

Ecotourism -The Popular Movement in the informal labour of Kerala

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Abstract

Ecotourism can be embraced as a headway for the tourism industry of Kerala as it gives due priority to ecologically sustainable development. As an ethical business practice that rooted in the embedded relationship of human beings and nature, ecotourism aims at practising the sustainable tourism and thereby generating employment and income for the local people for their active participation and involvement in it. In this context, the present article highlights how the ecotourism initiatives in Kerala are systematically being steered by the Kerala Forest Department for regional development. The present article is based on the research study conducted by the author among 29 ecotourism destinations of Kerala. Being a descriptive, based more on secondary data sources rather than an empirical one, the present paper discusses how the systematic ecotourism initiatives by Kerala Forest Department have been successful in providing the social, economic and environmental benefits with the local population who directly or indirectly depend on the ecotourism projects for their livelihood options. The study has observed that ecotourism in Kerala has emerged as a viable option for rural households to secure a job either as a major income-earning activity or a subsidiary income-earning activity.

Introduction

Ecotourism, the “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well- being of the local people” (Singh, 2009a) has drawn worldwide attention in recent decades. It has widened the scope of ecologically sustainable tourism development models which can ensure the well-being of the local community living around the ecotourism destinations in an unprecedented manner. As a boon of nature, the environment plays a key role in ecotourism. As an ideal and potential strategy to protect the natural ecosystem while promoting the sustainable economic development of the local community, ecotourism has grown to the status of a niche market within travel and tourism industry (Cardoso, 2014).

In a Mexican Academic Journal published in 1987, Héctor Ceballos Lascuráin defined ecotourism as "travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987: p.13). In its revised version TIES defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and

education"(TIES, 2015). Jagbir Singh defines ecotourism in the general and commonly understood sense as the management of tourism with the conservation of nature in such a way that the fine balance between the requirements of tourism and ecology on the one hand and the needs of the local communities for jobs and new skills, on the other hand, is maintained to generate income from employment and also keeping in mind, a better status for women (Jagbir Singh, 2010). The World Conference on Sustainable Tourism held at Lanzarote in 1995 remarked that “tourism is sustainable when its development and operation include the participation of the local population, protection of the total environment, fair economic return for the industry and its host community, as well as mutual respect for and gratification of all involved parties” (Andrew Holden, Singh, 2009). All the conceptual reflections regarding ecotourism can be summed up in this way: ecotourism can be approached as a tool for sustainable development, it has many resources potential to protect and sustain the natural environment, it generates employment opportunities and income to local community especially to marginalized groups, it promotes the regional development and finally, it is a mechanism for empowering the rural women and the promotion of ecotourism is hugely beneficial for human beings and nature.

In the past, being evaluated as a smokeless industry, tourism was lauded as a key source of foreign exchange earnings and an engine of economic growth and development. But over time, the tourism so-called 'mass tourism' was upbraided for generating the

ecological and sociological disturbances which eventually created detrimental effects to both host community and the environment such as non-local orientation, displacement of the local community, mega-resorts with corporate interests, commercialization of cultural and natural resources, environmental degradation etc., (Sharma, 2010; Fennell, 2015b; Pathania & Kumar, 2008). On this ground, ecotourism has come up with a deep-rooted analytical framework of the full-fledged criteria of biodiversity conservation, economic benefits, well-being and empowerment of the local community. It was, later on, recognized by the United Nations while it observed 2002 as the Year of International Ecotourism.

For countries like Costa Rica, Nepal, Kenya, Ecuador, Antarctica and Madagascar, ecotourism is not only a strategy to protect the environment but also the largest economic activity contributing more share to their GDP (Singh, 2009),(Weinberg, 2011). As one of the sub and leading components of the service sector, tourism constitutes a major share of the service sector towards the GDP of Kerala. At the same time, the mode of tourism strategy, which is branded under the ecotourism label, is increasingly demanded by both domestic and foreign tourists for the last couple of years. (Table 1.1)

Table 1.1
The flow of Tourists Arrivals to Kerala from 2004-2017

Year	Domestic Tourists	Percentage Change from Previous year	Foreign Tourists	Percentage Change from Previous year
2004	59,72,182	1.7	3,45,546	17.3

2005	59,46,423	-4.3	3,46,499	0.27
2006	62,71,724	5.47	4,28,534	23.7
2007	66,42,941	5.92	5,15,808	20.37
2008	75,91,250	14.28	5,98,929	16.11
2009	79,13,537	4.25	5,57,258	-6.96
2010	85,95,075	8.61	6,59,265	18.31
2011	93,81,455	9.15	7,32,985	11.18
2012	100,76,854	7.41	7, 93,696	8.28
2013	108, 57,811	7.75	8, 58,143	8.12
2014	116,95,411	7.71	9,23,366	7.60
2015	124,65,571	6.59	9,77,479	5.86
2016	131,72,535	5.67	103,8419	6.23
2017	146,73,520	11.39	109,1870	5.15
2018	156,04,661	6.35%	109,6407	0.42%

Source: Department of Tourism, Kerala Government

The year 2018 witnessed an increase of 6.35% in the domestic tourist arrivals to Kerala over the year 2017. Similarly, the foreign tourist arrivals to Kerala in 2018 have had an increase of 0.42% over the previous year(Department of Economics and Statistics, 2018).

Ecotourism -The Most Popular Initiative by the Forest Department of Kerala

All the exertions to ensure the effective and systematic operation and management of the ecotourism projects of Kerala can be acknowledged as one of the most popular movements by the Kerala Forest Department.

‘The Tourism Policy of Kerala 2012’ has conceded that tourism would promote the well being and empower the unorganized labour force in the rural areas (Tourism Policy of Kerala, 2012). The policy holds up that such modes of tourism strategies which are pointed towards the social, environmental and economic benefits to the local population are imperative in Kerala. Moreover, the Policy also affirmed that proper measures would be devised in the tourism sector of Kerala to empower the community in all respects. On the environmental and social fronts, the policy aims at minimizing environmental damages and sustaining local culture and traditions in the rural community. On the economic front, the focus would be given to the generation of direct and indirect employment opportunities through tourism(Tourism Policy of Kerala, 2012).

As far as Kerala is concerned, the achievement of the environmental, social and economic goals of tourism is easily accessible through the mode of ecotourism strategy to a great extent. This mode of strategy aims at enhancing sustainable tourism together with the well- being of the rural community at the grass-root level. There are unique and enchanting eco-tourism destinations across Kerala. Since most of the ecotourism spots in Kerala are situated in around the rural and forest areas, the major ecotourism initiatives in Kerala are now being undertaken and implemented by the Kerala Forest Department.

The Forest Department of Kerala has been evolving new modalities for developing community-based ecotourism for the last couple of years(State Planning Board, Kerala, 2009). It has been on a smooth track in developing and providing different and unique tourism strategies in each ecotourism destinations both to guest and host communities. The direct and indirect employment opportunities generated through ecotourism activities at 19 territorial divisions, 24 wildlife sanctuaries and five National Parks under the dynamic initiatives of Kerala Forest Department, have been exposed much beneficial to the less privileged sections of the rural community(Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, 2015).

One of the exceptional peculiarities of ecotourism in Kerala has been experienced in the generation of the employment opportunities for the economically backward rural community who had exploitatively depended on the forest resources for their livelihood before the ecotourism spots were identified and activated. The systematically structured buildup of ecotourism by the Forest Department of Kerala works much for the successful and dynamic initiative in the implementation of ecotourism activities in its true sense. How far this structured buildup has been successful in the implementation of ecotourism activities through sincere efforts of the Forest Department of Kerala is discussed in coming sections.

1.2 State Forest Development Agency, Kerala (SFDA)

The active involvement of the local people in the development of ecotourism

activities is found to be mandatory. It is ensured through an institutional framework. The Forest Department through its institutional framework -State Forest Development Agency (SFDA)- ensures the active involvement of the local community in the development of ecotourism activities at each spot. SFDA is being operated with the following.

- (a) To widen the operation of Participatory Forest Management (PFM) for the effective forest management and to sustain the well-being of the forest dependents.
- (b) To organize the programmes by liaising with other departments and agencies of the government for the development of the eco-friendly villages to forest dependents.
- (c) To check and reduce the exploitation over forest resources by the communities and other weaker section and to develop the sense of responsibility among them towards the protection of the forest.
- (d) To encourage the forest-dependent communities to participate in PFM to earn their livelihood options under the institutional arrangements- Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSS) or Eco-Development Committees (EDC).
- (e) To create sustainable employment opportunities for the tribal and other marginalized sections of the rural community in and around the forest areas.
- (f) To generate durable community assets for the forest dependents and thereby the overall development of the village
- (g) To chalk out programmes for the capacity building of the forest-dependent

community (Kerala Forest Department, n.d.)

1.3 Participatory Forest Management (PFM)

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) is an intended tool designed to safeguard the forests and to ensure the sustainable use of the non-wood forest resources with the dynamic involvement of communities depending on forests for their livelihood options (Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, n.d.). Since 1998, Kerala has taken up the Participatory Forest Management (PFM) mainly focused on objectives; (a) biodiversity conservation and (b) the promotion of well-being of the forest dependents. Under the Forest Development Agency of Kerala, these objectives are accomplished with two partnership institutions called Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSS) or Eco-Development Committees (EDC) formed at the village level. The ecotourism activities at each ecotourism spots are effectively managed by these two village-level bodies. The ecotourism activities in Territorial Forest Divisions of Kerala are managed by the VSS and those in National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries are regulated by EDC (Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, 2009, Kerala Forest Department, 2015).

- **Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSS) or Eco-Development Committees (EDC)**

The model of ecotourism development practised in and around the protected and reserved areas of the state have been upheld as a sustainable one for other Indian states. The Directorate of Ecotourism under PFM has introduced a new approach called Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS) in the reserved forest areas and Eco-Development

Committees (EDCs) in Protected Areas of the state to ensure community participation in the management of ecotourism across the state. The active involvement and participation of the local community through VSS or EDC is highly appreciated on account of it ensures the environmental protection and brings about the socio-economic benefits to the local community. In brief, the economic, social and cultural empowerment of the local community through the generation of employment opportunities at each ecotourism spot can be possible through the effective functioning of these institutional bodies.

Every VSS or EDC consists of people belonging to Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste and other economically backward community. It can be observed that the income earned by the VSS or EDC workers from various employment alternatives shows dissimilarity among different ecotourism spots because of the variations in the income-generating capacity of each spot. (Babu Rengaraj, 2013). The survey conducted among 29 ecotourism destinations shows that the local people are actively participating in VSS or EDC for the successful management of the ecotourism destinations.

The detailed list of VSS and EDC and the category of the people working at various ecotourism destinations of Kerala is shown in table 1.2

Table 1.2
Detailed List of VSS and EDC- 2010-2015

Year	Number of VSS	Number of Families				Number of EDC	Number of Families			
		SC	ST	Others	Total		SC	ST	Others	Total
2010-11	389	6877	16878	42555	66310	185	2831	4474	4852	12157
2011-12	398	7062	15372	36798	59232	190	3681	4373	5088	13,140
2012-13	400	7062	15225	36798	59,085	190	3681	4373	5088	13,140
2013-14	400	7062	15225	36798	59,085	190	3681	4373	5088	13,140
2014-15	400	7062	15225	36798	59,085	190	3681	4373	5088	13,140
2015-16	400	7062	15225	36798	59,085	190	3681	4373	5088	13,140

Source: Forest Statistics 2010-2015, Kerala Forest Department

It has to be noticed that the people belonging to SC, ST and other economically backward communities are found to be actively involved in ecotourism activities through the village level institutions –VSS or EDC for the last few years especially since 1998 when the state has begun to focus more on Participatory Forest Management (PFM) to conserve our flora and fauna and to make an improvement in the standard of living of the forest dependents. Both these two goals of PFM, as a sustainable development strategy, can easily be accessed through the ecotourism operations.

1.4 The Best Practices in Ecotourism through Innovative Participatory Approach

The indigenous people who are incorporated into VSS or EDC and perform as tourist guides, protection watchers, drivers, trainers, cooks, office staff, etc. may have an intimate understanding and knowledge on the cultural tradition of the area and the scope of ecotourism activities to be developed in association with ecotourism. During the

survey conducted between 2014-2016, the researcher has observed that local community involvement in the enhancement of ecotourism related activities is effectively ensured through local bodies VSS or EDC among 29 ecotourism destinations of the state. The forest department under the new innovative participatory approach follows certain best practices while dealing with ecotourism operations in remote and backward areas.

a. Environmental Literacy

The ecotourism has become a successful venture to develop environmental literacy among the local people as well as the visiting community. Environmental literacy provides the desired outcome of inculcating an environmental responsibility regarding the protection and management of natural resources. The initiatives like deepening the knowledge on local environment and its culture especially aboriginal culture, knowledge on social culture and tradition, the necessity of unpolluted environment etc. are some of the core areas covered under the environmental aspects of ecotourism. Eravikulam National Park, Periyar Tiger Reserve and Chinnar Wildlife in Idukki District, Silent Valley National Park and Parambikulam Tiger Reserve at Palakkadu District, Muthnaga Wildlife Sanctuary at Wayanadu district, Kallar ecotourism spot at Trivandrum district and Aralam Wildlife at Kannur district are some of the ecotourism destinations which are to be mentioned in this regard. For example, the Drivers EDC working at Silent Valley National Park always keeps a timely effort to provide environmental literacy to all the stakeholders of tourism and stand brutally against all kinds of pollution created by both

local and visiting community.

b. Empowerment of Local Communities

. The organized training given to the members of VSS or EDC (workers) is sufficient enough to empower them economically, socially, culturally and psychologically. The different types of training on language competency, reception dealings, personality development, interpretation, homestay arrangement, presentation of cultural events, financial management, tour operations, security alerts etc being offered to the members, are very much conducive to empower the local community in all respects. As contributed by an EDC member at Parambikulam Tiger Reserve at Palakkadu District, “the ecotourism spot has enhanced my productivity and my confidence level has favourably widened while I deal with a visitor after I have been trained”. The training programs organized for SC, ST and other backward communities are found to be successful to empower them to great extent. The spoken English training offered to the casually employed workers at Eravikulam National Park at Munnar at Idukki District during the off-season (closed days) by offering remuneration for their participation is something worth to be mentioned in this regard. Moreover, the remarkable service Parambikulam Tiger Reserve at Palakkadu District towards the payment of Rs. 5000 to those ST women who make use of hospital facilities for their delivery purposes is another exceptional practice which should be appreciated.

The training is given to the development of self-employed activities related with ecotourism like paper bag production, honey making, craft making, etc not only sufficient to bring about the economic benefits but also suitable enough to empower them. The reasonable wage at a spot, adequate leisure time, participation in the decision making body, enhanced self-esteem and confidence level, less hardship nature of work are some of the most contributing factors for the social, cultural, economic and psychological empowerment of women workers at the ecotourism spots of Kerala. A large number of female participation has been found during the field survey among ecotourism destinations, Ponmudi, Kallar and Neyyar in Thiruvananthapuram district, Konni Elephant Kraal at Pathanamthitta district and Palaruvi in Kollam District of South Kerala.

c. Development of Quality of Work Life (QWL)

QWL can be defined as the process of a comprehensive construct which develops an environment for the holistic well-being of the workers in their work-life and enables the workers to participate effectively in the fulfilment of the goals of the organization.

The productive performance of the workers in any organization is closely connected with factors such as nature of the work, adequate compensation for the work, the organizational climate of the firm, and training programs for the development of personal, the nature of the relationship with co-workers, the degree of job satisfaction and job security, safe and healthy working conditions of the workplace etc., which are essentially included in the conceptual framework of QWL.

QWL is the quality of the relationship between the workers and their total working environment encompassing human, economic, social and technical dimensions. Ecotourism projects in Kerala are successful in this regard. The study conducted among 29 ecotourism destinations has brought out some prominent factors which can effectively contribute towards the enrichment of the QWL of casually employed workers at ecotourism spots. Remuneration matched with labour productivity, protection of individual rights, increased money income and saving, good recognition for the work done, fair and adequate working conditions, positive attitude towards work and life, environmental education, sufficient working hours, training for improving skill, sufficient working days, peaceful existence with co-workers creative suggestions and feedback by the supervisors etc are some of the major factors which would be experienced in enhancing QWL of the casually employed workers at ecotourism destinations of the state.

d. Generation of Income and Employment in Rural Labour Market

Does ecotourism meaningfully intervene in the rural labour market of Kerala? is to be addressed regarding the generation of income and employment for the rural community. A large number of socially and economically less privileged sections of workers in rural Kerala are found to be engaged in informal sector activities of varied kinds while the same phenomenon has been experienced in Indian Economy where more than 90% of the working population and around 50 per cent of National Income are from the informal sector (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India n.d.). (Ministry of

Labour and Employment, Government of India n.d.). Since the majority of ecotourism destinations are located around the rural and forest areas, the informal workers residing nearby depend on the employment opportunities offered by ecotourism destinations. A large number of socially and economically less privileged sections of workers in rural Kerala are struggling hard to find the job opportunities to earn a minimum subsistence level of living. In this context, ecotourism has become an alternative source for the employment opportunities for casually employed and self-employed of the rural workforce inhabiting around ecotourism destinations of Kerala. One of the major economic impacts of ecotourism is experienced with the generation of both casual and self-employed opportunities to the local community who have very limited employment opportunities other than that offered by ecotourism. The workers employed (casually employed) at the ecotourism destinations as well as those employed in activities related with ecotourism (self-employed) around the sites are two major beneficiaries of ecotourism in the rural labour market of Kerala.

The study based on 29 spots in Kerala to analyze income and employment generation by ecotourism project is convenient to make the following inferences;

1. The local workforce who is casually employed at the spot can be included in the informal category of workers in the formal sector (tourism sector) of Kerala. Majority of them are employed at the spots as tour guides and protection watchers with negligible any social security benefits. The

temporarily appointed tourist guides may also work as forest protection watchers, cooks, boatmen, mahouts, drivers, eco shop staff, office staff, the staff at small scale enterprises etc. The varied nature of the jobs available with each ecotourism spot depends on the factors like the category of ecotourism destination, the nature of ecotourism activities, size of the ecotourism projects, amount of revenue generated by ecotourism destinations and the inflow of tourists into each destination. Similarly, many of the rural self-employed are found to be engaged in various activities like running the local canteen, homestay facilities, running hotels and restaurants, conducting taxi services, running echo shops etc. nearby the ecotourism spots.

2. The local self-employed workers around the ecotourism destination are often engaged with the small scale and medium scale and sometimes large scale business enterprises based on the flow of tourists arrivals to each destination
3. Regarding the casually employed workforce at each destination, more males are found to be employed at wildlife sanctuaries and National Parks and more females are found to be employed in the territorial divisions of Kerala.
4. Less hardship experienced with reasonable wage in the casually employed activities at destinations is often found to be an attractive factor for the job entry.

5. Environmental education, training for personality development and various skills are the major non-monetary benefits enjoyed by the casually employed workers at the ecotourism destinations.
6. Ecotourism in Kerala has emerged as a viable option for the rural households to secure a job either as a major income-earning activity or a subsidiary income-earning activity
7. The demand for and supply of ecotourism works of each zone and each spot has been found not uniformed. The forest department of Kerala under the specialized agencies of VSS or EDC appoints the workers by the availability of the works and the total number of workers applied for the job in each zone. It has been found that the VSS or EDC has been giving due attention in appointing workers democratically in the sense at least one member from each family gets employed at the spot so that that maximum economic benefits to maximum families of the local population are ensured. Workers consider factors such as wage rate and the number of working days offered by each spot, the nature of ecotourism works at the spot and the non-availability and low wages of the other employment alternatives in the area etc while supplying their labour to ecotourism works.

Conclusion

On account of the growing demand for ecotourism as one of the leading sub-sectors of tourism of Kerala, it has got wide attention of economists, social thinkers, environmentalists and even politicians in their policymaking process. Moreover, The tourism policy 2014 of the Kerala government has pointed out the real motives behind its tourism policy. These basic motives can be summed up as: (1) to change all the tourism products of Kerala into eco-friendly mode; (2) to speed up the ecotourism development initiatives in Kerala; and (3) to ensure the involvement of the local community in generating income and employment. The real development of an economy is closely related to the development of the rural area where the vast majority of informal workers struggle for a living. On this ground, the ecotourism has emerged as an effective tool for addressing the major issues of unorganized labour such as unemployment, poverty, and low standard of living etc in the rural labour market. The vibrant social and cultural life of Kerala in a beautifully crafted environment by nature together with economic benefits drawn by the workers from ecotourism destinations would help people and workers engaged in ecotourism in Kerala to maintain a sustainable, satisfying and peaceful life in harmony with nature. Undoubtedly, Kerala Forest Department, in this scenario, promises a bright future for ecotourism in Kerala.

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