Research Paper Economics

ECO-Tourism In Kerala and Its Importance and Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the few sectors where Kerala has clear competitive advantages given its diverse geography in a short space ranging from the Western Ghats covered with dense forests to the backwaters to the Arabian sea. Its ancient rich culture including traditional dance forms and the strong presence of alternative systems of medicine add to its allure. Unfortunately, Kerala is dominated by domestic tourism within the state although foreign tourists arrivals to the state has been growing at a faster rate than national average. The goal in the KPP 2030 is to develop Kerala as an up-market tourism destination with the state being the top destination in terms of number of tourists and revenue among all the Indian states. Sustainable tourism is the mission. This can be achieved by integrating tourism with other parts of the economy like medical and health hubs which will attract more stable tourists over a longer period of time and with higher spending capacity. There will be new elements added to leisure tourism and niche products in tourism will be developed. Infrastructure development is crucial to achieve this goal. The success of Kerala tourism will be based on the synergy between private and public sectors. The government has taken steps to encourage private investment in tourism, while adhering to the principles and practices of sustainability. Industry led sustainable tourism development relies upon the government- imposed and self- imposed regulations. Tourism in Kerala will be benchmarked against international indicators and monitored on a regular basis to achieve quality.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

India is one of the oldest civilisations with a kaleidoscopic variety of cultures which makes for a rich cultural heritage. It has achieved multifaceted socio-economic progress during the last fifty years since its independence. The nation covers an area of 3 287 263 km2, extending from the snow-covered Himalayan heights to tropical rainforests in the south. As the seventh largest country in the world, India is well marked off from the rest of Asia by mountains and the sea, which gives the country a distinct geographical entity.

Ecotourism is a new concept in tourism. It 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. India is one of the oldest civilisations with a kaleidoscopic variety of cultures which makes for a rich cultural heritage. It has achieved multifaceted socio-economic progress during the last fifty years since its independence. The nation covers an area of 3 287 263 km2, extending from the snow-covered Himalayan heights to tropical rainforests in the south. As the seventh largest country in the world, India is well marked off from the rest of Asia by mountains and the sea, which gives the country a distinct geographical entity. Bounded by the Great Himalayas in the north, it stretches southwards, and at the Tropic of Cancer tapers off into the Indian Ocean between the Bay of Bengal on the east and the Arabian Sea on the west. The mainland comprises four regions, viz., the great mountain zone, the plains of the Ganga and the Indus, the desert region and the southern peninsula. Possessing a tremendous diversity of climate and physical conditions, India has a great variety of fauna numbering 8 1251 species, which represent 6.65% of the world's total. Of these, insects constitute about 60 000, molluscs a little over 5000, mammals 372, birds 1228, reptiles 446, amphibians 204 and fish 2546.

Tourism products and current tourist traffic pattern

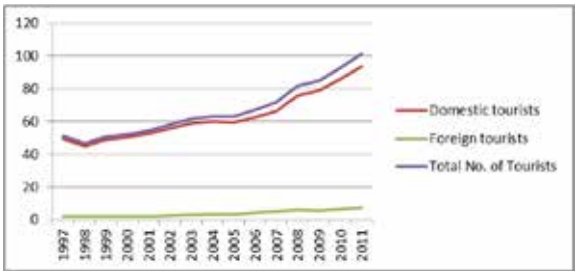
Kerala's principal tourism products fall into six categories: (1) heritage/ cultural/religious sites & events, (2) backwaters, (3) beaches, (4) hill stations, (5) wild life sanctuaries and (6) ayurveda, with the common cord of green environs harmonising them all together to form a Green Symphony.

Table 1 Tourism products and current tourist traffic pattern

Tourism product category	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
1. Heritage, culture & religion	65	40
2. Backwaters	15	20
3. Beaches	8	25
4. Hills & hill stations	7	5
5. Forests & wildlife	5	10

Kerala, of all the states in India, offers the maximum potential for the promotion of ecotourism. Miles and miles of endless serene beaches, tranquil stretches of emerald backwaters, pristine valleys and mountains, exotic species of rare flora and fauna, wild life sanctuaries and national parks, enchanting art forms, magical festivals and cultural monuments are all unique to Kerala and has given it the sobriquet of "Gods own country". The national geographic traveler has labeled Kerala as one of the 10 paradises in the world. Kerala is thus ideally suited for the promotion of ecotourism and has already initiated several steps in this direction. In Kerala 56 places have been identified for development as ecotourism destinations giving emphasis to conservation, ecological sustainability, environmental education and local community benefits. Keeping this objective in mind the Kerala Tourism has setup a separate ecotourism wing to give policy support for the development of the ecotourism destinations in the State.

Figure1: Tourist arrival trends in Kerala: 1997–2011, (lakh)



Sources: Department of Economics and Statistics. 2009. Statistics for Planning 2009. Government of Kerala and Department of Tourism. 2011 and previous reports. Tourism Statistics. Government of Kerala.

Adverse impacts of tourism

As analysed in the GER (UNEP 2011a), despite the many potential positive impacts associated with tourism, the sector is also a significant contributor to environmental pollution and degradation (UNEP 2012a).1 Pressure on the environment stemming from tourism includes: Rising greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – including significant emissions from transportation (e.g. aviation and road transport) and accommodation (e.g. from air-conditioning and heating systems);

Water consumption – increased pressure on already diminished water resources; in some regions, tourism can compete with other sectors for water such as agriculture and the subsistence needs of local populations;

Waste management – considerable impacts of waste and local wastewater; for example, it is commonplace for hotels to discharge untreated sewage directly into the sea;

Detrimental effects on biodiversity – including the erosion of coral reefs, coastal wetlands, forests, arid and semi-arid ecosystems and mountainous areas (UNWTO 2010a)

Increased conflicts with local communities – arising from failure to incorporate biodiversity concerns into destination planning, investment and benefit sharing; and

Threats to cultural integrity – arising from unplanned (no prior consent or participation) and unmanaged tourism.

Travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as ay existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas. In these terms, nature-oriented tourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach to travel although the ecological tourist need not be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing himself/herself in nature in a manner generally not available in the urban environment

Ecotourism in Kerala

The state of Kerala, forming part of the Western Ghats, contains a protected area of 2,324 sq.km in two National Parks and 12 Wildlife Sanctuaries. The Western Ghats of Kerala, with its tropical forest ecosystem, provides a natural advantage for development of Ecotourism. The Western Ghats regions of Kerala can be projected as an Ecotourism Zone in the true sense. It has now become necessary to evolve appropriate location specific strategies for sanctuaries in Kerala, in the sphere of ecotourism development.

Proper ecotourism product development, it's marketing, environmental impact assessment, monitoring etc. are to be done in a systematic way. The Tourism Department of Government of Kerala has taken steps to give focused attention to ecotourism in the State. A separate ecotourism wing has been created to give policy support for the development of the ecotourism destinations in the State. Thenmala ecotourism project was established in and around Shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary with the co-operation of departments such as Forest, Irrigation and Tourism. It is considered to be the first planned ecotourism destination in India. Thekkady is another ecotourism destination, which offers the visitor an unforgettable experience. Except Thekkady, all other sanctuaries in Kerala are practically unknown to tourists. What is needed is a more focused strategy which is supply-driven and small group - oriented. Ecotourism activities, in an ecologically sensitive area need close monitoring.

Table 2.The Potential Ecotourism Spots identified in the Forests of Kerala

Thiruvanathapuram district	Agastyarvanam Biological Park Neyyar Peppara Ponmudi Arippa
Kollam District	Thenmala Kulathupuzha Achancoil Palaruvi
Pathanamthitta District	Konni Pamba Kochupamba
Alapuzha District	Gandhi Smrithivanam, Purakkad
Idukki Distric	Kolahala Medu / Peerumedu Kuttikkanam Thekkady Munnar Rajamala / Eravikulam Idukki Thommankuthu Chinnar
Kottayam District	Kumarakom
Idukki District	Bhoothankettu Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary Mangalavanam Kodanad
Thrissur District	Athirapally Vazhachal Chimmony Peechi Vazhani Sholayar
Palakkad District	Chullannoor Nelliyampathy Silent Valley Parambikulam Malampuzha Walayar
Malappuram District	Nilambur Nedumkayam, Nilambur
Kozhikode District	Kakkayam Peruvannamuzhy Chaliyam
Kannur District	Pythalmala Aralam Kottiyoor Mangrove based Ecotourism,Kannur
Kasargode District	Ranipuram Parappa

Source : Tourist Annals 2012.

Conclusion

Tourism has been recognized as an important sector of the global economy, with a contribution of about 91 per cent of domestic tourism. Ecotourism is an upcoming activity, especially suited for the backwaters areas like the state like Kerala. However eco-tourism as "travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as ay existing cultural manifestations" Kerala with its wide range of unique tourism products

offers excellent opportunities for tourists. Even in the narrowly defined ecotourism niche market India offers a lot. In emerging 21st century ecotourism, India is expected to gain momentum in view of the policy and institutional support provided by government. The roles of the private entrepreneurs, trade bodies, the local communities, NGOs and all other stakeholders are well recognized in this regard. Mutual sharing of information among experts in the region will definitely benefit each country and assist to further develop ecotourism. Such a mutually beneficial approach will help to utilise the potential of the region in ecotourism, and ultimately will lead to the creation of visitors (ecotourists) who may become ambassadors for conservation of our valuable natural resources. If we achieve this that will be the biggest tribute we can offer to Mother Earth and for God's own country.

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