TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT IN ECOLOGICALY AND CULTURALLY FRAGILE AREAS – OBSERVATIONS FROM KERALA IN INDIA

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ABSTARCT

For economically poor but resource rich countries, tourism has become a vital sector to be considered for regional development. In the post-modern world, there seems to be an ever increasing urge for experiencing authentic life styles and environment – a search which is obvious to end up in locations and communities that were ecologically and culturally enclosed so far, so that it had not altered yet. This taste of more diversified and specialized experience makes many of the culturally and ecologically rich regions attractive in contemporary tourism market. The new tourism styles like Eco-tourism, Cultural tourism, Rural tourism, (indeed too many) have become synonym with the growth of tourism in several countries. However the real challenge before policy makers and the industry is to manage and strike a balance between conservation, recreation and regional development. In this context, the paper tries to explore through various alternative tourism concepts like eco-tourism and cultural tourism and observe its actual practices in Kerala, the southern most states of India, which has initiated several innovative tourism models. After analyzing the pros and cons tourism initiatives in the state, the paper seeks to appreciate and present the approaches that could be used as a base for tourism product development and management in ecologically and culturally fragile area.

Keyword: Tourism, Ecotourism, Local Culture, Tourism Product, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, over the last few decades, has grown into a multi-billion dollar business, having the status of world's largest economic activity contributing to global GDP, employment and capital investment. According to World Tourism Organization, international tourism roughly accounts 36 per cent of the trade and commerce on advanced countries and 60 per cent in developing countries. It constitutes an average 3-10 per cent of GDP in advanced countries and 4 per cent in developing countries. With an annual international tourist arrival of 922 million, the sector generated an annual receipt of US $ 944 billion in 2009 (UNWTO, 2008). The travel and tourism economy employs 29 million people in its various sub-sectors such as hospitality, travel, leisure services, tourism retailing etc.

The striking feature of post-modern tourism is its spatial and social reach to almost all the regions, people and class, either as travelers and or being traveled. Consequent upon the importance that the international tourism gained in the global economy, it is rapidly gaining the centre stage in the political and economic discourse of most of the regions. The reasons for the pervasive growth of tourism could be attributed to several reasons. The economic growth across the globe fuelled with economic as well as political globalization has made it conducive for the free movement of capital and people all around the world. The time-space compression that happened with the revolutionary growth in information and communication technology and rapid transport system has also made the distant and remote places more accessible. Thus globalization has its best manifestation in international tourism.

Contemporary tourism- the search for the *'other'*

The significance of international tourism is manifested not just on its voluminous growth, but also the styles and forms that it takes in due course. There has been an unprecedented growth in tourism styles such as cultural tourism, rural tourism and eco-tourism that looks for places and people exotic to the advanced societies to get experienced. There is increase in travelers who move away from beaten track routes and find leisure in experiencing the remote and pristine ecological and cultural settings. The tourism growth in several Asian and African regions hints to these trends. Eventhough tourism in these regions is not comparable to the tourism economy of Europe or America, several countries in these regions have taken note of the importance of tourism development and started bestowing attention to it. For the ever changing taste of international tourists for more diversified and specialized experience, these regions offer an unparalleled stream of tourism forms. The relatively less explored ecological and cultural resources of these regions are attractive in contemporary tourism market. In the advent of globalization, an ever-growing middle class population, even in the economically less privileged countries, is joining the band of leisure class. Eventually more and more locations are systematically scavenged by the travel service providers to give them the experience of the *"exotic"* and the *"unexplored"*. The same process that create the global village of an ever growing undistinguished mass, also generate quest for those dwindling refugees of difference (Elliot, 2001;57).

There is a paradoxical outcome for this process which is vital for the planners and service providers to get aware of. With the advent of tourism development in any given place, the place becomes less attractive for the exotic seekers. Also, such places and culture become extremely exposed to consumerist pursuit, losing its authenticity Both the regional government as well as private service providers are then in a constant pressure to refashion the existing destination experience or rediscover the new places and experiences to present before the post-modern tourists of ever changing tastes.

These lead to adding more and more remote locations, naturally rich interiors and culturally exotic regions of the globe as tourism destinations. This is not to mention that contemporary tourism is taking place more in such locations. Rather, it hints to the fact that, along with the continued attraction and concentration of popular mass tourism centres, the international tourist flow into exotic locations are increasing in a pace faster than before. More and more natural landscape are constantly been under the scanner of tourism sector to widen its reach; while the cultural landscape of the regions refashioned to highlight its *'otherness'* and *'exotism'*. Thus one could see the most innovative and creative tourism product development in alternative tourism destinations. For the planners and service providers the quest of post-modern tourists for experiencing the "different", put-forth the twin-sided challenge of creating authentic tourism experience for the tourists while ensure the conservation and sustainable regional development of the host region.

THE ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF A REGION- CASE OF KERALA

Even if a region has rich ecological and cultural wealth that might have tourism potential, tourism develops in a way that it directed purposefully, ie., tourism geography is a construct by the agencies, and natural as well as cultural landscape is only fine tuned for it in the process. In case of the country, it implies a division as core and peripheral regions with in the tourism geography of the country, ie., the core regions/states witness an accelerated growth in tourism activities and in the peripheral, despite of its similar advantages, have only slow growth on tourism activities. India, like many of the similar Asian and African nations, has able to take the advantage of the shifting focus of global tourism. The natural and cultural diversity across the vast geographical area has now tuned for hosting global tourism. The country has an apex Tourism ministry and associated institutional set-up for overlooking the tourism development across the country. At the same time, the individual state initiatives play a major role in tourism development in the country. In India, though tourism taking place in almost all the states, certain states such as Kerala, Rajasthan and Goa are quite matured in developing tourism economy in their states. This speaks of the successful initiatives of certain individual states to highlight its uniqueness in the global tourism market.

Among the Indian states, Kerala has the distinction of successfully integrating its economy to the global tourism economy. Over the years, tourism has turned to be the most important segment of the state economy. Hence it is worth looking into the state to see how the regional initiatives tuned to accommodate global tourism phenomenon by transforming part of their natural and well as cultural landscape into tourism commodities.

Locating in the southern most tip of India, Kerala has a unique status in the socio-economic front. Kerala is the most advanced among the Indian states in terms of high literacy, education and health status. The social development that it achieved, despite of its weak economic status, was well documented and debated by economists and sociologists as well. Until 1980, Kerala was hitherto an unknown destination in the country's tourism map. Late 1980's and the early 1990's witnessed a surge in tourism activities across the globe and the state too come under the scanner of international tourism sector. That was a time when the international tourism sectors started focusing on 'non-western" destinations. Taking advantage of the global economic boom of the period following the liberalization of Indian economy, the state entered into tourism market with serious initiatives. Aggressive marketing campaigns launched by the government agencies that oversee tourism prospects of the state laid the foundation for the growth of tourism industry in the state. The tag line "*Kerala- God's Own Country*" was adopted in its tourism promotions and became synonymous with the state. The state's initiatives to best use the mass media to project its *'otherness'* helped to *reteritorialise* the state in the global tourism market. This means that the state have able to differentiate its exclusive features to destinations of similar advantages in a highly competitive global tourism market. Thus, within the last two decades, the state witnessed a magnitude of growth in tourism activities, emerging it as one of the prime tourism destinations in the southern part of the country.

Adding to the economic importance of tourism are the budgetary deficit of the state and the relative backwardness of the state in the industrial front making tourism the most

promising area for attracting investment, generating revenue and creating employment. The tourism industry that flourished in the state was regarded by the state government as an available alternative model for regional development. Thus in all most all regions of the state, more ecologically sensitive areas and cultural expressions were added to the list of tourism attractions.

The factors that contributed to the tourism growth in the state can be summarized as:

o The period at which state initiated into tourism economy was paralleled with the economic liberalization and the consequent globalization of economic- political and cultural aspects of global life making way for easy access to global tourism sector.
o The industrial development of the state was hindered by the geographical constraints. The tourism industry was largely out of these constraints and hence it become the prime sector for investment by state as well as the industrial fraternity,
o The state has a wider air network with outside world, a prime mode of international tourists, as the state housed three international airports with in such a small geography.
o The international and regional travel service providers, initially serving the outbound Non-resident Keralites have later focused on inbound tourist potentiality of the state by cashing on the rich ecological and cultural diversity of the region.

The tourism growth in the state over the years shows that the initiatives found success. The State that received just 21,604 international tourists in 1980 has grown into the one of the most important international tourism destination of the country with 5.98 million annual international tourist arrivals and 76 million domestic tourist's arrival (GoK, 2009). The growth of tourism is intense in the recent years (Table.1). As per the latest economic reports the total revenue generated the sector in the State is US $ 2.91 billion, of which foreign exchange alone account US $ 0.68. For the weak economy of the state, the economic output of the tourism industry became a panacea.

TABLE.1. TOURIST ARRIVAL TO KERALA (2002-2008)

Year	Domestic Tourist	% Var.	Foreign Tourist	*% Var.*
2004	59,72,182	1.7	3,45,546	*17.3*
2005	59,46,423	-4.3	3,46,499	*.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*

Source: Dept. of Tourism, Govt. of Kerala

The ecological and cultural landscape – the tourism focus

Eventhough globalization and the way the state positioned within its economic and cultural geography helped to grow as a major tourism destination in the region, it has all made possible with making use of the natural and cultural wealth of the state.

Kerala has a rich flora and fauna cover over the entire geographical area thanks to its location in the south-west slop of the Western Ghat maintain, one of the bio-hotspot in the world. The state further has its entire 550 km eastern side bordered with Arabian Sea. 28 per cent of the state is covered with forest housing several protected areas ad wildlife sanctuaries besides the riverrine, midland mountain ranges and grass lands. Many of the prime tourism spots such as Thekkady and Munnar are located within the protected wildlife sanctuaries of high-ranges. The backwater regions of the lowland area of the state become another prime attraction for the tourists searching for the *"difference"*. More than eighty percent of the international tourists visiting the state is paying visit to these locations to have the local specific tourism experience. Added to this is the distinct cultural heritage that the state preserved for centuries. Take for instance the case of Kerala's Ayurvedic traditions. Due to the presence of extensive facilities and renowned practitioners, Keala's Ayurvedic tradition has able to establish its name. In the advent of tourism development, it was the Ayurvedic heritage of the region that got special place in the tourism programmes in the state. Today Ayuruvedic tradition is synonym with the tourism market in the state. Further the state has its own cultural expressions, festivals and unique art forms, all of which are well packaged into various tourism programmes in the state.

The last two decades of aggressive promotion measures by both government as well as private service providers focused on these ecological as well as cultural heritage of the state, strategically labeled with the tags of "eco-tourism" "cultural tourism" "backwater tourism" etc., to make it presentable before an ever-changing leisure pursuit of the international tourists as well as domestic tourists.

TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT- THE COMPLEXITY OF PLANNING

It has found that there are internal as well as external factors for the successful integration of a region into global tourism economy. As tourism become a lucrative business option, complexity of regional planning become more visible. Such issues are more observable in those destinations where tourism development is heavily based on the ecology and local culture that are fragile and the stakeholder base is wider. There is a concern that unplanned tourism growth in fragile areas can lead to pronounced negative environmental and cultural impacts. Critics argue that areas and sites opened for alternative tourism may eventually lead to mass tourism and a range of negative impacts. In the absence of adequate participation in planning and management, local communities often bear the costs of tourism development and suffer from restricted access to resources.
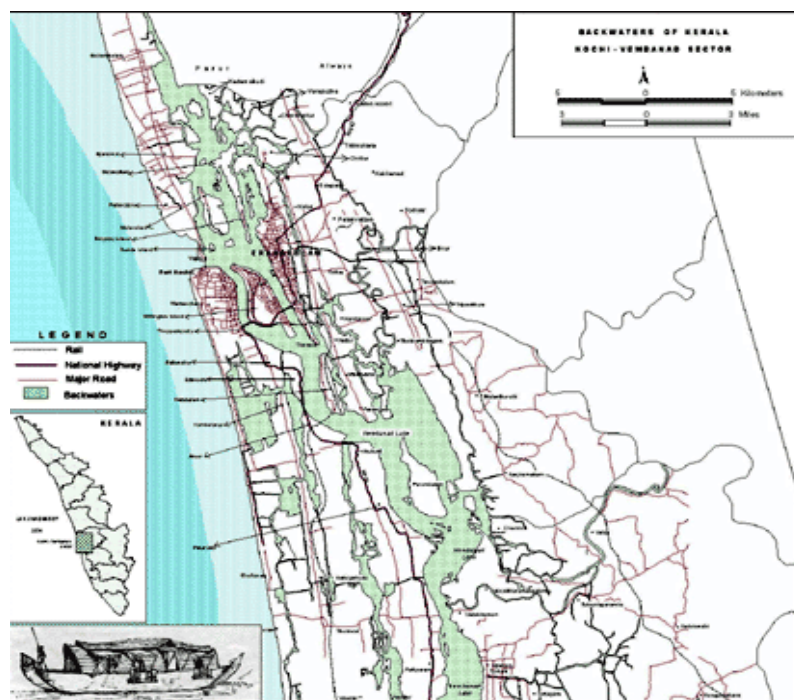
In Kerala, a similar concern extends to the preservation of both natural regions as well as built facilities that are important to maintain the ecological and cultural integrity of the region. To a great extent the regional government as well as the tourism service providers are successful in finding creative solutions to this issue. There are several attempts in the tourism product development that are locally specific, ecologically sound and bearing on the local economy and culture. In order to have a close look into the intricacies in linking

ecologically and culturally fragile landscape of a region with tourism economy, two specific cases from Kerala, one the Backwater tourism in Vembanad wetland region and the other, Eco-tourism activities in Thekkady are discussed in the following section.

The case of backwater tourism

Stretched over, a total expanse of 1500m, the backwaters of Kerala is a network of 44 rivers, lagoons and lake from north to south of the State. Most important stretch is the backwater trail of Alappuzha to Cochin in the south to central costal plain touching three districts and it is part of the Vambanadu Wetland (Figure 1).

FIGURE 2: VEMBANAD WETLAND AREA, KERALA

It is the largest tropical wetland ecosystem in the south-west cost of India and is a designated *Ramsar Site*, a wetland of global importance for its biodiversity values. It is a complex system of backwaters, marshes, lagoons, mangrove forests, reclaimed land and intricate network of natural and man-made canals. The lake is fed by six rivers flowing from the Western Ghat section of the state. It is an important resource base for livelihoods of the people living around through inland fishing, inland navigation, coir retting etc. Further the lake system supports a highly productive agriculture system spreading over 1,000 sq. km, on the reclaimed portion of the lake. The system also supports unique cultural traditional and water centered social institutions.

Despite of the fact that tourism development in this region was started only in the half of last decade, the serenity of the backwaters found a quick attention in the global tourism market. This was a time global tourism trend is moving towards attraction to the

'peripheries' and the 'exotic'. The backwaters of Kerala well fitted into this. Sources from Tourism Department of the state show that the destinations around this backwater region receive 2.8 lakhs of international tourist and 18.35 lakh domestic tourists annually (GoK, 2009). The uniqueness of backwaters of Kerala got global recognition, adding further attention on a global scale. In 2009 National Geographic Travelers has listed the placid backwaters of Kerala as one of the 133 "world's Greatest Places" and the previous year among the '50 must see places' in the world. By realizing its potential, most of the major tourism service providers operate in this region.

What makes this area so attractive for the post-modern tourists? Of course the serenity of the waterfront village life is the prime reason for tourism development in the region. However anyone who looks deeply into the tourism activities in the area can identify that the innovative and creative development of tourism experiences in a perfect rhythm with the local way of life has a strong implications on the attraction of the region.

The private hospitality service providers have ensured that the traditional village life and the local landscape are revamped to preserve the authentic appeal of the region. The resorts operating in the region have incorporated the natural setting, traditional fishing facilities and local architecture into their built environment. One of the major innovations in the backwater tourism is the rediscovery of the traditional water-transport system using houseboats. Originally used as a cargo boats, the large sized country boats of the past were remodeled into large boats with stay arrangements. Currently there are near about 1000 houseboats operating in the backwaters of Vembanad wetland region and an equal number of small country boats and commercial boats that renders service to the tourists. This unique *'floating villas"* give an unparallel experience for the tourists. It has also helped the local peoples to get employment opportunities in the tourism sector as boat operators, guides, housekeepers etc. In the wake of increased commercial water transportation in the region, including leisure cruising, the backwaters of the region have found to be in the focus of the government to transform into the prime water transport route. More water routes have been nationalized and development works are in progress to make it more travel friendly.

While the tourism development in the area is in steady progress and has a positive economic implication in the host community, tourism developments have repercussions on the life of the very community reside there and depend on the ecosystem for their livelihood. As more and more lakefront plots are landscaped for the heritage experience of the tourists visiting into the area, the accessibility of the local people for livelihood purpose is hindered. The waterways- their common transport route and their livelihood source- are congested with heavy traffic of Houseboats, which are meant for tourists. These boats, now in excess of the carrying capacity, have not only congested the waterways but the discharge from these boats is a major cause for water pollution also. Thus over the years these stretch of sensitive ecosystem has witnessed several modern stakeholders claiming rights over the landscape and waterscape which often stands in conflicting interest over the traditional stakeholders.

There are attempts from various quarters to reduce the tourism pressure in the ecosystem. Notable in this direction is the Government notification of Kumarakam, the prime backwater destination, as Tourist Zone. A set of rules and regulations are formulated for

development activities to ensure the ecological integrity of the region. Further, the area was included in the Responsible Tourism initiative of the state, through which tourism programmes are planned in consultation with the local people and activities that helps to increase the economic and cultural participation of the people living in the backwater region. The industry is also sensitive as the cultural and natural integrity of the region is so vital for the sustainability of tourism development in the region.

Case of Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Thekkady

Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) (popularly known as Thekkady), locate in the Western Ghat section of Kerala, provides an excellent case to critically analyze the complex process of tourism development in forest areas. PTR is not only one of the bio-hotspot in the Western Ghat, but also over the years gained the status of one of the best managed tourism destination in South India. From the ecological perspective, PTR is viewed by many as a critical test of the state's ability to preserve a fragile ecosystem in which nature and human live together so intensely. From the tourism perspective, PTE represents a similar critical test of the state's ability to host global tourism without a highly fragile ecosystem.

Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) is one of the richest forests in the South India. The Western Ghat, north of Periyar, are known as High ranges. Below the river are cardamom hills. It is located in the cardamom hills of Thekkady in Idukki district. Kumily a plantation town and Thekkady are situated on the immediate outskirt of Periyar Sanctuary. Sprawled across 777 sq.km , Periyar Sanctuary was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1978. It also comprises a 26 sq.km artificial lake formed during the construction of a dam across Mullaperiyar river. Perched on the altitude of 900 m to over 2000 m. above the sea level, about 360 sq. km. of the sanctuary is thick evergreen forest, which hosts a plethora of flora and fauna. The forest has the floral diversity equal to any other pristine forest in Nilgiri biosphere with its diverse vegetation cover including, evergreen and semi evergreen Savannah grasslands and deciduous forest types.

With amicable climate, serene beauty and rich flora fauna, Thekkady region along with the tiger reserve has attracted nature lovers long before the concept of 'Eco-tourism' emerged in tourism sector. Tourist flow to Thekkady and the Periyar reserve has now reached a record high of over one lakh and nearly 20 per cent of them are foreign tourists (Table 2). Further, the average duration of stay by the foreign tourist in the destination is 3.5 days where as the Indian tourist, it is 2.7 days. (DOT, 2000). The forest department reports that they receive more than 4 lakh visitors annually, if take into account the transit travelers also.

The lake inside the Periyar Sanctuary makes an important site to visit in Thekkady. Periyar is the one of the few sanctuaries in India, where one can have the unique experience of viewing wildlife at close quarters. In response to the growing demand for short eco-tourism journeys, various tailor-made activities for more inclusive experiences to suite the demands from new eco-tourists are experimented there. Outcome is the introduction of new programme by making use of the local landscape and the tribal culture in the area. There are tourism programmes that make use of the tribal knowledge and awareness on the forest landscape. Carefully planned tourism programmes such as

Jungle trail, Bamboo rafting etc. use the local human resources. Since entries to such tourism programmes are limited, the forest administration ensures that tourism activities don't follow the trend of mass tourism phenomenon. Further, attempts are underway to extend the tourism activities beyond tourism zone to cover more areas in the region. This is good in a way to reduce stress on the protected area and implies extending the reach of tourism economy to cover more local people.

TABLE 2. TOURIST VISIT TO THEKKADY

Year	No. of Tourists		
	Indian	**Foreign**	**Total**
2004-05	1,07,187	27,061	1,34,248
2005-06	1,03,280	31,930	1,35,210
2006-07	1,03,280	30,038	1,33,318
2007-08	1,10,834	26,689	1,37,523

Source: Dept. of Tourism, Govt. of Kerala

After several years of tourism based development in Thekkady, there is a concern that the kind of development and urbanization that takes place in and around the park area is threatening the ecological integrity of the area. With the advance of tourism growth, another inflow of people, the neo-residents who come to the place to be part of the employment and business opportunities, have exacerbated the situation. The landscapes are fast changing to accommodate the increasing human settlement. The population pressure that the area facing is adequate to point to this issue. Thekkady, with in its area of 12.07 sq. km, has now have a population of 17612 (census 2000). The density of the area is 750 / sq. km. Where as Kumily Panchayath have the population of 33,722, having the population density of 412 /sq.km, It is much higher than district population density of 252/ sq.km.

In an attempt to address public pressure arising from this concern, the government has initiated the responsible programme throughout the state that also includes Thekkady to regularize and plan the development in the region. This along with the sustainable eco-tourism programmes initiated by the forest department has a hope of arresting the existing unchecked tourism programmes in the area. However, the horizontal and vertical integration of the local landscape into accommodate new tourism styles have been adding further challenge. The existing tourism zone in the protected area over the years have got congested of the excessive tourism activities like resorts and shops. Providing the natural setting for 'authentic natural' experience become a big challenge for the service providers. Natural landscape and lifestyles are what the eco-tourists wanted. This has lead to a situation that tourism providers have to look further to the near by plantations and spice garden to find a suitable settings to host eco-tourists.

Along with the natural landscape of the region, cultural geography of the local tribal communities has integrated into the new tourism programmes initiated in the area. Most of the tribal population in the area- encompassing, half a dosson of ethnic groups- are living in the settlements in the fringes of the park since their resettlement from the core areas of the forest. They primarily depend on minor forest produce, small level of cash crops and on unskilled labour in the neighbouring tea and cardamom estates. In the last

few years attempts have been made to integrate them into tourism and forest conservation measures in various forms. There are encouraging results also, especially the attempts to make use them in conservation activities. Their culture and their knowledge in the local forest ecosystem have found a resource for the tourism service providers for adding cultural appeal of the ecotourism programmes. In the due course, visit to tribal hamlets, exhibition of tribal culture through museum, tribal artform performances etc., have been added to the tourism experience in offer.

THE PLANNING STRATEGY- LEARNING FROM KERALA'S EXPERIENCE

Tourism in any of the destination located in ecologically and culturally fragile area, places twin responsibility on all those who engage in the process; develop attractive travel itineraries based on local resources, while keeping the "responsible travel" paradigm over and above all other interest. Developing successful itineraries that meet the eco standard and cultural sensitivity need to be the modus operandi of the industry in such locations. The observations from Kerala in general and two cases analyzed within the state in particular hint to the following aspects of planning issues that are needed to be looked in while initiating tourism programmes in ecologically fragile and culturally sensitive areas.

Understanding ecological dimension of tourism activities

One of the major policy issues is to understand what kind of recreational or tourism activity is appropriate to allow in a region. Richard (1998) gives three major considerations for conceptualizing the "appropriateness" of activity in tourism destinations.

- ♦ *Scientific and functional consideration*, that is, the extent to which the activity might have impact on the ecological and social integrity as well as the economic viability.
- ♦ **Value driven consideration,** that is, the extent to which the activity is judged to fit within what are frequently referred "sustainable" tourism. It loosely refers to the certain degree of reverence for nature and local culture.
- ♦ **The experience driven factor,** that is, the extent to which the activity proposed may enhance or detract form the quality of visitor experience in the destination.

Understanding "visitation"

An important task before the tourism planners and service providers in any destination is to manage the inflow of visitors. The human presence, through the introduction of tourism activities, in the fragile areas put forth a great challenge for the concerned agencies to find means for management. One has to take note that the persons arrive to a destination is varied and each having different motivations for visitation. This range of motivations creates demand for a broad spectrum of activities and gives rise to an equal broad spectrum of behaviours. For the tourism service providers, it is vital to understand

these aspects of visitation as each needs a different set of tourism products to get appealed.

The discussions on planning in tourism destinations are, very often, concerned with the anonymous person "tourist". A tourist in the general phenomenon is seen as willfully attempting to destroy high fragile ecological features of the destination. Even though the tourist certainly do their share of exert pressure on the environment in such areas, they often represent a relatively minor percentage of the total visitors to the area. In the observation in Thekkady area reveals that the "the same day" visitors represent greater percentage than the actual eco-tourist. One reason for these visitors lies in the location advantage of the park. PTR lies close (just 4 km) to a National Highway and Kumily, the town hosting the PTR tourists, is one of the major spices trading centre in the country. Over the years Kumily and other small towns in Thekkady has grown into a major stop over for the motorists and travelers passing through the area. Another inflow of people to areas with the advance of tourism growth in a destination is neo-residents who come to the place to be part of the employment and business opportunities. It is prerequisite for policy makers in similar locations to forecast different kinds of visitation that could happen with the development of tourism in the area and thus plan for management.

Looking beyond the destination boundary

It is observed that even the best managed locations such as Thekkady and vast tourism geography like Vembanadu wetland area become more crowded. Hence the impacts of the tourism activities, on the fragile geography, become a growing concern. How to avoid the crowd in the destinations? Many of the tour operators in Thekkady increasingly seeking buffer zone outside the park area and private estates for developing tourist activities. Further, short-term trips to neighbouring destinations have added to the programme itineraries. The tourism programme in Periyar in the last few years focused on providing multiple leisure experience to the tourist visiting the park area. And many of the tour activities such as spice tours, village stays, farm tours, tea tours and short trips to neigbouring sites helps to disperse the tourists visiting the park site to away form the forest area. This reduces the pressure on forest. Such models could be replicated in other similar locations after studying the possible indigenous attractiveness in the near by areas.

Reteritorialising **the experience**

The local industry and the planners have to understand how to deliver high quality, exotic and short course on the destination. What is needed is to focus on understanding the contemporary tourists. Despite the hurried behaviours of the typical Mass tourists, there is greater demand for more in-depth local specific travel experiences. High growth of tourist inflow to Backwater tourism centres in Kerala reveals that more tourists today are looking for genuine experiences, better cross-cultural experiences and a sense of discovery and more sophisticated learning opportunities. The service providers need to plan appropriate programes that suite to the tourist to get multiple experience of ecology and related culture. Though tourism development in such ecologically and culturally rich areas provides the opportunities for such programmes, things are challenging for both regional government as well as industry since the focus need to be on the ecological implication of the tourism programme on these fragile ecosystem and the local people

who bear straight on the implication of such initiatives on these supportive ecosystems. Organizing educations sessions could be made compulsory for the industry to host the tourist.

Prepare tourism programmes in accordance with conservation plan

The Conservation policies and Acts that are now following in most of the developing countries are not well prepared to meet the ecological management issues once development activities such as tourism is introduced in a fragile area. The conservation acts and regulations are only capable to manage the actives that happen in the notified area. However such narrow conceptualization of ecological landscape become a helpless tool to check any impacts that could trigger with the tourism boom that happen just outside the denoted 'destination" areas. Tourism companies at the same time can be caught up in complicated circumstances relating to government policy regarding conservation. Hence such regulation needs to be implemented after proper awareness among the stack holders for the requirement of such rules. One idea is to form coalition of various service providers and work with local NGOs and government to sensitize and develop sensible regulations for better monitoring that protect the ecosystem and encourage fair visitor management policies. The policy initiatives such as Conservation of Tourism Zone Act and Sustainable Tourism programmes initiatives of the Kerala state is a good attempt in providing a guideline for local sensitive tourism product development.

Augmenting critical role of stakeholders

Muthoot Environmental Research Foundation (MERF), a conservation agency part of Muthoot Leisure and Hospitality Service, has under taken a study jointly with National Institute of Advanced study in Thekkady to protect two known species of nocturnal flying squirrels in the Western Ghat. Besides, MERF supports the Vasantha Sena, a voluntary group pf tribal woman patrolling the forest as part of the initiative of the eco development committee in Thekkady. In Kumarakom village local hospitality industries have tie-up with the local farmers to supply vegetable requirement of the industry. These initiatives provide amble insights into the possible partnership between tourism industry and the conservation agencies to work together to conserve the environment. What the planners could do is to develop tailor-made conservation programmes suitable for partnerships that involve the industry. Even though such activities in severally may not be major conservation strategy for an ecologically fragile regions, such efforts will have high impact on the part of industry as it builds a positive relation between tourism and local community.

Assessing enterprise possibilities for local communities.

One of the major argument that is being told for initiating tourism in ecologically fragile and culturally rich area is the strengthening of local economy and people through a tourism based income avenue creation. Building better relationship between the locals and tour operators is prerequisite for initiating eco-tourism, cultural tourism, etc. However this is more complicated than saying as the growing expectation among the locals on the industry sometime lead to conflicting of interest. The tourism service

provisions are at large requiring very specialist employees. The possibility for the local people to participate is very limited as the local human resource not necessarily is oriented towards the service based economy. The tourism on the other hand can act as a supplementary source of income for the people only if the industry provides space for the local people and economy to be part of the new economy. It may not be adequate to expect the local people naturally will have a role in the economy. Quite often it is needed to have certain deliberate plan to make avenues for such things to happen.

Separate agency for monitoring tourism and conservation

The community based tourism programme was started in Periyar Tiger Reserve as part of the Eco development project funded by World Bank during 1996-2004. Periyar foundation has developed and retailed as a separate body to carry out the activities of the project. This has now the role to play for planning, monitoring and evaluation of the tourism programme in the area along with other possible intervention in the park area to conserve the region. Last year INS 78 Million was collected as eco-development surcharge form 3.6 lakh tourists visited the area. It revolves around Eco Development Committees (EDCs): 72 in all, covering 58,000 villagers. Many tribal people are now engaged into tourism activities that primarily bear upon the skills of the tribal people. The Separate agency like Periyar Foundation is useful to act as an in depended agency with in the park authority to formulate the tourism management plans along with other research and coordination work. Further this could act as a platform for experts on eco tourism experts and agencies to work along with the park authority in the appropriate policy development. In a similar attempt, the local level tourism planning body is constituted in Kumarakom backwater tourism village to have a say in the tourism activities of the region.

CONCLUSION

The increasing public interest is considered today a major positive factor in the process of conservation management of ecological as well as cultural heritage of a region. On the other hand, the growing influx of visitors may exert strong pressures on fragile ecosystems and lead to the gradual alteration of the local culture. Such problems have already appeared in many of the tourism destinations across the world. It becomes advisable, therefore, to examine the relationship between tourism and sensitive areas and to propose a balanced approach that might be of benefit to both sides. There are many successful models across the world on innovative tourism initiatives. However just as the diversity in typology of the geography, the issues related with conservations, concentration of flora-fauna, habitat pattern of cultural life of the communities living around etc., will vary from location to location, hence it become it inappropriate to replicate any model as such. What is needed is the destination planning local based on local realities and for which we need to be guided by the principles of good science and sustainable economics, which is capable to look tourism development beyond 'numbers' and 'currency' value.. The Much lauded successes stories on innovative tourism programme such as Periyar Tiger Reserve or the backwater tourism in Kerala should not mean that tourism in such fragile eco system promise panacea for conservation issues. What is aimed is to carefully analyze the growth of such destinations, and learn both the

positive as well as negative aspects of tourism development in the region which is vital for future tourism product development.

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