



Successful Endeavors in Eco-Tourism; Experiences from Thekkady, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Adding more meaning to the evergreen tourism industry, the term 'eco-tourism' has gained wide momentum during the recent past by exploring unseen natural bounty and bringing forth innovative conservation approach. When the never ending quest of human beings to explore the experience of the "exotic" and the "unexplored", socially, culturally and environmentally fragile places become more vulnerable to various impacts. In this juncture, the theme 'develop sustainably and conserve thoughtfully' is being well articulated by various successful sustainable tourism development endeavors world wide. Amongst these, the sustainable strategy of ensuring community participation in both tourism development and environmental conservation for effective destination management in Thekkady requires special emphasis; as it assured sustainable livelihood to the destination community along with guaranteeing the very existence of destination. This paper is an attempt to portray the successful eco-tourism experiences in Thekkady.

KEYWORDS : Eco-Tourism, Community Participation, Community Based Tourism Product (CBT), Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a tourism destination, Kerala is blessed with abundant natural bounty, rich flora and fauna in the Western Ghats region and various other picturesque and exuberant locations. As per the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, 29 % of the total geographic area of the state is forest comprises of protected areas, wildlife sanctuaries besides the riverrine, midland mountain ranges and grass lands (KFWD, 2014). Among these, eco-tourism hot spots like backwaters of Vemband, misty mountains and tea plantation of Munnar, long beaches, and culturally and ecologically rich Periyar Tiger Reserve in Thekkady are enticed by both domestic and international travelers by its charming natural beauty. When the visits of tourists exceed the carrying capacity and the commercial interest scores over environmental protection and cultural conservation, the sustainable strategy adopted at the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Thekkady by ensuring the participation of local inhabitants and stakeholders become an emulating model in eco-tourism initiatives.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Major objectives of study include;

- To understand the ecological sensitivity and natural bounty of Thekkady
- To summarize the environmental sustainability endeavors of tourism in Thekkady
- To give an outline on the impact made by ecotourism initiatives in Thekkady

3. METHODOLOGY

The report is primarily based on the secondary data available at the Department of Kerala Tourism, research articles and publications, local materials and other tourism resource inventory. Additionally, researcher conducted a field level enquiry on the eco - tourism initiatives at Thekkady especially from local community, tourism officials, Local Self Government representatives, tourism service providers, Self Help Groups, and various other stake holders of eco-tourism in Thekkady. Primary data were collected through a systematic survey among the households of local inhabitants of Thekkady using a structured questionnaire and interview among various stakeholders of eco-tourism.

4. ABOUT THE DESTINATION-THEKKADY

Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) spreads across 777 km² popularly known Thekkady is famous for its rich biodiversity located in the Western Ghats section of Kerala. The core area of the PTR comprising 350 sq. km. is protected as the Periyar National Park. The splendid artificial lake formed by the Mullaperiyar Dam across the Periyar River, wild

elephants, deer, bison; and opportunities for trekking, boating or jeep safari offer thrilling experience to visitors. Periyar Sanctuary was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1978. It is often cited as one of the best managed tourism destination in South India and is known for its 'local community-forest department mutual collaboration (Narain *et al.* 2005). According to Saji and Narayanan (2012), from the ecological perspective, Thekkady or PTR is viewed by many as a critical test of the state's ability to preserve a fragile ecosystem in which nature and human live together so intensely. Also, from the tourism perspective, PTR represents a similar critical test of the state's ability to host global tourism without a highly fragile ecosystem.

Along with flora fauna diversity, Thekkady is famous for its indigenous people locally called 'adivasis'. According to Chaudhuri, (2013) Periyar Tiger Reserve has six different tribal communities ; viz. Mannans, Paliyans, Malayarayangans, Mala Pandarams, Uralis, and Ulladans. The Mannans and the Paliyans are larger in number than the other tribal communities and have similar histories of living close to the borders of the Kerala and Tamil Nadu, particularly on the forests of the Western Ghats Mountain ranges; in tribal settlements called the Mannankudy (*kudy* meaning village) and Paliyankudy. Though, they were completely forest-dependent in the past, today many engage in trading non-timber based forest resources like honey, timber, fish etc. with the local markets outside their hamlets, or even working in cash crop plantations. Mannans are dominant have around 250 households in Thekkady and Kumily, whereas the Paliyans had almost half that number. Thekkady has witnessed by 27, 537 foreign travelers and 170, 857 domestic tourists during last year.

Periyar Tiger Reserve has received various awards on its eco-conservation initiatives. In October 2012, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of India honored PTR with 'India Biodiversity Governance Award' for the best managed Protected Area in the country (UNDP 2012). It was also accepted as the 'conservation model' by the Tiger Task Force in 2005.



Figure 1: Location of Kumily in Kerala, India. Source: www.vosard.org. (Chaudhuri, 2013)

Facilities and Activities at Thekkady

- Bamboo Rafting
- Day Trekking Programme
- Jungle Inn
- Learning Program in Bamboo Grove
- Tribal Heritage
- Wild Adventures
- Elephant ride
- Boating
- Watch Towers and Rest house
- Visitor centre
- Information Centre at boat landing
- Interpretation centre

5. ECO- TOURISM; A PARADIGM SHIFT IN DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

As defined by the Ecotourism Society, eco-tourism is the responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as: *“responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well - being of local people”*.

Along with the growth of tourism in Thekkady, various social and environmental concerns also emerged. The kind of development brought by the tourism facilitated urbanization, which gradually affected ecological integrity of the area. Saji and Narayanan (2012) reported that advancement of tourism attracted a large number of neo-residents who come to the place to be part of the employment and business opportunities have exacerbated the situation. Alteration in natural environment and the pressure of travelers on the forest system started to threaten forest resources. Additionally, it was started to influence the local tribes and tempted them to move away from their indigenous culture and traditions. As reported by the UNESCO (2004) in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, tourism in Thekkady also led to cultural degradation of authentic life and increases commercialization of traditional heritage. People were involved in illegal de-barking of Cinnamon trees (Vayana) as well as in Sandalwood smuggling and poaching. People were not allowed to enter in to forest to collect materials and fishing that produced deep dissatisfaction among tribal people. However, the timely intervention of Department of Tourism and Department of Kerala brought meaningful changes to management and life of the tourism destination of Thekkady.

Saji and Narayanan (2010) reported that after several years of tourism based development in Thekkady, the kind of development and urbanization that takes place in and around the park area was threatening the ecological integrity of the area. The inflow of people or neo-residents who come to the place to be part of the employment and business opportunities, have exacerbated the situation. Subsequent interventions exceeding the carrying capacity produced catastrophic impacts on environment and culture. The population pressure that

the area facing is adequate to point to this issue. Also, the horizontal and vertical integration of the local landscape into accommodate new tourism styles and the excessive tourism activities like resorts and shops had been producing substantial repercussions. It became difficult to providing the natural setting for ‘authentic natural’ for the service providers.

It was in the wake of these developments “India Eco-development Project”, a World Bank funded participatory bio-diversity conservation programme initiated implementing sustainable development initiatives. Main objective of the project was to ensure local participation in its fullest sense. According to Thampy (2005), the Project at Periyar had two basic objectives: to manage protected areas and to get local people involved in it. It is also found that, the project has so far benefited about 40,000 people of 5,540 families. Additionally, in 2008, government of Kerala decided to implement Responsible Tourism in the destination aimed at increasing positive social and economic impacts and minimizing negative environmental impacts of tourism on destination.

Community Based Conservation

In interaction with tribal community; it was found that community members were frequently entrapped in endless debt cycles with the moneylenders from Kumily before the India Eco-development Project in PTR. They were forced to take loans from the village moneylenders during lean agricultural periods. As a result, they could not make any profit from the harvest, being they had to put the harvests from their pepper vines up as collateral. This made the farmers to take yet another loan from the same moneylenders, and subsequently entangled in a debt cycle. It was in the wake of this sad state of affairs, Forest Department at PTR intervened to pay these outstanding loans and they allowed collecting firewood for their own use, and harvesting elephant grass from the forest that is sometimes used in the village for thatch. Chaudhuri (2013) reported that both communities are allowed to continue with their traditional fishing activities within the forest, though fishing now is constrained to Tilapia in Lake Periyar, and according to fixed quotas. Also, Forest Department employment like becoming forest guards has also been a source of income for some. In recent years, eco-tourism activities like ‘Tribal Tracking,’ ‘Green Walk,’ and ‘Tribal Heritage Tour,’ have been significant sources of income for many Mannan and Paliyan youth.

Collaborative activities between local people and government in conservation initiatives intended to decentralize forest management with greater autonomy for local communities, particularly since the passing of legislation in 2005 giving rights to forest dwellers was the key trigger in the paradigm shift of destination management in Thekkady. Such a kind of activity initially started in 1997 when the World Bank-sponsored India Eco-development Project (IEDP) aimed to reduce dependence of local populations on critical biodiversity habitats by providing the latter with alternative market-based livelihood opportunities (GEF 1998 cited in Chaudhuri, 2013). More specifically, it was designed to provide livelihood training to the local populations living around critical biodiversity habitats, as a way to win their support for wildlife conservation. The IEDP formally ended in PTR in 2001.

According to Chaudhuri (2013), this Joint forest management (JFM) schemes led to the devolution of community control over local forests and the undermining of customary forest rights. He observed that the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) model that incorporates members of local communities in the management of protected areas; and the neo-liberal model of protected area management that prioritizes self-sufficiency of the protected areas to generate its own revenues and emphasizes public-private partnerships in habitat management in a manner that often marginalizes local communities’ participation in management are the effective strategy for successful management of eco tourism destinations. It seems identical with the NGO-dominated conservation- development scheme in the Crater Mountain Management Area in Papua New Guinea (West 2006).

Even though the eco-development program was first implemented among Mannans and the Paliyans who lived closest to Kumily, it gradually extended to neighborhood based Eco-development Committees (EDCs). It ranged from women’s micro-credit groups to regulation of the collection of minor forest products. After the ending of IEDP,

GONGO – a government organized non-governmental organization – called the Periyar Foundation was founded to carry on with the supervisory functions of the IEDP. An amount of Rs.10 (approximately US\$ 0.17) for domestic tourists and Rs.100 (approximately US\$ 1.70) has been added to the ticket for the PTR entry as an eco-development surcharge to the Periyar Foundation. Both the PTR Forest Department and the Periyar Foundation are headed by the same person – the Deputy Director of PTR East Division.

Micro Enterprise Development

A group of forty indigenous youths from the Kumily-based tribal communities of the Mannans and the Paliyans who are members of two professional ecotourism eco-development committees (EDCs), viz. the Tribal Tracker's EDC and the Tribal Heritage EDC engaged in conducting various conservation-oriented tours inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve also an example of income-generating opportunities for local indigenous youths. This prompted them to pledge to protect the very forests that they had plundered in the past and in return, the Forest Department withdrew all the cases against them. The Bamboo Rafting programme initiated by another group of tribal youth with the support of forest department and the Tribal Trekkers Eco- Development Committee (a group of 20 tribal youths), and the Periyar Tiger Samrakshan (PETS) (a group of 70 members who were earlier employed by the Forest Department as watchers) indicate the strength of community involvement in the tourism. Local community members also provide services like day treks through the forest, arranging nature camps, horse riding and, undertaking the census of animals in the reserve.

Government was started with implementing various income generating ventures like vermiculture (composting), handicrafts making etc. followed by other community development initiatives involve giving educational and infrastructural support to the local community along with various outreach events. Chaudhuri (2013) reported that according to the study conducted by Bhardwaj (2008)—an erstwhile Field Director of Periyar Tiger Reserve and Executive Director of the Periyar Foundation—eco-development activities have resulted in the overall increase of income for the participating community by 24%, specifically benefitting the User group eco-development committees, whose income went up by 70%. Also, the study claims that the collection of NWFPs (or non-wood forest produce) that included fodder, grass used for thatching, bamboo etc. fell significantly. Particularly, collection of cinnamon bark and hunting is claimed to have stopped completely after the first ten years of the eco-development activities at PTR. Terming it as 'social fencing', Henkemans (2001) put forth it as a strategy to settle both community rights of access and effective measures to exclude outsiders. Officials of Periyar Reserve opined that illegal poaching of animals and valuable trees like sandalwood (*Santalum album*) has significantly reduced by the surveillance by villagers. The Eco-development Project has resulted in improvement of the *relationship* between the local community and Forest Department

A group of women called the Vasanthasenas – literally guardians of spring – who patrol the forest voluntarily are divided into various neighborhood-based EDCs, each taking turns to patrol the forest. In 2006 the Vasanthasenas won the prestigious Amrita Devi Environmental Award given by the Ministry of Environment and Forests for their environmental stewardship. The eco-tour guides and the Vasanthasenas are also expected to prevent pollution inside the forest by picking up stray plastic during their walks. Since the Vasanthasenas expanded from the original ten women to almost hundred during the time. From time to time, the Forest Department at PTR had also reached out this group to train them in various income-generating initiatives.

In order to add cultural appeal to the eco tourism programs, government thought of implementing Community Based Tourism (CBT) products utilizing the potential culture and knowledge in the local forest ecosystem have found a resource for the tourism service providers. In the due course, visit to tribal hamlets, exhibition of tribal culture through museum, tribal art form performances etc., have been added to the tourism experience in offer. Among these, Village Life Experience (VLE) packages, an endeavor explore authentic culture and village life of tribal by benefitting the community enticed numerous travelers.

Responsible Tourism (RT) Initiatives

In order to improve community participation and strengthen sustainability, government of Kerala started implementing responsible tourism program in 2007. It was intended to improve livelihood opportunities of local population by linking them with the industry. RT initiated homestead organic farming in 612 households and started supplying it in to hotels and nearby shops. Additionally, various women Self Help Groups (SHG) came in to the picture of micro enterprises by producing processed foods, paper bags, value added goods etc. Focusing on capacity building and training projects, RT at Thekkady intensified community involvement in various programs. District Level and Destination Level Committee had been formed with local dominance to plan, manage and monitor different activities of RT. Currently, around 68% of tribal people are being getting benefit from both responsible tourism and eco-tourism programs. A community feedback survey conducted among the local community of Thekkady has found that majority of the inhabitants have very favorable approach to tourism.

Sl. No.	Community Feedback	Percentage (%)		
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Financially Beneficial	63	5	32
2	Appropriate to the local conditions	62	8	30
3	Facilitates Social development	49	7	44
5	Develop Infrastructure and basic amenities	66	7	27
6	Relation with industry	40	39	21
7	Creates negative Environmental Impacts	25	13	62
8	Causes cultural degradation	32	15	53

Table 1: Community Feedback Survey, 2014

Development and promotion of Community Based Tourism (CBT) is one of the worth mentioning initiatives of Responsible Tourism. Village Life Experiences Packages, Cultural and Art shows by tribal community, Village Souvenir shops, Ethnic Cuisine Restaurant, Spice Garments and handicrafts etc. added more meaning to the lives of destination community. It was responsible tourism helped to declare Thekkady as a Plastic Free Tourism Destination.

6. CONCLUSION

During a short span of time destination management endeavors in The the Periyar Tiger Reserve emerged as one of the most successful management plan for eco tourism destination in India. Experiments from Eco-Tourism Project and Responsible Tourism initiatives apparently proved that community based conservation and community based tourism can have a multitude positive impacts on sustainable destination management. Ultimately the approach of social fencing and people participation is a step in the right direction achieving tourism development, community development and environment, and cultural conservation to go hand in hand.

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