

Ecology and Economy: A Case Study on Thenmala Ecotourism in Kerala, India

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Received July 22, 2020; Revised August 24, 2020; Accepted September 02, 2020

Abstract Nature has always been vibrant that we inherent from the past and pass on to future generations to use. There is a symbiotic relationship between ecosystem and socio- economic life of the people. The present study seeks to review certain aspect of ecology and economy in the context of Thenmala ecotourism. Kerala the southernmost state of India and popularly known as God's own country in tourist literature. Thenmala ecotourism project is the first planned ecotourism project in the country. Thenmala is a small village at the foothills of Western Ghats and predominantly a forest covered area located in the Kollam District of Kerala. Ecotourism is an emerging concept in tourism industry and this programme encompasses education, sustainable development, respect for fragile environments and the people with whom the traveller is interacting. The concept of ecotourism today has sharpened its aspects in the goals of responsible tourism by making maximum participation in responsible positions for the local as well as tribal hosts India.

Keywords: ecology, ecotourism, Western Ghats, sustainable development, shenduruney wildlife sanctuary, cultural heritage

Cite This Article: Sreerekha. M, "Ecology and Economy: A Case Study on Thenmala Ecotourism in Kerala, India." *Applied Ecology and Environmental Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 6 (2020): 351-354. doi: 10.12691/aees-8-6-4.

1. Introduction

The formations of ecological signs as a direct outcome of inter relationship between nature and human subsistence strategies. Studies show that everything in the socio-cultural regime revolved round eco- culture of this economy and everything was disposed of so as to establish its eco -cultural hegemony over other economies [1]. Tourism is recognised as one of the important global service industry today and it has seen rapid growing industry. Over the last fifty years tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors globally, accounting for some 9 percentage of the world's GDP and over 200 million jobs [2].

International agencies like the United Nations World Tourism Organization have estimated that nations like India and China would become the superpowers in the global tourism map by the year 2020 [3]. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Rio Earth summit were identified Travel and Tourism as one of the key sectors of the economy which could make a positive contribution to achieving sustainable development [4].

Ecotourism is an emerging concept in tourism industry and this programme encompasses education, sustainable development, respect for fragile environments and the people with whom the traveller is interacting. According to the World tourism organisation: "Ecotourism is the

tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural aspect found in this areas" [5]. Ecotourism is one of the key sectors for India in the service sector negotiations under General Agreement on Trade in Services in the WTO [6]. The India's New Tourism Policy 2002 was implemented in the 10th Five Year Plan, will generate awareness about the benefit of tourism for the host population [4].

2. Western Ghats and Tourism

The Western Ghats which are older than the Himalayas and are described one of the 8 "hottest hotspot" areas of biodiversity were inscribed in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage Sites list in July 2012 [7]. The term Western Ghats refers to the practically unbroken hill chain (with the exception of the Palakkad Gap) or escarpment running roughly in a north-south direction, for about 1500 Kilo meter parallel to the Arabian sea coast, from the river Tapi (about 210 16' North) down to just short of Kanyakumari (about 8019' North) at the tip of the Indian peninsula [8]. The number of tourists visiting the Western Ghats is increasing steeply. The forms of tourism observed are nature based on ecology, wildlife, religious, social and business. Religious tourism has the highest share of tourism in the Western Ghats followed by other forms of tourism. The Western Ghats are naturally is an

important centre of sustainable development efforts. The Gadgil Report says that Tourism needs special attention in the Western Ghats and such sites need to be understood as production-consumption systems. These are “systems in which environmental goods and services, individuals, households, firms and states are linked by flows of materials, energy and relationships in which transactions of money and information or negotiation of power and influence take place” [8].

3. Definitions of Ecotourism

Tourism has immense potential to accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals. This sector can generate quality job for durable growth, reduce poverty and offer incentives for environmental conservation a triple-win to help countries transition toward more inclusive, resilient economies [9]. The term ecotourism was emerged in the late 1980s as a result of the world’s acknowledgement and reaction to sustainable practice and reaction to global ecological practices. Ecotourism was a term first coined by Hector Ceballos Lascurain [10], a Mexican Environmentalist in 1983. The first organisation devoted to ecotourism was the International Ecotourism Society founded in 1990.

Ecotourism meant to be a Sustainable form of natural resource based tourism. There are many well recognized definitions formed a clear picture of the concept of ecotourism. Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as responsible travel that conserves natural environments and sustains the wellbeing of local people [11]. Das says, “ecotourism, defined as responsible travel to natural areas, that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people, has caught the attention of diverse interests, both as an economically profitable leisure activity, and as a means of conservation and development” [12].

National ecotourism strategy (1994) defines “ecotourism is the nature based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable”. Wenjun Li (2009) describes in the recent decades, ecotourism emerged as one of the most economic, effective and environmentally friendly way of utilizing natural resources and maintain sustainable development in natural reserves [13]. According to Weaver (1999), Interest in ecotourism now wide spread among tourism planners and marketers, is rationalise by a number of popular assumptions regarding the sector’s potential economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits. However, most of the definitions of eco-tourism boil down to a special form of tourism that meet the criteria like it provide environmental conservation include meaningful community participation and it is profitable and can be self-sustained.

4. Ecological Economics of Thenmala Ecotourism in Kerala

Kerala situated the southernmost tip of India. The state blessed with excellent weather and networked by forty- four rivers, thirty - four lakes, Pond, lovely hills, its

numerous lagoons, dense vegetation and paddy cultivation. The tourism destinations like silent valley National park, wild life sanctuaries of Shenduruney, Parambikulam, Neyyar, Periyar and the bird sanctuaries of Thattakkadu and Kumarakam enrich the exotic wild life. According to the 1999 statistics of Kerala has eleven Wildlife Sanctuaries, two National parks, one tiger reserve and many potential ecotourism destinations [5].

The excellent geographical features of Kerala and serene environments attracted tourists in all over the world. Tourist arrival is one of the most important indicators of the demand for tourism in a particular destination point. Kerala one of the highest growth rate in tourist arrivals and the following table gives the data on Foreign Domestic tourist arrivals over the last five years. From 2014 onward, it can be seen that there is steady growth in tourist arrivals. The given below official Statistics shows that the foreign and domestic tourists are increasing in absolute terms.

Table 1. Tourist Arrivals (2014 - 2018) [14]

Tourist Arrivals	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Tourist (Foreign and Domestic)	12618777	13443050	14210954	15765390	16701068
Percentage variation over previous years	7.71	6.73	5.71	10.94	5.94

Source: Kerala Tourism Statistics 2018, Government of Kerala Department of Tourism, p.43.

Ecotourism today has sharpened its aspects in the goals of responsible tourism by making maximum participation in responsible positions for the local as well as tribal hosts India [15]. The Government of Kerala is committed to develop plans for utilizing the ecotourism potential in the State. The Government assure that ecotourism is promoted on the basis of sound principles of ecological sustainability. Thenmala Ecotourism is India’s first planned ecotourism project [16] based on sound principles of ecological sustainability. Thenmala lies on the western slope of Western Ghats, in Kerala and ecosystem management in Thenmala attracted many tourists from all over India.

Thenmala is a small Village, located at the foothill of the Western Ghats, between Kulathupuzha and Punalur, in Kollam District of Kerala, with full of rivers, streams, hillocks and evergreen forests [17]. The hilly village of Thenmala is situated 22km east of Punalur on the Kollam - Shencotta railway [18]. The area is covered by dense forest, Tea and rubber plantation and beauty of this destination is attracted large number of domestic and international tourists. Thenmala Forest Division and Shenduruney Wildlife Division fall wholly within the district [18].

The name Thenmala is derived from two words “Then” and “Mala” in local parlance. Then ‘Thenmala’ translates to Honey Hill’ and high quality honey is exported from this area. The majority part of Thenmala is under forest cover and it borders the Shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary. The artificial lake formed by Parapparam dam built across

the Shenduruney and the Kulathupuzha rivers occupies the central part of the sanctuary. The forests of Thenmala offer excellent fortuity for ecotourism with a wide array of flora and fauna. The surrounding dense forest is also known for the good quality timber that is in much demand across the country. In order to promote tourism ten satellites enters are identified around Thenmala. These places are Palaruvi falls, Aripa, Kulathupuzha, Aryankavu, Achancoil, Konni, Pamba, Kochu Pamba, Umayar and Ponmudi. Thenmala ecotourism project won the prestigious Pacific Asia Travel Association gold award for 2003-2004, the National Tourism Awards for the most Eco - friendly organization in 2001-2002, and the best ecotourism practices in 2003-04 [19].

5. Shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary

Thenmala Ecotourism project has been formulated in and around the shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary with the assistance of Tourism, Forest, and Irrigation Departments. Shenduruney wildlife sanctuary is the one of the richest areas of Bio- diversity in Western Ghats. The sanctuary is located in Kollam district and comes under the control of Agastyavana Biological Park. The etymological meaning of the name "Shenduruney" is derived from a tree called "Shenkurunjy" or *Chenkurunji* which is an endemic tree was found in this region. Chenkurinji tree (*Gluta Travancorica*) from which the sanctuary got its name Shenduruney grows here. This area is covered with Tropical evergreen forest and semi evergreen forest comprises three fourth of the total area of sanctuary. The major forest type in the region are Sothern Hilltop Evergreen forest, West coast semi Evergreen forest, Sothern secondary moist mixed Deciduous forest, Myristica swamps and Reed Brakes.

Historically, Shenduruney has rich heritage and the remnants of pre-historic period was excavated from this area. A recent study was conducted by P.Rajendran, Archaeological Research association of the Poona Deccan College, has resulted in the excavation of the remains of Stone Age Culture from a large cave situated at the north western part of the Shenduruney River. It has been proved these remains belong to the Mesolithic Age and this study reveals the fact that Shenduruney River Valley Civilization was the one the oldest river valley civilization in India [20].

Shenduruney wildlife sanctuary confesses that the region has diverse flora with high rate of endemism [21]. This area is covered with Tropical evergreen forest and semi evergreen forest comprises three fourth of the total area of sanctuary. The major forest type in the region are Sothern Hilltop Evergreen forest, West coast semi Evergreen forest, Sothern secondary moist mixed Deciduous forest, Myristica swamps and Reed Brakes. The Myristica swamps are tropical wetland found in the valley of Shenduruney and Kulathupuzha River. The Myristica swaps, a vanishing ecosystem, now largely confined to 53 patches in the Kulatupuzha and Anchal forests and the Shenduruney Wildlife sanctuary [22]. The major ecotourism spots in the Shenduruney sanctuary are Kallar Trial, Dharbhakulam Trial, Kattlapara-Choodal Bird watching Trail and boating in the sanctuary. The

Shenduruney forest was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1984.

6. Thenmala Ecotourism Promotion Society (TEPS)

In the year 1998, the 'Thenmala Ecotourism Society' was founded as a Government of Kerala undertaking to promote ecotourism activities at Thenmala and its surroundings. The main aim of this organisation is promoting Ecotourism activities at Thenmala and its surrounding areas with cooperation of Forest, Irrigation and tourism Departments.

7. Objectives

The important objectives of the project are:

- To develop Thenmala Dam and its neighbouring areas as a major tourism destination by the turn of this country.
- To promote ecotourism on the basis of sound principles of ecological sustainability in Thenmala and its neighbouring area.
- To have a well-planned tourist destination with attention on sustainable tourism development so as to become a model for other destination in advancing programmes.

8. Impact of Thenmala Ecotourism

There are both positive and negative impact based on various activities by the tourist and the changes which are taking place. Thenmala ecotourism play beneficial role for the conservation cultural heritage, economy and environment. The ecotourism creates a knowledgeable society in a village at Thenmala and it upgrades the public infrastructure. The ecotourism in Thenmala there appear to play an important role in protecting the natural environment. People should make aware the ecological impacts damage to ecosystem: effects on physical environment. As considering the economic side, tourism should create the employment opportunities for the local communities in the particular region. After coming of Thenmala ecotourism the local people got jobs, number of them provide tourist with local food and lodging, guide service and locally made handicrafts as a result their community receives substantial direct economic benefit. Moreover Thenmala region brought about variety of other positive changes including more jobs and increased the income of the family and this result an improved standard of living for the population. Abolition of poverty is possible under ecotourism and income generation these are the important objectives of ecotourism.

Considering the negative impact of ecotourism, the maintenance of bio diversity is a critical component of the sustainability. The promoters of ecotourism have forgotten or needful ignoring the principles of ecotourism. As a consequence of this we are facing a new form of ecological imperialism in which western cultural values

are being impressed on the indigenous culture through ecotourism. The major interruptions by the local residents and officials in the Thenmala ecotourism project from domestic and foreign tourist are mostly on the destruction of natural habitat, wildlife disturbances and conflicting attitude [23]. Ecotourism is the buzzword in tourism. Exciting industry, government and conservationists like, it has come to embrace environmental friendly, community friendly and market friendly tourism [4]. But even though its value in rising awareness of the relationship between tourism and environment, the term has become misused that it is little worthless cliché, which may be harmful as conventional form of tourism. Another disadvantage of ecotourism, sometimes it may be considered only an extension of tourism marketing. The ecotourism need government or NGO's proper financial support otherwise it will not work out the expected level. Moreover the concepts of ecotourism will work out only the support and cooperation of the local people. Unless the local people will participate the programme will not be consider an ecotourism.

9. Conclusion

Ecology is one of the most critical components essential for the well-being of a society and the foundation for a sustainable and powerful economy. Thenmala, with its diverse nature and culture has enjoying a unique place in the pages of history. Thenmala lies on the foothills of Western Ghats, this area coming under the ecologically sensitive area and need special attention and need to preserve or the future generation. Tourism has experienced continued hike and increased diversification becoming one of the fastest developing economic sector in the world. Thenmala ecotourism project is India's first planned ecotourism project. The ecosystem management in Thenmala attracted tourist from different parts of India. Ecotourism can able to contribute to development which is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable. This addresses the fundamental issues like conservation of nature, culture, society and promotion of traditional knowledge by developing tourism through community participation. In the functioning of Thenmala ecotourism local people have significant role than any other agency. Endeavour to make tourism and inclusive social experience it is ensure to that there is access for all especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged communities in the society.

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