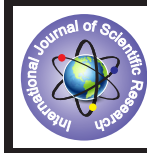


Prospects and Challenges of Ecotourism: an Empirical Investigation of 'Thenmala' Tourism Destination in Kerala



Economics

KEYWORDS : Sustainability, Ecotourism, Tourism impacts

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is an industry which employees the leisure time of the people in a useful way. It is a major engine of economic growth in most parts of the world. The immense potential of tourism is particularly relevant for developing nations like India. In respect of India the abundance of extremely serene environments and also quite a large number of historical and religious locations is an additional attraction, unlike most other parts of the world. This favorable situation is more applicable in respect of Kerala state in Indian subcontinent, often referred to as 'Gods own Country' in view of its scenic locations and conducive geographic, climatic and other conditions. Along with the appreciable growth in tourism over the last two decades or more in India and the high growth prospects of the tourism industry, there are growing apprehensions regarding the sustainability of the industry in view of the adverse environmental impacts of tourism. Both the favourable and adverse aspects as above are probably more applicable to 'Gods own Country' than any other state in India. As it is widely recognized that of the different types of tourism, the nature-friendly tourism model viz. 'Ecotourism' alone can be sustainable for development in the long run, this paper analyzes the prospects and challenges of ecotourism with reference to 'Thenmala' ecotourism project in Kollam district of Kerala, and suggests strategies for sustainable development of tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is an industry which employees the leisure time of the people in a useful way. It is a major engine of economic growth in most parts of the world. It is a multidimensional, multifaceted activity arising out of temporary movements of people from normal place of work and residence and the stay and various activities engaging over there, has gained much relevance in the global socio economic scenario. The vast development potential of tourism is acknowledged by many an international agency, including WTO (World Tourism Organization) and WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council). The immense potential of tourism is particularly relevant for developing nations like India. In respect of India the abundance of extremely serene environments and also quite a large number of historical and religious locations is an additional attraction, unlike most other parts of the world. This favorable situation is more applicable in respect of Kerala state in Indian subcontinent, often referred to as 'Gods own Country' in view of its scenic locations and conducive geographic, climatic and other conditions.

In spite of the immense developmental potential of tourism, the growing challenge of environmental degradation that is caused by tourism is a problem the world over. This has resulted in the need for the design of environment-friendly and sustainable models of tourism. Accordingly, the concept of ecotourism is fast emerging. The International Eco-tourism Society defines eco-tourism as follows: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the wellbeing of the local people." The term 'ecotourism' is derived from two words 'Ecosystem (Ecology) and Tourism'. Ecosystem is the system in which we live, the system which include the earth, the water, the sky and of course the living and the non-living objects in all these systems. It is a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit. Thus, ecotourism means, tourism involving travel to areas of natural or ecological interest, typically under the guidance of a naturalist, for the purpose of observing wildlife and learning about the environment and at the same time focus on wildlife and promotion of understanding and conservation of the environment.

Significance of the Study

World over, the general trend is that of the fast adoption of tourism initiatives for rapid economic development. However, as noted already, adverse impacts of tourism are dangerously on the rise. In many parts of the world the evil effects like degradation of the environment, fast depletion of natural resources, adverse effect on bio-diversity and ecological balance, etc. are observed. This situation underscores the significance of 'nature friendly' tourism or ecotourism. In his study on the prospects of ecotourism in Kerala, Manoj P K (2010) [9] has pointed out the

strengths and weaknesses of Kerala tourism. The weaknesses include growing levels of environmental degradation. Another weakness has been cited to be the gross underutilization of the abundant tourism potential of the state in spite of the fact that the state is one among the best ten in respect of foreign tourist arrivals and also the one endowed with enviable natural resources that attract the tourists worldwide.

For a developing country like India which has been late in recognizing the potential of tourism, particularly for the Kerala state in India which is yet to recognize its vast tourism potential in spite of its status as the 'Gods own Country' the relevance of ecotourism promotion for long-term and sustainable economic development need not be over emphasized. In this context, an analysis of the problems and prospects of ecotourism in Kerala – the 'Gods own Country' and that too with a focus on "Thenmala" – the pioneer ecotourism destination in Kerala, assumes high level of analytical significance. A study as above can reveal the major problems faced by the destination so that suitable remedial strategies could be suggested for faster but sustainable development of tourism in the destination under study viz. Thenamala in Kerala.

Statement of the research problem

Kerala-the 'Gods own Country' is unique in its culture and tradition. Kerala is the perfect eco-tourism with all its greenery and natural beauty. Thenmala is developing as a major tourist centre in Kerala. Along with its natural beauty attempts are made by Tourism Department, Government of Kerala to promote Thenmala as a holidaying spot. Of late, it is identified as one of the major ecotourism destinations in the whole country. As the research works done in the area of ecotourism in Kerala are very scarce, the present study attempts to identify the prospects and challenges of this major ecotourism destination and to suggest suitable strategies for its better performance.

Objectives of the Study

- To make an overall study of the potential of tourism for economic development with a focus on the emergence of ecotourism and its present day significance;
- To make a detailed study of the prospects and problems of 'Thenmala' – the prominent ecotourism destination at Kollam district in Kerala, including the socio-economic impact of this project, the positive and negative aspects of this tourism destination; and
- To suggest meaningful strategic faster and sustainable growth more study the relationship between nature of tour and socio-demographic factors of the tourists in Thenmala.

Methodology and Data Sources

The study has been carried out by using both primary and sec-

ondary data. A sample survey was conducted in Thenmala for primary data collection. A sample of 200 respondents ie. 40 from local residents and 80 each from domestic tourists and foreign tourists are taken. Besides, a study was conducted among the officials of the project. Primary data have been collected by simple random sampling technique by using a well-structured interview schedule. Statistical tools such as chi-square test, scaling and index are used for analytical purpose. Secondary data are also used to study the socio-economic and environmental impact, present scenario of tourism in India and Kerala etc. Reports published by Kerala Tourism Development Corporation, State Planning Board's Publications, World Tourism Organization (WTO) and government agencies like Department of Forest, Department of Tourism, published articles, research papers, Economic Review various issues etc.

Benefits of Tourism: the case of Global, Indian and Kerala Scenarios

Tourism is inherently a highly social business that has carved a niche for itself internationally. This worldwide phenomenon is growingly being recognized as an effective tool for economic development of nations by generating employment, earning revenue and foreign exchange, and acting as a means for upward social mobility through interaction with cultures from elsewhere in the world. The implications of tourism on the society at large, from a social and ecological perspective is generally studied based on the conceptual framework propounded by Brundtland (1987)[1] viz. Ecologically Sustainable Development Framework. Internationally, this framework has been used for managing the key issues related to the tourism development. World over ecologically sustainable tourism (or, 'eco-tourism' in short) is gaining momentum fast. According to Lane (1991) [6], ecologically sustainable tourism should strive for, "providing satisfying jobs without dominating the local community. It must not abuse the natural environment, and should be architecturally respectable. In fact, India may be observed to have "a geographical location, natural resources as well as historical and cultural background which are quite conducive for development of tourism" (Manoj P K)(2008) [7]. India has got excellent potential for being developed as one of the best tourism destinations of the entire world. However, tourism statistics over the years reveal this huge potential of India is underutilized (Manoj P K)(2008) [7]. Regarding the specific case of the prospects of environment-friendly tourism for economic development of India, the above author has pointed out its excellent growth prospects, but has also warned about a number of negative factors that deter the tourists and hence impede the growth prospects of ecotourism. The negative factors include environmental pollution affecting the very sustainability of tourism initiatives and others, like, inadequate infrastructure, physical and social carrying capacity constraints, not-so-encouraging response of the community, lack of adequate information to the tourists, little benefits to the local community, difficult entry/immigration facilities etc. Various suggestions for improving the present situation have been made including PPP (Public Private Partnership). Referring to the problems faced by Kerala from a wider perspective ('Kerala model of development'), Oommen (2008)[11] has studied Kerala's ecological problems in detail, and has called the current scenario as 'Ecological Overkill'. In his study on the prospects of ecotourism in Kerala. The weaknesses of Kerala tourism as pointed out by Manoj P K (2010) [9] include gross underutilization of the abundant tourism potential of the state in spite of the fact that the state is one among the best ten in respect of foreign tourist arrivals and also the one endowed with enviable natural resources that attract the tourists worldwide.

Globally, it has been recognized that the heart of eco-tourism lies in the preservation of the nature and the environment, ie. a tourism that seeks to maintain a harmonious co-existence with the nature. Exhibit I depicts the global trends in tourism. Tourism has got tremendous potential for a developing nation like India. In India tourism has got somewhat high share in the overall GDP of the country (Table I), though it is only about half of the global average. Regarding employment generation, the rate of employment offered by Indian tourism is slightly higher than the world average. Thus Indian tourism has got high potential

for creating employment opportunities. In fact, WTTC estimates that the top ten countries with the greatest expected relative growth in employment over the next ten years are all developing countries. Table I is self-explanatory in this regard. Kerala state in particular, often referred to as 'Gods own country', has got an enviable potential for tourism, probably better than any other state in India or abroad. However, the vast potential of the state is grossly underutilized, in spite of the fact that there are clear indicators of a revival in the last few years, as is evident from Table II.

Thenmala Ecotourism: Brief Profile

Thenmala ecotourism has been conceived as the first planned Ecotourism destination in India i.e. in Kollam District was inaugurated in January 2001. Thenmala is 72kms from Trivandrum, the State Capital of Kerala, God's Own Country, the southernmost State of India and 66 Kms from Kollam. Thenmala is a small village situated at the foot of the Western Ghats and has been selected by the World Tourism Organization as one of the best eco tourism projects in the whole world. Thenmala: "Then + Mala", i.e. in local parlance "Then" in Malayalam means honey and "Mala" means hillock. The honey collected from Thenmala forest region is of good quality and of high medicinal value because of the unique floristic composition of the forests.

Major tourist attractions at 'Thenmala' include the following: (i) **Thenmala Reservoir - with boating facility**, (ii) **Thenmala Dam - this** the center of attraction at Thenmala. Built under the Kallada Irrigation and Tree Crop development project, it is the second largest irrigation project in Kerala, (iii) **Metre Gauge railway - visitors** can experience the exciting travel through the rare metre gauge railway, (iv) **Thenmala Eco Tourism Centre - this** center provides the tourist the needful assistance and facilities to experience the eco tourism around Thenmala (v) **Punalur - it** is 45 kms from Kollam on the Kollam-Shenkottah railway line and is also linked with Kollam by road, (vi) **Palaruvi Falls - situated** at a distance of 16 km from Thenmala provides a beautiful feast for the eyes, (vii) **Deer Park - a** beautiful place with lots of trees and deers (viii) **Tree-top huts** in the park, and (ix) **Chenduruni Wildlife Sanctuary - this** sanctuary consists of catchment areas of tributaries of Kallada river upstream of the Parappan dam.

Other major attractions include a (i) Cultural Zone which includes a number of tourist attractions, like, tourism facilitation centre, musical foundation, shop court, amphitheater, and restaurant owned by K.T.D.C etc. apart from Nakshatravanam (Astro-forest), Butterfly Safari Park, Musical Dancing Fountain etc.; (ii) Leisure Zone - an area on both sides of the canal, situated on the downstream between Kallada dam and bridge, and this zone consists of an information center, pathways, plaza, resting points, sculpture garden, and a broad walkway; and (iii) Adventure Zone - situated about 2 km. from Thenmala junction, having features like an elevated walkway, rock climb, river crossing, and mountain biking, swings and rope ladders.

The Problems and Prospects of thenmala ecotourisms: findings

As noted earlier under the head Methodology, the study was done among a sample of 200 people comprising 40 from the local community and 80 each from domestic tourists and foreign tourists. The study results point to certain specific and new features relating to all types of tourists. It is noted that the tourists feel that expenses are affordable and level of satisfaction is very high (75 percent), and the tour is affordable to even middle class. In fact, 55 percent have replied that personal savings as their main source of spending. Majority of the tourists have opined that tourism to ecotourism centres offers a rejuvenating therapy experience thus inducing them to become regular visitors.

It is worth pointing out here that vast majority of the tourists (as high as 92 percent or 184 respondents out of the total 200) have expressed their deep concern over the fast depleting flora and fauna in the region. Besides, as high as 72 percent have bothered regarding the degradation of environment.

The other major areas of concern, in the order of descending order of seriousness factors are inadequate infrastructure (69 percent), poor cleanliness and safety (64.50 percent) and lastly comes other factors (46.50 percent). Table III is self-explanatory in this regard.

Regarding the areas that deserve urgent attention as perceived by the respondents include conservation of nature (90 percent), and among the foreign tourists the score for this parameter is as high as 95 percent. Next area that needs urgent attention is control of pollution or better disposal of waste, for which the score is 80 percent. Improvement of infrastructure facilities and that of cleanliness and hygiene are the factors that come in the third and fourth priorities based on the feedback from the respondents (with scores 68.50 percent and 66 percent respectively). Table IV is self-explanatory in this regard.

The major negative impacts of Thenmala ecotourism are found mostly on biological and physical impacts, socio-cultural impacts and economic impacts. The stress areas in the biological and physical negative impacts are the diversity of flora and fauna, soil erosion and landslide, displacement and change of migration patterns of fauna, decrease in the aesthetics of the area, noise pollution and traffic jam in the densely populated floating areas. Stress areas in socio-cultural and economic negative impacts are; loss of cultural value and heritage, effect on social pathology (i.e. increase in crime and associated activities), host community and ecotourists are in conflict causing dissatisfaction, diversion, distortion and exploitation of resources for money, local authorities have less control over development activities, lack of sufficient infrastructure etc.

The major positive impacts of ecotourism are biological and physical impacts, socio-cultural impacts and economic impacts. Comparing with the negative biological, physical, socio-cultural and economic impacts, positive impact was high. Also the stress areas in positive impacts are increase in collaboration between all the concerned stakeholders, better communication and transportation facilities and infrastructure, cultural and natural appreciation, better social or public services in the areas, reduction in domestic violence through local participation, prevention of people's out-migration, well-planned development and conservation process in the areas, increase in employment opportunities or job availability and job quality, improve gender equity, established ecotourism interest in the areas, children and students are encouraged to study higher, stimulation of local livelihood approaches, open up people's mind about the outside world and development. Thus it can be concluded that, positive impact was high as compared to negative impact as far as Thenmala ecotourism project was concerned.

Suggestions for Improvement in ecotourism Services at thenmala

In view of the foregoing discussions, it may be stated that promotion of ecotourism in India is an imperative rather an option. This is more relevant in a state like Kerala – "the God's own country", one of the most promising states in India for tourism development.

While the steps already stated by the Governments of India and Kerala appear to be in the right direction, there needs to be focused efforts toward preservation of the environment and prevention of ecological degradation.

There is the need for ensuring the full participation and participation by the local community. This is essential to ensure the long-term prospects of the sector.

Furthermore, there is the urgent need to limit the number of visitors in each ecotourism destination so that the natural environment can withstand the pressures.

Sustained efforts and required to create and foster awareness regarding the need for protection of environment is required, particularly for avoiding the use of plastic to the extent possible and invariably 'no' to its littering.

Concluding Remarks

The Government of India is considering incentives for green products, and a publicity and awareness campaign at the national level through the mass media and hotel industry would be a desirable step towards development of ecotourism. Though no major policy document has been issued by the Central or State Governments with regard to promotion of ecotourism so far, certain guidelines have been issued to tour operators and tourists as part of a campaign to preserve the environment in the tourism zones. The prospects of Thenmala (and so also similar other ecotourism projects) appear to be quite bright, if suitable remedial measures to conserve and preserve the natural resources are implemented on a time-bound manner. Efforts are required to control the number visitors within the permissible limits, lest the destination becomes too overcrowded and devoid of natural beauty to attract the tourists.

Exhibit I: Global trends in Tourism

Distribution: Tourism is a significant sector in almost half of the low income countries, and in virtually all the lower middle income countries.

Destinations: The top 15 tourism destinations in the developing world (in terms of absolute numbers of arrivals or receipts) tend to be populous, low-middle income and upper-middle income countries. 5 out of these 15 destinations have a population of over 10 million living below a Dollar a day.

Employment: Word-wide forecasts predict a growth in tourism development of over 100 million jobs by 2007. Global tourism already accounts for over 250 million jobs.

Growth: Tourism contributes to an aggregate economic growth of over 50 percent between 1990 and 1997

Pro-Poor Tourism: In most countries with high levels of poverty, tourism is a significant contributing factor, providing over 2 percent of GDP or 5 percent of exports). Some 12 countries account for 80 percent of the world's poor (living on less than a Dollar a day). In 11 of these countries, each with over 10 million poor people, tourism is significant addition to the economy and this contribution is growing.

(Source: UNEP 2002, WTTC 1998, Ashley et al. 2001, Roe et al. 1997) [Adapted from Manoj, 2010]

Table I: Economic Benefits of Tourism in India vis-à-vis the World.

Indicators	Year	India	World
Contribution of Tourism to GDP*	FY 2003	05.83 percent	10.00 percent (2002)
	FY 2004	05.90 percent	10.20 percent (2003)
	FY 2005	06.11 percent	10.40 percent (2004)
	FY 2006	NA	10.60 percent (2005)
Employment in Tourism Sector*	FY 2003	38.6 million (8.27 percent)	198.098 million (7.8 percent) (2002)
	FY 2004	41.8 million (8.78 percent)	194.562 million (7.6 percent) (2003)
	FY 2005	NA	214.697 million (8.1 percent)
	FY 2006	NA	221.568 million (8.3 percent)

(Source: *Tourism Statistics 2006 at a Glance, Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, 2007*). (Cited from Manoj, 2010).

[* Direct as well as indirect contribution of tourism.]

[Figures in bracket for employment shows the percentage share in total employment].

[World figures shown above are drawn from World Tourism & Travel Council (WTTC)].

Table II: Trends in Tourist Arrivals into Kerala

Year	Domestic Tourist	Percentage Change	Foreign Tourists	Percentage Change
2000	5013221	2.6	209533	3.8
2001	5239692	4.5	208830	-0.5
2002	5568256	6.3	232564	11.3
2003	5871228	5.4	294621	26.7
2004	5972182	1.7	345546	17.3
2005	5946423	-4.3	346499	.27
2006	6271724	5.47	428534	23.7
2007	6642941	5.92	515808	20.37
2008	7591250	14.28	598928	16.11
2009	7913537	4.25	557258	-6.96
2010	8595075	8.61	659265	18.31

(Source: *Economic Survey 2011, Kerala State Planning Board, Government of Kerala*).

Table III: Opinion of the Respondents regarding Areas of Concern

Areas of concern at present as perceived by the respondents	Local Residents		Tourists-Domestic		Tourists-Foreign		Total	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Depleting flora and fauna	34	85.00	76	95.00	74	92.50	184	92.00
Degradation of environment	30	75.00	44	55.00	70	87.50	144	72.00
Inadequate infrastructure	20	50.00	42	52.50	76	95.00	138	69.00
Poor cleanliness and safety	22	55.00	37	46.25	70	87.50	129	64.50
Other factors	18	45.00	33	82.50	42	52.50	93	46.50

(Source: Field Survey)

Table IV: Areas where Improvement is Required as Perceived by the Respondents

Options or Strategies required for improvement of the current situation	Local Residents		Tourists-Domestic		Tourists-Foreign		Total	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Conservation of nature	32	80.00	72	90.00	76	95.00	180	90.00
Control of pollution/waste disposal	34	85.00	48	60.00	78	97.50	160	80.00
Infrastructure facilities	20	50.00	44	55.00	73	91.25	137	68.50
Cleanliness and Hygiene	18	47.50	42	52.50	72	90.00	132	66.00
Other factors (Information etc.)	22	55.00	35	43.75	42	52.50	99	49.50

(Source: Field Survey)

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