancient royal boat : Hiyang Hiren

Third, according to Moirang Kangleirol (Folklore of Moirang-a historical place where Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose hosted Indian Flag), a legendary hero called Kadeng Thanjahanba, once brought a gravid female Sangai as a loving gift for his beloved Tonu Laijingrembi and released the deer free in the wild of Keibul Lamjao, thence-forth the place became the only abode of the Sangai. Sangai is revered very affectionately as being part of many stories and myths by the Manipur Society. There are several sites in Manipur named after Sangai like Sangaikot, Sangaithel, Sangaiprou etc suggesting the deers' dispersion during the past.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the study it was concluded that Manipur can project legends in the promotion of its famous attraction like KLNP as myths, legends and folk tales provoke the thoughts of people, improve attractiveness and have great impact in promoting tourism. The following suggestions emerged during the study in connection with implementation of this enthusiastic survey.

Ecotourism in traditional societies with cultural taboos requires an inclusive, respectful, and adaptive approach. The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention No 169 emphasizes the importance of indigenous and tribal peoples' participation in decision-making processes and self-management. It is crucial for outside agencies to understand the cultural dynamics of these communities before introducing ecotourism for development.

Ecotourism involves preserving traditions and conserving resources. Linking myths, legends, and folk tales to tourist attraction like KLNP can entice people to travel and enhance destination image. Acknowledging taboos and myths, engaging elders and cultural leaders, and promoting legends can enhance attraction and impact tourism.

A group of local decision-makers and knowledgeable individuals will be needed to monitor activities, while indigenous guides, storytellers, and conservation advocates will be required to be trained for the purpose. Myths offer a unique perspective on reality, and the tourist department and tour organizers should learn to present myths chronologically or connected to the location of KLNP highlighting the importance of soil-based events.

Implementation of a systematic project will ensure to interpret cultural stories into conservation awareness, educating tourists about environmental protection impacting on indigenous peoples for positive economic and cultural benefits, and visualizing local culture revitalization.

Economic sustainability requires inclusive employment opportunities, prioritizing indigenous hospitality roles, and respecting traditions by allowing locals to sell crafts, handicrafts, souvenirs, and traditional foods which the ecotourism aims to offer.

Thus, ecotourism will improve economic viability by focusing on cultural showcases, and ecological ceremonies benefitting local communities from ecotourism profits. Culturally themed eco-lodges should be designed using native architecture thus narration of Myth & Taboos can educate tourists about environmental protection.

Conclusion

The study suggests local ownership of ecotourism projects, allowing communities to manage tour operations. This fosters group solidarity, pride in traditions, and identity, benefiting tourists, promoters, and national culture. Regular monitoring and community feedback can modify tourism plans. Culture and tourism are interconnected, enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations, regions, and countries. Folklore, such as myths, legends, and folk tales, reflects ancient social events and preserves historical facts through imaginative fables. Place names are based on origins and stories, preserving the Sangai's name. The study explores how local knowledge can be transformed into tourist attractions, focusing on social emergence for tourist appeal. It reveals that creating tourism myths involves local ethnic communities, media, destination government, developers, artists, and novelists. This process enhances a destination's distinctiveness and gives it a competitive edge, but requires cultural awareness and action.

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