

A STUDY ON DESTINATIONS OF ECO TOURISM IN KERALA

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Abstract

Tourism 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 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. This paper analyzes the most visited destinations of ecotourism with reference to Kerala

Key Words: Kerala Tourism, Eco tourism, Tourism industry

Introduction

Ecotourism, which is also known as ecological tourism, is the responsible travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and often small scale. 'Eco' is derived from the Greek word "oikos" which literally means the habitat and is an abbreviation of the term "ecology" which is the scientific study of the relation of living organisms to each other and their surroundings. Therefore, in this view, ecotourism essentially means ecological tourism; where ecological has both the environmental and social connotations. Tourism is one of the world's most rapidly growing industries and tourism related businesses, the leading producers of new jobs worldwide. It is a unique industry in which floating and migratory populations play a central role in the successful conduct of various projects. Many countries are keen to garner a percentage of the huge 922 million-tourist traffic (WTO, 2008). According to the UN World Tourism Organization, international travelers are projected to nearly double in size by 2020, led by China, India and destinations in South-East Asia. In India the improvement of tourist infrastructure, enhancement of transport connectivity, and focused work on marketing and promotion campaigns by the tourism departments and the industry has led to the country experiencing a boom in tourist arrivals. In 2008, foreign tourist arrivals rose to 5.37 million while domestic tourists went up to 562.92 million registering a growth rate of 65.69%. The foreign exchange earnings generated in 2009 were USD 11.75 billion. The industry contributed 4.9% to the country's GDP and has emerged as a major source of employment. Tourism supports 48.26 million jobs (directly and indirectly) accounting for 8.78% of the total jobs within the country.

Definition Eco Tourism

Ecotourism is now defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education. Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests.

Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

- 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.

Eco Tourism Development

Located at the southern extremity of the Indian sub-continent adjoining the Arabian Sea, the state of Kerala is resplendent former scenic splendor and cultural opulence. The total area of the state comprises 38863 square kilometers and a coastline length of 550 kilometers. The population of the state is 33.39 million. Kerala is known by the name 'God's Own Country' and is one of the most sought after tourist destinations in Asia. It is the only Indian state that offers all types of tourism products. Secluded beaches, palm-fringed back waters, mist clad hill stations, lush green tropical forests, water-falls, exotic wildlife, historical monuments, diverse art forms and festivals give Kerala a distinctive charm. Apart from being a tourist destination, Kerala is India's number one state with 100 percent literate people, world-class healthcare systems, the lowest infant mortality, the highest life expectancy rates, the highest physical quality of life and the best law and order conditions. Moderate climate and the rich art and culture are positive factors that help to foster tourism development. Kerala has not done well in agriculture and industry in the past few decades. In this context the state was focusing on the development of the services-related industry which is now considered as the sunrise segment of the state's economy. More attention is now bestowed on tourism, information technology, health services, and education. Because of the new initiatives taken by the state as well as innovative private parties, Kerala has emerged as the most acclaimed tourist destination in the country. The origin of Kerala Tourism can be traced back to the 1950s, when the state set up a Hospitality Department. Tourism as a department came into being in the 1960s. The enormous potential of tourism in Kerala was only examined in the 7th plan. Over the last decade the growth of tourism in Kerala has been amazing

Eco Tourism in Kerala

Eco tourism is a growing area in the tourist friendly state of Kerala. Eco tourism in Kerala has taken off in a big way because Kerala has many destinations known for their natural beauty and exquisite landscape. As Kerala is one of the greenest destinations in India, the state is a perfect hub for promoting eco tourism in a big way. The landscape is covered with coconut palms in the coastal areas. The paddy fields shimmer with the emerald green of new shoots. The banana plantations are filled with the whisper of waving green banana leaves. The tea plantations are a green blanket that cover the hill ranges as far as the eye can see, and the backwaters are fringed with Pandanus plants that trail the tips of their long leaves in the rippling water, as you float by. The verdant beauty of Kerala is richly highlighted through the different eco tourism destinations. The hill stations, Western Ghats, silent valley, the wildlife sanctuaries, jungles and parks are all splendid eco tourism destinations

Most Visited Destinations in Kerala

Thenmala

This range of “honey hills” so called due to the medicinal honey obtained from there, lies at an altitude of 1650 ft extending over acres of dense forests. The area houses various zones to cater to differing tastes of the visitors. The terrain is rough and Eco-fragile; so zones for activities are demarcated. In the leisure zone, you can choose some of the nature trails and take leisurely walks observing the flora some of which you have never seen before, stop and admire the occasional waterfalls, sit down and enjoy the picnic fare you brought along. Stroll on the boardwalk made of pieces of wood, looking at the stream below. You can also visit the sculpture garden “Man and Nature”. The Canopy walkway, an elevated path in the adventure zone should not be missed. There is a 1000 m trail for mountain biking. Rock climbers can enjoy their hobby as pegs and ropes are provided. You can do an exciting river crossing using rope bridges, make a trust fall or pedal a boat. There is a Deer Rehabilitation center nearby where you can get friendly with the stray deer. Enjoy local art forms and performances at the amphitheater or shop from the shop court for souvenirs. Thenmala is equidistant from Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram and takes about 2 hours to reach there from both the cities.

Konni

Konni village lies on the banks of Achankoil River. The forests around Konni were one of the first reserve forests in Kerala. There is an abundance of rivers and streams in the area and diverse flora that includes many medicinal herbs which are fast disappearing from the face of the earth. Aborigines lived here once; their simple lives had never upset Man-Nature equilibrium. Konni is mainly associated with “Aanakoodu” a camp for elephants where they are trained. Tourists can view the taming; even participate in feeding them and bathing them. Rides are provided. An elephant museum has also been set up. This location

is the hub for ecotourism activities, such as trekking accompanied by trained guides to interior camp sites. Treks of half day, whole day and two days are possible. The last mentioned takes you to Manalar-Kumbhavarutty, a refreshing waterfall deep inside the forest.

Parambikulam

It is one of the best Eco-tourism spots in Kerala. This Wildlife Sanctuary is spread across 277 sq km between ranges of hills. The Teak plantation here is scientifically managed. Kannimara Teak tree is the tallest and the oldest at 350 years. Among the calm greenery rise many peaks, the tallest being Karimala Gopuram, 4,718 ft tall. Vengoli peak is climbable without much hassle. There are 3 dams in the area. Thus the sanctuary sports a series of reservoirs interconnected by tunnels, rivers and canals. The place is exciting for wildlife enthusiasts, bird watchers and botanists. Deep inside the sanctuary live rarely seen animals such as lion-tailed macaque and Bengal tiger. 250 species of birds have been identified. Floral diversity is something to write home about. 1320 species of flowering plants including orchids! Amazing! Activities are plenty to choose from according to your energy and interest. Soft, medium, tough and adventure trekking trails of different length, duration and difficulty present you with a choice. For any trek you need permission and a tribal guide. Thunakadavu and Parambikulam lakes offer boating and rafting. You can camp out in the forests or stay in a watchtower and view the animals.

Rhodo Valley

As the name implies, rhododendrons flower profusely in this high altitude locale in Munnar. This “Silent Valley” plateau, covered with grass, is home to many endangered species of animals. To enjoy the scenic beauty one has to trek along some of the many trails that start from Silent Valley Tea Estate. There are a number of packages with fixed tariffs lasting from one day to 3 days. The treks touch Land’s End Camp, Lake View camp and Rhodovalley Camp. A two-day trek halts for the night at a forest hut and returns through Rhodo valley and back home. Next to the KFDC office on Mattupetty Road is an orchidarium and garden. A trek from Rajamalai through thick shola forests will land you at the orchid farm at Kadalar. Part of the way is traversed by jeep. There are some beautiful lakes nearby. There is dormitory accommodation available. There are few comfortable resorts nearby too.

Thommankuthu

The topography of the place is as strange as its name. It consists of a seven-step waterfall from 1500 m to 500 m spread over a distance of 5 km. At each step there is a cascade and a pool beneath. There are dark mysterious caves in between. Naturally tourists rush to this spot for a rarely experienced treat. It is only 20 km from Thodupuzha. If you are game, you can trek 12 km to the top of the mountain where the waterfall starts. But you can enjoy as much in the shallow pools lower down. Go boating, bird watching and camp for the night. For those who prefer comfort stay, there are a number of hotels in

Thodupuzha. Even a farm stay is available nearby Cochin International Airport is 70 km from Thodupuzha.

Aralam

This wildlife sanctuary is the northernmost sanctuary of Kerala lying 45 km to the east of Kannur. The extent is only 55 sq km. It is a bio-rich forest range with large Teak and Eucalyptus plantations. The tallest peak Katti Betta rises to a height of 1145 m. The forest is mostly evergreen with diverse fauna and flora. The Aralam State Farm adjoins the Sanctuary. An overnight stay in the forest watchtower may give you glimpses of wildlife such as leopards, elephants, bison and other wild life. Meenmutty waterfall is near the watchtower and you can relax there during the day. You can also trek 14 km from Valayanchat to reach Meenmutty. Aralam River flows calm; a picnic on its banks would be pleasant. There is dormitory accommodation at Aralam : also rough night camping at Meenmutty. Proper facility for staying is in Iritty town, 20 km from the sanctuary.

Eravikulam National Park

This Park at an altitude of 7000 ft lies 16km north east of Munnar. The fauna and flora is diverse; special emphasis is to be placed on the Nilgiri Tahr a type of wild goat seen only in this area and also the rare butterflies including the Atlas moth. 5 species of mammals seen here are endemic to Western Ghats. Over 100 species of birds and butterflies have been sighted here. Trekking and other activities are allowed only in the tourism zone which can be reached by vehicles. The view from the top is marvelous. Guests can undertake treks along many a trail from here. A one-day trek from Lakhom falls is worth the try, at the end of which you can view the Anamudi Peak, the highest in the Western Ghats. You may stay overnight at the Log House and rest your weary feet. Fishing is another pastime in the park area. Rainbow trouts are abundant in the streams. If you explore the upper valley you'll land in the shola grasslands, adorned with balsams and orchids. For stay you can opt for the Government Guest Houses or the many resorts in Munnar.

Peppara Sanctuary

This area of mixed forests is about 50 km from Thiruvananthapuram. It covers an area of 53 acres which includes a dam, thick forests, rocky terrain with rich fauna, and sparkling streams. There are some tribal settlements here and there. Birdwatchers and butterfly lovers will find this place especially attractive. There are plenty of water birds also, so any trekker or sightseer will find the place satisfying. Treks require previous permission. The sanctuary also supports wildlife such as tigers, panther, lion-tailed macaques and Nilgiri Langurs. Pomudi Hill Station and Meenmutty waterfalls are quite near from Peppara.

Periyar

"All things wild and wonderful", (the title of a book on his veterinary practice by James Herriot) - that is how Periyar can be defined. Thekkady with the big lake in the

middle brings pictures of herds of elephants, whole families of all ages strolling gracefully in their natural habitat. A cruise in this 26 sq km man-made lake is a comfortable way of watching the wildlife around. But the ecotourism activities designed are more thrilling at Periyar Sanctuary, a tiger reserve in Thekkady than at the lake. A nature walk accompanied by tribal trackers along selected trails takes you through a variety of flora comprising many species of flowering plants, rare orchids, birds and butterflies in the forests. Twice a week a protected trekking and camping activity for a group of 5 along the Tiger trail is provided in the company of reformed poachers who know every nook and corner of the forest. You may sight a tiger from a safe distance. A night patrol with armed guards is an exciting opportunity to feel the “dreadful thrill “of the wild.

Gavi

A two hour jeep ride from Kumily, passing through exemplary scenic beauty takes you to Gavi a must- see for bird watchers. There are a lot of tea and cardamom plantations, forests, waterfalls etc, which you can view on the way or stop and spend some time. Besides bird watching, visitors can go boating or canoeing in the Reservoir lake. The trekking trail to Pullumedu Peak ends with a panoramic view including the famous shrine of Sabarimala. The adventurers can hike to Meenar or Valley view and gaze in awe at the deep ravine below. You need to have a local guide and “elephant chaser “accompany you. The most exciting thing to do is night-camping in the forest, which is possible in Gavi. You can stay in the eco-lodge overlooking the Gavi Lake and forests. You may also stay in a tree-top house or to say honestly that you lived right in the forest; pitch a tent in the wilderness. Kerala Tourism Department has realized the significant advantages of environment friendly tourism and taken steps to develop it. Such nature-oriented travel induces man to think deeply of how pristine and green the earth was when humans did not avariciously snatch resources meant for other living things. While visiting such a spot, any honest person will condemn man’s cruelty to nature, the animals and the vegetation and will definitely start thinking about ways to preserve the Mother Nature.

Conclusion

I concluded that Ecotourism has expanded fast and in a revolutionary way. It is an offshoot wave of environmental awareness. Due to tourism’s strong role in the nations and economies of the world, the need for tourism research is imperative. The movement towards ecotourism in Kerala is at once a threat and an opportunity to create more sustainable tourism. By diverting tourist traffic to ensure that the carrying capacity of any destination is not exceeded, by planning for regeneration of natural resources, and by generating awareness in the host community whereby they are prepared to deal with the negative impact of mass tourism are the ways of attaining sustainability.

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