

## ECOTOURISM FOR PROMOTING LIVELIHOODS AND CONSERVATION

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With dwindling natural resources there is a need to reduce man animal conflict. Through sustainable and eco-friendly practices many destinations have shown way as to how humans can live in harmony with nature for his own sake and for the sake of future generations.

**E**cotourism is a term which is used worldwide for the last two decades. Conservation, preservation and sustainability are embedded in this form of tourism. The very concept of tourism has undergone drastic changes in light of livelihood of rural community and conservation of biodiversity. Any tourism activity which is detrimental to local community will also cause irreparable damage to environment. The age old traditions and values that are ethnic in nature need to be conserved and nurtured for future generations. Ecotourism has established itself as a livelihood activity to local community in remote destinations around India particularly in Kerala.

Tourism undoubtedly ranks among the top industries in terms of employment and revenue generation globally. Ecotourism has emerged as a major activity among local community in rural India especially in Kerala. Ranking top among consumer

states in India, Kerala banks heavily on ecotourism activities to provide livelihood to local community. Although tourism is not rated highly among hard core conservationists as they find it detrimental to environment, there no going back in terms of tourism revenue. This is particularly true in light of the fact that rural community with their wealth of knowledge in terms of environment, local flora and fauna have managed to earn a decent income through ecotourism initiatives undertaken from time to time. Carrying capacity of eco destinations is a major cause of concern particularly in terms of damage caused to bio diversity of the region. Systematic approach based on regular training to local community has ensured that environmental impact due to these activities is minimal or zero. Nature has healing powers and can cure itself of damages caused by intrusion provided sufficient time is given. This concept is applied in wild life sanctuaries and national parks around the country where ecotourism activities

are promoted. During certain periods like breeding season of endangered species, drought or at times of unforeseen events, these Eco destinations remain closed to visitors. An attempt has been made here to highlight ecotourism activities in general in India with a focus on ecotourism initiatives in Kerala.

Emerging as a buzzword in the late 1980s, Ecotourism is a responsible travel to undisturbed natural areas that conserve the natural environment and enhance the well-being of the local people (TIES – 1990). Recognized as an appropriate tool for reaching the milestone of sustainable development, the catch phrase simultaneously performs three important functions namely strengthening conservation efforts by providing financial supports, enhancing economic benefits to the aboriginal people and other local community and enrich visitor's experience in the destination where the buzzword is being implemented and promoted properly. Keeping in mind the importance of the development of ecotourism, ecotourism zones are being developed in the protected areas network across the world. Experience shows that the cost of maintenance of the global network of protected

areas will be around USD 50 billion per year and the top 25 World Biodiversity Hotspots require USD 500 million per year (Gossling, S; 2002). The protected areas are in the need of ecotourism for generating sufficient income to cover their maintenance costs in order to achieve financial sustainability. Western Ghats, in India, is one of the biodiversity hotspots in the world which is home for endemic plants and endangered animals. Along with this, the 1600 km long mountain range is considered as one of the principal ecotourism sites in the country.

### Ecotourism in India

Realising the importance of ecotourism a great deal of work has been done in terms of developing eco destinations in various states keeping in mind the spirit of sustainable development through conservation of ethnicity and environment. The top eco destination in the country in Kerala is the narrow piece of land tantalisingly wedged between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats. The very fact that the mighty Western Ghats runs across the length of Kerala is the reasons for the large number of eco destinations dotting the state of Kerala.

Figure 1.1 – Ecotourism in Kerala



Other major ecotourism destinations are found in the north eastern states chiefly in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The concept of ecotourism is catching up in other states as well, some of which like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh to name a few. With a fascinating spread of wildlife amply protected by the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries India is one of the few countries in the world that can boast of such a varied biodiversity. Tourism industry has not looked back since the advent of community linked projects reaping profits that augers well for further ecotourism initiatives. In light of the above observations some the prominent ecotourism destinations are being discussed in the paragraphs that follow. Ranging from the lofty heights of Leh to the capital city of India, New Delhi we can find ecotourism closely interwoven into the fabric of the Indian society. Some ecotourism initiatives related to livelihood of local community in Indian states other than Kerala are listed below.

### Leh Nutrition Project

Ladakh (Leh) is a much sought after destination where ecotourism is a source of livelihood to local community. The Leh Nutrition Project, an NGO initiative joined hands with Ladakh Ecological Group to promote sustainable livelihood to local community. They have been addressing issues related to child care, development, education, livelihood and watershed development in this difficult terrain. Ecotourism concepts have been imbibed into the livelihood activities of this community which has resulted in improving living standards.

### Ecotourism for a Better Future - Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh Forest Department has taken steps to carry forward the concept of ecotourism in the state. State Forest Development Agencies (SFDAs) were constituted to implement Participatory Forestry Management.

### Ecotourism Initiative in New Delhi

Ecotourism Society of India has played a key role in ecotourism initiatives in the capital city of India. New Delhi ranks top among the cities that are most polluted and reducing carbon foot print

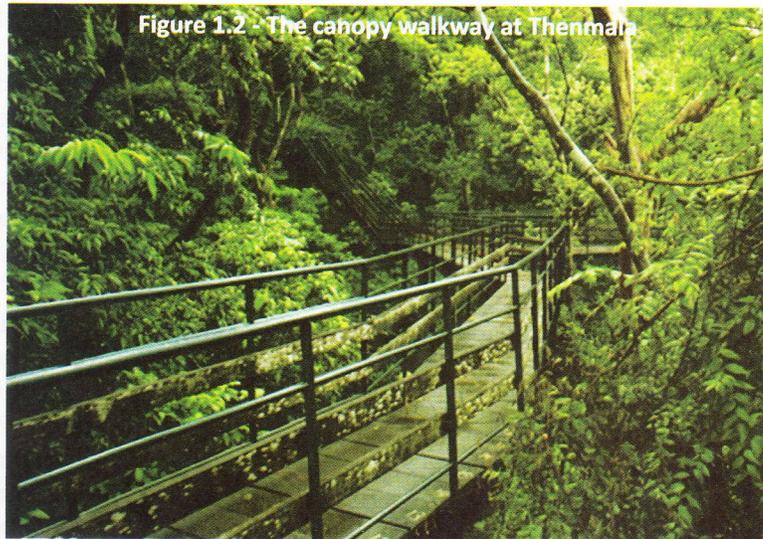


Figure 1.2 - The canopy walkway at Thenmara

by creating awareness among city dwellers will go a long way in addressing this menace. A clean and green city is modern day man's dream and New Delhi has taken the right step in this direction. Places in the city like the Chhawla-Kanganheri – an ecotourism park near Najafgarh drain has been revamped for recreational activities. Boating, camping, paintball and obstacle course are some of the activities available for tourists and city dwellers. Farm tourism is another activity that is catching up with tourists largely in city outskirts and a few have come up in the heart of the city as well. Other ecotourism activities available are exploring the JNU caves that consist of a few caves hidden in the lush greenery of Jawaharlal Nehru University campus in New Delhi. The Yamuna Bio diversity park is another emerging bio diversity project site dedicated to giving insights into the importance of conserving biodiversity. This 457 acre park near Wazirabad village is one the most visited public places and is emerging as a important centre for learning and understanding the environment.

### Ecotourism in Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand has established itself as a leading ecotourism destination in the country over the last few years. With its abundance in terms *snow-capped mountains*, rolling Meadows, *high altitude lakes*, *dense forests* and *wetland*, Uttarakhand is a nature lover's paradise. Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarakhand are home to exotic *wildlife*, *birds* and *flora*. Many circuits are being developed in these areas as ecotourism circuits. The forest rest houses of British era add value to these circuits.

## Ecotourism initiatives in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Assam

These states of north east have a unique identity different from the rest of country in terms of flora, fauna and way of life. The people of these regions right from their ancestors have imbibed a sense of pride wherein their culture is inextricably intertwined to nature. Hence ecotourism concepts are in cohesion with their thoughts and activities. Though a late entrant into the area of tourism and its different forms, these states are setting their own benchmarks by conserving their ethnicity and culture. Eco tourists from world all over now look at north eastern India with awe and respect. Kaziranga National park in Assam is such a destination famous for the one horned Rhino. In addition to these many exotic species have made this state their home.

The mountainous state of Sikkim famed for its close association with nature has made ecotourism a livelihood activity through organised treks and trails which have become package tour programmes. Meghalaya is yet another north eastern state of India where the indigenous communities are in harmony with nature. Their rituals and beliefs are closely associated with mountains, flora and fauna. Conservation and preservation of eco systems is a natural process here. Sometimes called the paradise unexplored, various initiatives in this state aimed to bring ecotourism in its true spirit the welfare of local people. With mesmerising natural beauty and abundance, this state stands on the threshold of what could be a harbinger to a sustainable livelihood, through ecotourism initiatives.

## Ecotourism in Karnataka

Madikeri, Agumbe, Coorg and Shimoga are among the most sought after ecotourism destinations in Karnataka. The importance this state has given to ecotourism is amply evidenced by the decision to set up an Eco-Tourism Development Board for the state. The famous national parks like the Bandipur and bird sanctuaries like Ranganathittu are just a few examples where ecotourism has become both a conservation and livelihood activity in this state. Ecotourism has firmly set its roots in this southern state of India and has paved way to a better future for the local people.

## Ecotourism in Kerala - interwoven into the Fabric of Society

Forest with its endemic plants and majestic animals has always captivated mankind. Kerala

is one of its kinds in the Indian peninsular as the Western Ghats supports tremendous biological values in great variety. With this backbone, today the state has established 23 protected areas (16 wild life sanctuaries and 5 national parks) which are spread over 1736.88 sq.km thus providing a natural advantage for developing ecotourism.

## The Eco Development Project

India Eco Development Project aims to reduce the dependency of local community on forest and conserve the biological diversity of protected areas with the support of World Bank and Global Environmental Facility (GEF). 580 EDCs have been formed involving 75,000 households in the selected areas. Considering the biological value of Periyar Tiger Reserve for the state, the India Eco Development Project is launched by the Department of Forest and Wildlife in 1996 in this reserve (Project Performance Assessment Report, World Bank, 2007). The major objectives of this project are following;

- Improve the capacity of protected areas management to conserve biodiversity, increase collaboration of local people and increase opportunities for local participation
- Reduce the negative impact of local people on biodiversity
- Develop more extensive support for eco - development
- Ensure effective management of the project
- Prepare future biodiversity projects

After launching India Eco Development Project in Periyar Tiger Reserve, ecotourism has received significant attention among local people, tourists, service providers and other aid agencies in this state. Considering the significance of ecotourism in the forest areas, steps are being taken to spread this concept into other protected and forest areas of this state. As a result, EDCs and VSS were formed in the network of protected forest areas by involving local people. For assisting EDCs, a local level institutional mechanism was developed what is known as Community Development Found (CDF) in which a particular portion of employee's salaries are retained, deposited and will be utilized for the members in terms of loan and to meet unforeseen demands of the local community. The members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) are also included in the ecotourism practices to boost women empowerment in the state.

## Benefits of Ecotourism

The ecotourism initiative in Kerala has become an alternate tool for providing livelihood benefits to the marginalised community members in terms of employment, income generation and training. Guards, guides, and drivers are the major employment generating positions in the ecotourism destinations. The employment opportunities for the local community members not only increase their level of income but also facilitate saving pattern among them. As ecotourism destinations are laid down in remote areas, the initiative has provided employment opportunities to the marginalised and economically backward community members. According to Eco – Development and Tribal Welfare Wing of Department of Forest (as on 31.12.2008), a total of 39557 community members have been employed of which 8164 people (20.64%) belong to Scheduled Caste community, the employment generated for Scheduled Tribes is estimated as 6063 (15.33%) while 23330 people (64.03%) from other community have been employed in various ecotourism practices across the state.

In addition to the socio – economic benefits of ecotourism, the earnest efforts are being made in imparting various training / skill development programmes to the members of EDC and VSS across the state which enables them to acquire and update their knowledge on different concepts of ecotourism management. Most recently, Kerala Institute of Tourism and Travel Studies (KITTS) in association with Directorate of Ecotourism organised Naturalist/ Interpreters course for EDC / VSS members with the aim of promoting quality eco tour guides in the identified ecotourism destination. During the course, guiding skill, first aid practices, ecotourism products of Kerala, visitor management technique, hospitality and special knowhow on endemic and endangered species of Kerala were imparted to them with the aim of enriching their existing knowledge. Moreover, the Directorate of Ecotourism is taking efforts for organising regional workshops in the identified regions for achieving the goals of sustainable development of tourism in the state.

The statistics released by Kerala Forest Department (2016) shows that out of the 190 EDCs across forest regions in Kerala, Scheduled Tribe (ST) representation family wise is 31.14% while for 400 VSSs in Kerala the representation by Scheduled Tribes (ST) family wise is 25.76%. This shows that

Scheduled Tribes who are ethnic to that region have shown greater interest in enrolling themselves in ecotourism initiatives of the state.

## Extracts from Statistics for the year 2016 by Kerala Forest Department

### Participatory forest management (PFM)

The State has adopted participatory forest management (PFM) as a strategy for conservation of bio-diversity and for the improvement of livelihood of forest dependent people by forming partnership institutions at grass root level since 1998. The institutions in territorial forest divisions are called Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSS). Those in Sanctuaries and National Parks are called Eco-Development Committees (EDC). During the year 2015-16, there were 400 numbers of VSSs and 190 numbers of EDCs. Detailed statistics on VSS/EDC are given in tables 1.1 to 1.2 that follow.

Table 1.1 -Division wise number of VSS

Sl No.	Territorial division	No.of VSS
1	2	3
1	Thiruvananthapuram	20
2	Thenmala	11
3	Punalur	15
4	Konni	20
5	Ranni	34
6	Achencoil	6
7	Kottayam	13
8	Kothamangalam	10
9	Munnar	11
10	Marayoor	23
11	Mankulam	9
12	Malayattoor	17
13	Vazhachal	11
14	Chalakydy	10
15	Thrissur	21
16	Palakkad	11
17	Mannarkad	11
18	Nilambur south	14
19	Nilambur north	30
20	Nemmara	17
21	North wayanad	17
22	South wayanad	18
23	Kozhikode	17
24	Kannur	20
25	Kasargode	14
	<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>

**Table 1.2 -Division wise number of VSS**

SI No.	Wildlife division	No. of EDC
1	2	3
1	Parambikulam	7
2	Aralam	3
3	Silent Valley	7
4	Wayanad WL	15
5	Peechi	12
6	Thiruvananthapuram WL	31
7	Shendurney	9
8	Idukki	9
9	Munnar WL	22
10	Periyar East	35
11	Periyar West	40
	<b>Total</b>	<b>190</b>

### Vanasree Ecoshops

Vana Samrakshana Samithies were to sell processed and semi processed non timber forest products collected by adivasis (tribals) from forest areas. The profits from these outlets are ploughed back to the Minor Forest Produce (MFP) collectors through the VSS. The public will also be getting unadulterated and genuine forest products from these outlets. There are 37 Vanasree Ecoshops in the state under forest development agencies (FDA) including 2 mobile units. The details of these outlets as on 31.03.2016 are shown in table 1.3.

**Table 1.3 -Division wise location of ecoshops**

SI No.	Division	Name of Vanasree unit
1	2	3
1	Thiruvananthapuram	Forest headquarters, Thiruvananthapuram
2	Thiruvananthapuram wildlife	Neyyar
3	Achenkoil	Manalar - Kumbhavurutty
4	Thenmala	Palaruvi
5	Punalur	Ayur
6	Konni	Konni
7	Ranni	Kochandi
8	SF, Alappuzha	Kommadi
9	Malayattoor	Kodanad
10	Malayattoor	Paneliporu
11	Kothamangalam	Thommankuthu

12	Chalaky	Chalaky
13	Vazhachal	Athirappally
14	Vazhachal	Vazhachal
15	Munnar wildlife	5th Mile
16	Munnar wildlife	Alampetty
17	Munnar wildlife	Anamudi shola
18	Munnar wildlife	Lakkam
19	Munnar wildlife	Rajamala
20	Periyar east	Thekkady
21	Parambikulam, wildlife	Parambikulam
22	Parambikulam, wildlife	Malampuzha
23	Parambikulam, wildlife	Anappady
24	Silent valley national park	Mukkali
25	South wayanad	Soochippara
26	South wayanad	Pakkom-Kuruva
27	North wayanad	Mananthavady
28	North wayanad	Plamoola
29	North wayanad	Thrissileri
30	North wayanad	Kalindi
31	Nilambur north	Aruvakode
32	Nilambur south	Nedumgayam (Manjeri)
33	Wayanad wildlife	Muthanga
34	Marayoor	Marayoor
35	Schendurany wildlife	Schendurney
36	Thiruvananthapuram	Mobile vanasree unit
37	Malayattoor	Mobile vanasree unit

### Eco-tourism destinations

The eco-tourism in forest areas is implemented through forest development agencies. There are 55 eco-tourism destinations functioning in the State. District wise number of eco-tourism destinations in the State under forest department is given in table 1.4.

**Table 1.4 -District wise number of Eco-tourism destinations**

SI No.	District	No. of destination
1	2	3
1	Thiruvananthapuram	6
2	Kollam	3
3	Pathanamthitta	4
4	Alappuzha	0
5	Idukki	8
6	Kottayam	2
7	Ernakulam	3

8	Thrissur	2
9	Palakkad	6
10	Malappuram	3
11	Kozhikkode	5
12	Wayanad	9
13	Kannur	3
14	Kasaragode	1
	Total	55

The photographs are just a glimpse of the depth in bio diversity and natural resources of Kerala which are also popular ecotourism destinations.

### Role of Department of Tourism and allied Organisations

Tourism is a thriving industry in Kerala and ecotourism is one many forms of tourism practiced in the state. However the very fact that a separate directorate exists of ecotourism at Government level shows the importance of ecotourism. Kerala Institute of Tourism and Travel Studies (KITTS) is the HR wing under Kerala tourism catering to all training and manpower requirements in tourism sector in the state. Some initiatives implemented through KITTS has given expertise to thousands of local community people and common man interested in pursuing a livelihood in ecotourism destinations. Leading ecotourism destinations of the state such as Munnar, Thekkady, Wayanad have captured lot of international attention through sustainable livelihood practices using ecotourism.

### Thenmala Ecotourism

This is India's first planned ecotourism destination. The major activities and zones in this scenic spot situated 72 kms away from Trivandrum are a) Adventure zone b) Boating c) Butterfly safari d) Children's park e) Deer Rehabilitation Centre f) Leisure zone g) Musical dancing fountain and the h) Nakshatravanam. The latest contribution by Thenmala Ecotourism Society (TEPS) is barrier free access for hearing and visually challenged visiting this pioneer ecotourism destination in the country launched in March 2019.

### Conclusion

Ecotourism as tool to sustainable livelihoods conservation of bio diversity is established beyond doubt. In India more and more states have embraced ecotourism not only to increase revenue but also to

conserve nature and its valuable resources. It will not be an exaggeration to state that the entire state of Kerala can be declared an ecotourism destination. Ranging from providing livelihood to local community living in forest fringes to cities, ecotourism is a way of life in Kerala. Well trained man power and judicious use of resources has made Kerala a true leader in this venture. Munnar, Wayand, Thekkady and Neyyar are just a few shining examples of this noble venture. With dwindling natural resources there is a need to reduce man animal conflict. Through sustainable and eco-friendly practices many destinations have shown way as to how humans can live in harmony with nature for his own sake and for the sake of future generations.

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