



## ECO TOURISM INITIATIVES IN KERALA- A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEKKADY

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### **Abstract**

*Eco tourism is a travel experience, first and foremost that helps travellers come to better understanding of unique natural and cultural environments around the world. It was first introduced in the 1980's and was developed as a creative strategy for conservation. Planners and developers are quickly finding that ecotourism can provide an economic rationale for natural resource conservation and wildlife protection policies. But if it is not properly planned it can result in the destruction of the natural environment. So this study makes an attempt to understand the importance of ecotourism development for the sustainable tourism development and also tries to understand the steps taken by Kerala government at Thekkady for the development of Ecotourism. The study used random sampling methodology and primary data was collected from 100 respondents from Thekkady. The study found that many nature friendly activities are practiced in Thekkady with the active participation of the resident community at the destination. The study detail explains the various activities promoted in Thekkady. The study found that the residents at the destination provides high level of support for the tourism activities.*

**Key words:** *Tourism development, sustainable tourism development, Eco tourism*

### **Introduction**

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy and developing countries are attempting to cash in on this expanding industry in an attempt to boost foreign investment and financial reserves. But the uncontrolled growth of this industry can result in serious environmental and social problems. A growth in tourism exerts a lot of pressure on the environment and the local population. These include the destruction of the traditional landscape, congestion of the transport system, various forms of pollution, impacts on natural resources, impacts on consumption patterns, impacts on social systems etc. Thus the need for sustainable planning and management is imperative for the industry to survive as a whole. The sustainable development approach to tourism is acutely important because most tourism development depends on attractions and activities related to the natural environment, historic heritage and cultural patterns of areas. Ecotourism is a new concept in the sustainable tourism development. Ecotourism is a purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people. This study makes an attempt to understand the importance of ecotourism development for the sustainable tourism development and the study also tries to understand the steps taken by Kerala government at Thekkady for the development of Ecotourism.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the importance of Ecotourism for the sustainable tourism development?
2. What are the initiatives taken by Government for the development of ecotourism in Kerala?

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To understand the importance of ecotourism for the sustainable tourism development.
2. To understand the steps taken by Kerala government for the development of ecotourism in Kerala.
3. To understand the various activities promoted at Thekkady for the development of Ecotourism.
4. To understand the resident community support for the ecotourism at Thekkady.

### **Methodology**

The study location was Thekkady in Idukki district. Primary data for the study was collected using random sampling method and a total of 100 samples were drawn from the resident community of Thekkady. The secondary data for the study was collected from major tourism journals and important tourism websites. The questionnaire contained two sections. Section one included questions regarding the demographic details of the residents and section two included questions to assess the community support. All the items in the questionnaire (section two) were measured on a five point Likert scale. The scale used contained five points where 1 represented 'strongly disagree' and 5 'strongly agree'. The analysis was done using SPSS (ver21).



## Study Results

**Sample Characteristics:** A total of 100 respondents were analyzed and out of it, (58%) respondents were female while the rest were male (42%). The majority of the sample were belongs to the age group 30-40 (30%) followed by 40-50 (25%), 20-30 (20%) and so on. The sample was dominated by those who studied up to 12<sup>th</sup> (32%). 62 % of the respondents were married and 35% were native of the destination where they are staying. 30.5% were not employed in tourism sector and rest were (69.5%) employed in tourism related job.

## Importance of Ecotourism for the sustainable tourism development

Ecotourism is a type of travel that focuses on the discovery of a natural or wildlife habitat in a manner that maximizes local economic and social goals, and reduces the possibility of environmental degradation. It is about preserving ecosystems, educating visitors about conservation, empowering localities, operating sustainable tourist attractions – and, most of all, having fun and unique experiences.

Although the origins of the term ecotourism are not entirely clear, one of the first to use it appears to have Hetzer (1965) who identified four pillars or principles of responsible tourism, minimizing environmental impacts, respecting host cultures, maximising the benefits to local people and maximising tourist satisfaction. He defined Ecotourism as “tourism based principally upon natural and archaeological resources such as birds and other wildlife, scenic areas, reefs, caves, fossil sites, archaeological sites, wetlands, and areas of rare or endangered species” (Hetzer, 1965). Other early references to eco-tourism are found in Millers (1978) and by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1983). The first formal definition of ecotourism generally credited to Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1983) and who defined it as “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery, its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations found in these areas”.

According to The International Ecotourism Society eco-tourism is defines as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of local people". The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is a non-profit association committed to promoting responsible tourism practices that benefit conservation and communities. Representing the voices of stakeholders from all corners of the world, TIES' global network supports and is supported by members from 124 countries, who are leading the vital efforts to make travel and tourism more sustainable.

As per World Conservation Union ecotourism is “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features- both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impacts and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations”

If it does not satisfy any one of these In short, ecotourism can be conceptualised as – “Any tourism programme that is

- nature based,
- ecologically sustainable,
- where education and interpretation is a major component and
- where local people are benefited.”

Components then it cannot be called a real ecotourism venture. A walk through the rainforest is not eco-tourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there.

The term ecotourism has been used in the literature and by the tourism industry since the mid 1980's and during this time, ecotourism has coevolved along with a number of related terms including nature based, sustainable tourism, green tourism, responsible tourism, adventure tourism, alternative tourism etc. Ecotourism is often used interchangeably with these terms, but even though some elements of these different tourism types are similar, the terms are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive.

Ecotourism is a growing niche market within the larger travel industry with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool. The following principles should be followed by everyone who implements and participates in ecotourism activities:

- Minimize impact
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate
- Support international human rights and labour agreements



There are many different benefits that can be derived from Ecotourism if it is used as a tool by local communities rather than large outside interests.

### Eco tourism in Kerala

Kerala is a land blessed with natural attractions and is a suitable place for the development of ecotourism. The major attractions for developing ecotourism in Kerala are the natural resources like hillstations, various species of flora and fauna, wild life sanctuaries, national parks, valleys and mountains. Kerala government have started several initiatives for the development of ecotourism and has identified 56 ecotourism destinations. The details are given in Table1. Among the 56 destinations, Thenmala is India's first planned Ecotourism destination. It is situated in the foothills of Western Ghats in Kollam District and the project was inaugurated in January 2001. As Periyar tiger reserve is one of the main wildlife reserve in the state, the present study mainly focusing on the initiatives taken by the government for the development of ecotourism in Thekkady.

**Table 1: THE POTENTIAL ECOTOURISM SPOTS IDENTIFIED IN THE FORESTS OF KERALA**

<b>Thiruvananthapuram District</b> 1. Agastyarvanam Biological Park 2. Neyyar 3. Peppara 4. Ponnudi 5. Arippa	<b>Kollam District</b> 6. Thenmala 7. Kulathupuzha 8. Achancoil 9. Palaruvi	<b>Pathanamthitta District</b> 10. Konni 11. Pamba 12. Kochupamba
<b>Alapuzha District</b> 13. Gandhi Smrithivanam, Purakkad	<b>Kottayam District</b> 14. Kumarakom	<b>Idukki District</b> 15. KolahalaMedu / Peerumedu 16. Kuttikkanam 17. Thekkady 18. Munnar 19. Rajamala / Eravikulam 20. Idukki 21. Thommankuthu 22. Chinnar
<b>Ernakulam District</b> 23. Bhoothankettu 24. Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary 25. Mangalavanam 26. Kodanad	<b>Thrissur District</b> 27. Athirapally 28. Vazhachal 29. Chimmony 30. Peechi 31. Vazhani 32. Sholayar	<b>Palakkad District</b> 33. Chullannoor 34. Nelliampathy 35. Silent Valley 36. Parambikulam 37. Malampuzha 38. Walayar
<b>Malappuram District</b> 39. Nilambur 40. Nedumkayam, Nilambur	<b>Kozhikode District</b> 41. Kakkayam 42. Peruvannamuzhy 43. Chaliyam	<b>Wayanad District</b> 44. Tholpetti 45. Muthanga 46. Kuruva Islands 47. Thirunelli 48. Banasurakotta 49. Vellarimala 50. Mananthavadi
<b>Kannur District</b> 51. Pythalmala 52. Aralam 53. Kottiyoor 54. Mangrove based Ecotourism, Kannur	<b>Kasargode District</b> 55. Ranipuram 56. Parappa	

Source: www.keralatourism.com

### Eco Tourism at Thekkady

Thekkady is one of the main destinations in Idukki district which attracts thousands of foreign and domestic tourists every year. As per the Kerala tourist statistics (2014), Thekkady is in the sixth position in terms of foreign tourist arrival. The



famous Periyar Tiger reserve is the major attraction in Thekkady which covers an area of 925 Sq .km. In 1978 the sanctuary was included under the Project tiger considering the importance of the sanctuary in respect of its tiger population. In 1982 it was declared as Periyar National Park. In 1991 the place was included under the Project Elephant Reserve. The India Eco-development Project (IEDP) was implemented in Periyar Tiger Reserve from 1996 to 2004. Periyar Foundation trust was established in 2004for sustaining eco-development initiatives.The Periyar Tiger reserve is divided into three zones namely 1)Core zone-covers an area of 881sq km and is the core tiger habitat. This area is free from all human activities; 2) Buffer zone- covers an area of 44sq.km and is anarea of human settlements including tribal settlements and 3)Tourism zone-All tourism activities like boating, guided trekking, adventure trekking and camping etc are limited to the 10 sq.km tourism zone.

As a recognition to the conservation initiatives at Thekkady, Periyar Tiger Reserve was awarded the U.N.-India Biodiversity Governance award (2012) instituted by the Government of India and United Nations Development Programme for best managed Protected Area in the country. Community based eco-tourism programmes are the hall mark of this destination. The local community at the destination is responsible for the management of eco-tourism activities and the major activities include :-1) Nature walk or Green Walk-This is a trekking programme(4-5 km, 3-hours walk) offering exceptional opportunity of watching birds, butterflies and other wildlife; 2) Cloud Walk- It is a guided trek (3-4 hours) and the major attractions are the grasslands, evergreen, deciduous and riverine forests. The tourists will also get an opportunity to visit the “Mannan Tribe”; 3)Jungle Patrol: This is a regular night patrolling programme in the borders of the eco-development zone of the “Tiger Reserve” with armed guards between 7 pm and 4 am; 4) Border Hiking-It is day-long range hiking programme along the borders of Periyar Tiger Reserve; 5) Bamboo Rafting-This is the dust to dawn hiking and rafting programme through some of the richest forest tracts of Periyar Tiger Reserve. The tourists can have a look at the rich bird life, arboreal animals like Giant Squirrel, Nilgirilangur, herds of elephants and gaur; 6) Periyar Tiger Trail-This is an adventurous camping and trekking programmecovering a distance of 20-35 kms(one-night – two-days and two-nights – three-days duration);7)Bamboo Grove- This provides a learning experience for tourists by providing accommodation an eco-lodge( bamboo huts); 8)Jungle Inn-In this the accommodation is arranged in a forest cottage at Kokkara.The major attractions include watching troops of langurs, giant squirrels, many birds and the changing colours of the forest;9)Jungle Camp-The programme provides tented accommodations in the banks of Periyar River at Vallakadavufor 30 persons at a time with a board room facility for projection, film shows, trekking in the forest (Windy Walks) and a chance to experience the traditional tribal food prepared by the Urali tribe;10)Bullock Cart Discoveries-This programme(3-hours package) provides a unique travel experience through a farm lands, vine orchards, jasmine garden, a typical tamil temple, coconut groves, a meandering river side trail and the sleepy village of Gudalur, the setting very similar to R.K.Narayanan’sMalgudi Days.

**Community support for eco-tourism at Thekkady**

All eco-tourism activities are planned and implemented with the active participation of the local residents. Majority of the residents at Thekkadydepends on tourism for their livelihood. The dimension “Community Support” was explained by six items and thus it was considered as a single factor. The reliability of the factor “Community Support” was found to be 0.9544(Cronbach’s Alpha). The extent of the resident community support for eco-tourism was assessed by calculating the mean score of the variable and the result is presented in the table2.

**Table2: The mean score of the ‘community support’ for eco-tourism at Thekkady**

Variable Name	Community support
Mean	3.97
Standard deviation	1.07
Description	High

Here the mean score value of below 2.5 is taken as low, between 2.5 to 3.5 is taken as moderate and above 3.5 is considered as high. The table2 shows that the eco-tourism development at Thekkady receives ‘high’ level of community support and thus ensures the sustainable development of the destination, as the resident community support is considered as vital for the sustainable tourism development.

**Discussion of the findings**

Eco tourism is a growing niche market within the larger travel industry with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool.Growing environmental concern coupled with an emerging dissatisfaction with mass tourism has led to increased demand for nature based experiences. At the same time less developed countries began to realize the nature based tourism offers a means of earning foreign exchange and providing a less destructive use of resources than alternatives.



There are also different types of tourism which are used interchangeably with ecotourism and it includes 1) **Nature Tourism** - which concentrates more on enjoying and respecting the wildlife and the environment without the educational element present in ecotourism, 2) **Green Tourism** which applies to any activity or facility that operates in an environmentally friendly way, 3) **Sustainable Tourism** - does not deplete resources and allows for a smaller number of tourists to experience nature so as not to disturb the animal's normal mating, feeding, or migratory patterns, 4) **Adventure Tourism** - which spotlights physical outdoor activities. Examples include snorkelling, diving, or surfing a coastal area, 5) **Cultural Tourism** - centres on the discovery of the heritage of the host destination, 6) **Responsible Tourism** - attempts to minimize the environmental degradation of the host destination. But even though some elements of these different tourism types are similar, the terms are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive.

Ecotourism is a broad term encompassing many types of travel that share the goals of cultural and environmental awareness and respect, minimal environmental impact, and the preservation and betterment of local populations worldwide. Plenty of ecotourism projects make money and but we have to check whether the money is invested in conservation of the resource upon which ecotourism is based? And also have to check whether the profit from tourism encourage stewardship of natural resources in local people? A great deal of the literature available on the subject suggests that ecotourism often fails to preserve the environment. Ecotourism projects are frequently initiated with little input or benefit for local people. Often, national governments, NGOs, and foreign investors establish and develop ecotourism projects and also frequently reap the majority of economic benefit. Another important concern is the social changes (e.g., drug use, crime, moral degradation, loss of indigenous cultures) that occur as a result of ecotourism. A third commonly cited problem with ecotourism is environmental degradation. Although it seems counterintuitive, conservation of ecotourism destinations is not always a priority. The loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitats the production of waste and polluted effluents in areas are the serious concern of ecotourism. Recognising the global importance of this issue the United Nations designed 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) mandated the United Nations Environment program and the World Tourism organisation, to carry out the activities for the year.

Today many travel and tourism business have found it convenient to use the term "ecotourism" and governments have been using this term extensively to promote their destinations without trying to implement any of the most basic principles of ecotourism. Today the misuse of the term remains a problem worldwide. Ecotourism must be planned and managed successfully to achieve its key social and environmental objectives. Despite the commonly discussed problems with ecotourism it remains an attractive tool for sustainable development in many developing countries. Even though ecotourism have both positive and negative issues, if the situation is looked at seriously and properly and the problems are taken care of, then there will really only be positive results from ecotourism. To achieve this all stakeholders of ecotourism have to come together as a whole and work towards ensuring that ecotourism acts as positive as possible. A coordinated work of wide variety of stakeholder must be involved in ecotourism implementation and proper planning should be done to minimise the negative impacts. Government should take proper steps for the successful implementation of ecotourism to achieve the sustainability principles.

The government of Kerala have identified 56 eco-tourism spots in Kerala. The eco-tourism activities at Thekkady needs special attention because of its rich natural attractions (The Periyar Tiger Reserve) and the active participation of the resident community in the eco-tourism activities. The present study found that the eco-tourism in Thekkady are unique because it offers a variety of nature friendly activities to tourists. These activities provides excellent opportunity to watch the rich natural resources like forests, bird life, arboreal animals like Giant Squirrel, Nilgirilangur, herds of elephants, gaurs, butterflies etc without causing any negative impacts. The study found that the resident community at Thekkady provides high level of support to these ecotourism activities.

### **Conclusion**

Eco tourism is one of important alternative form of tourism development that is sustainable in the long term. Eco tourism can bring positive environmental and social impacts, but it can be like mass tourism if it is not properly planned and managed. So planning and development of eco-tourism, which includes the development of infrastructure for eco-tourism, its operation and also its marketing should focus on environmental, social, cultural and environmental sustainability criteria. Proper policies have to be formulated and implemented timely for the successful development of ecotourism and adequate corrective steps also have to be taken if there is any deviation from the ecotourism principles. Kerala government has succeeded in promoting eco-tourism in the state and presently there are 56 eco-tourism destinations in Kerala.



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