



ECOTOURISM: A KEYSTONE FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

Roy B John¹

Research Scholar

Department of Geography, Kannur University, Kerala

Dr. P K Vijayan²

Associate Professor & Head

Department of Geography, Kannur University, Kerala

Abstract

In tourism, ecotourism is the best tool towards the path of sustainable development. Today ecotourism has emerged as a developing activity and is being a part of tourism culture. Although ecotourism is a new concept to the modern world, several designed tourism sites are not connected with the parameters of ecotourism. Thiruvananthapuram district is been selected as study area, which is located in the southern most part of Kerala state and is bestowed with mighty lands of tourism attraction within a span of 45 km as Agasthyavanam Biological Reserve (Western Ghats) in East and Arabian Sea in West. These areas are picturesque as well as culturally motivated landscapes with ecotourism development aspects. The current investigation is to check the applicability of ecotourism in seven selected tourism destinations of the study area. The selected sites are diversified in tourism potential with beaches, boating, pilgrim centre, wildlife, backwaters and hill station. The ecotourism components are reclassified under two broad parameters as environmental and Socio economic. For determining the potentiality of ecotourism in the selected seven spots of study area the methodological framework created with Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threats (SWOT) analysis is dopted. Further for evaluating the potentiality and impact of ecotourism based on environmental and socio economic perspectives a questionnaires survey is done and scaling method is adopted. Results are discussed with both qualitative and quantitative methods to project the status and potentiality of ecotourism development.

Keywords: *Ecotourism stakeholders, SWOT, Ecotourism Potential and Scaling Method .*

Introduction

The International Ecotourism Society (2015) 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”. Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement, participate in and market ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles such as to minimize physical, social, behavioral and psychological impacts: Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect, Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, Provide direct financial benefits for conservation, Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry, Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental and social climates, Design, construct and operate low impact facilities and recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

Ecotourism is the best tool to paved the way for sustainable development. Ecotourism today not only developing as an activity but also a culture. It is the preservation of cultural norms and traditions of a community living in the vicinity of a fragile ecosystem where respecting and valuing the ways of living of these communities, the extension of a tourist's experience and culture can be easily incorporated in a spot with the main ideology of the consideration of thinking our state as an organism. Ecotourism should be promoted in ways of natural and culture. The Mangrove Eco village concept adopted in Sundarbans in India is a clear vision of promoting cultural ecosystem in developing country like India (Mohammad Mojibul Hoque Mozumder et.al, 2018) . Ecotourism is all about our behaviour sense of decorum while visiting a site that is either ecologically sensitive or has communities living within of an ethnic origin or are a minority group.

Ecotourism today has sharpened its aspects in the goals of responsible tourism by making maximum participation of the local as well a tribal hosts in India. These communities can only interact with the society about the values of nature in connection with sustaining and livelihood. For instance jeep drivers to the Silent Valley National Park, the Honey shop sellers of Thenmala in Kollam and Thirunelli in Wayanad districts in Kerala, the cuisines and religious rituals rendered by the tribal communities in different pockets in India are clear examples of developing goals of ecotourism (Sadasivan Nadar R, 1975) . It is important to note that cultural components inculcated in ecosystem can very well be applied to an urban ecosystem especially on historic site or a cultural component in the city.

Study Area

Thiruvananthapuram the southernmost district of Kerala state is situated between latitudes of 8° 17' N to 8°54'N and longitudes 76° 41'E to 77°17'E. With its southern most extremity being Parassala, Thiruvananthapuram district stretches along the shores of the Arabian Sea for a distance of 41.6 km with the Kollam district on the North and Thirunelveli and the Kanyakumari districts of Tamil Nadu on the East and South. The district consists of five taluks viz, Chirayinkil, Nedumangad, Thiruvananthapuram Neyyattinkara and the new born Kattakkada. Thiruvananthapuram is a major tourist center known for temple, beaches, backwaters and Western Ghats tract.

Objective of the Study

- To examine the Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats of selected ecotourism spots in Thiruvananthapuram district.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative and quantitative data are collected for the study. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire survey for the selected criteria under inductive analytical method which form the base for creating quantitative information. The qualitative methods involved group discussion and interview with local communities, tourism department officials and officials in forest department. The major stake holders in this investigation include international, domestic and local tourists. Secondary data collected from the basic aspect of study area with varied cultural and physical statistics received from Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), Kerala Institute of Travel and Tourism Studies (KITTS), Department of Tourism, Kerala and District Panchayat office of Thiruvananthapuram.

SWOT (strength, weakness , opportunity and threat) analysis is being applied to the selected spots for making the study to progress in a strategic planning task (Learned E.P et.al, 1965). The aim of SWOT analysis is to understand the strength and opportunities and minimize external threats and transform weakness into strength and to take advantage of opportunity along with minimizing both internal weakness and external threats (Saaty R W 1987). This tool is also applicable to organization with business for achieving the profit by overcoming the weakness, avoiding the threats, increasing the opportunities and maintaining the strengths.

The holistic perspective in sampling framework was carried on seven selected spots of Thiruvananthapuram district with canvassed questionnaire. It stresses the respondents potential to know how to answer the questions and provide valuable information for analysis and interpretation. The sampling model developed by Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE, 2006) for the evaluation of ecotourism Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats in the study.

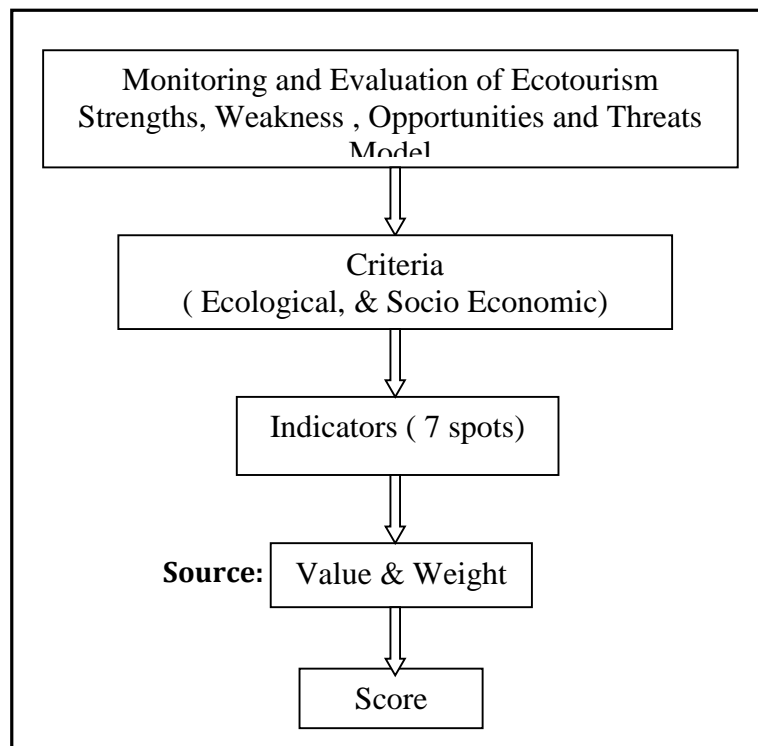


Fig:1 SWOT Model For Evaluating Ecotourism

The study conducted on seven selected spots of tourist importance are namely Kovalam, Veli, Varkala, Poovar, Neyyar Dam, Aruvikkara, and Ponmudi as the selection was primarily intended on the components of ecotourism potential (Table.1).

Table: 1

Selected Spots

Sl.No	Selected Spots	Ecotourism components selected
1	Kovalam	Beach
2	Varkala	Pilgrim centre
3	Veli	Boating
4	Poovar	Backwater
5	Neyyar Dam	Wild Life
6	Aruvikkara	Fishing
7	Ponmudi	Hill station

Source: Kerala State Land Use Board (2013)

The respondents are also categorized under three major groups as International tourist, domestic tourist and local tourist from each spots and analyzed the collected information. 20 samples from local, 20 samples from Domestic and 10 samples from International were interviewed in selected spots making a total of 350 samples (Table.2).

Table: 2

Detail of Samples collected from sample locations

Ecotourism site	International Tourist	Domestic Tourist	Local Tourist	Total respondents
Kovalam	10	20	20	50
Varkala	10	20	20	50
Veli	10	20	20	50
Poovar	10	20	20	50
Neyyar Dam	10	20	20	50
Aruvikkara	10	20	20	50
Ponmudi	10	20	20	50
Total	70	140	140	350

Source: Field Survey

By using values appropriate weightage (Considering the number of respondents) have been worked out. The values are generated depending upon the nature of preference from each respondents as +3 for very much satisfaction, +2 for satisfaction, +1 for Least satisfaction, -1 for Least Dissatisfaction, -2 for Dissatisfaction and -3 for very much Dissatisfaction. Scores are generated separately for the two criteria ecological and socio economic and finally the score values for Strength, Opportunity, Weakness and Threat are tabulated with proper graphical applications.

Table: 3

SWOT Assessment: Value and weight calculation

<i>Value</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Weight of C1</i>	<i>Weight of C2</i>	<i>SCORE OF C1=V*W</i>	<i>SCORE OF C2=V*W</i>
3 (Very Much Satisfied)	Kovalam	17	26	51	78
	Neyyar Dam	16	14	48	42
	Varkala	19	17	57	51
	Veli	12	15	36	45
	Poovar	14	7	42	21
	Aruvikara	5	5	15	15
	Ponmudi	13	9	39	27
2 (Satisfied)	Kovalam	22	18	44	36
	Neyyar Dam	19	19	38	38
	Varkala	14	16	28	32
	Veli	13	18	26	36
	Poovar	15	15	30	30
	Aruvikara	11	7	22	14
	Ponmudi	13	12	26	24
1 (Least Satisfied)	Kovalam	7	3	7	3
	Neyyar Dam	8	10	8	10
	Varkala	7	5	7	5
	Veli	8	8	8	8
	Poovar	7	9	7	9
	Aruvikara	4	7	4	7
	Ponmudi	9	9	9	9
(Least Dissatisfied)-1	Kovalam	2	1	2	1
	Neyyar Dam	2	2	2	2
	Varkala	4	6	4	6
	Veli	6	4	6	4
	Poovar	5	5	5	5
	Aruvikara	11	6	11	6
	Ponmudi	4	7	4	7
(Dis Satisfied)-2	Kovalam	1	1	2	2
	Neyyar Dam	3	3	6	6
	Varkala	4	4	8	8
	Veli	6	4	12	8
	Poovar	5	8	10	16
	Aruvikara	10	14	20	28
	Ponmudi	6	7	12	14
(Very Much Dissati	Kovalam	1	1	3	3
	Neyyar Dam	2	2	6	6

Cont...

	Varkala	2	2	6	6
	Veli	5	1	15	3
	Poovar	4	6	12	18
	Aruvikara	9	11	27	33
	Ponmudi	5	6	15	18

Source: Field Survey

Note: C1=Criteria One (Ecological) C2 = Criteria Two (Socio-Economic) V = Value

Table:4

Individual respondents score of Ecological and Socio-Economic Criteria

Sites	Criteria	Value*Weight			Score of (+) Values	Value*Weight			Score of (-) Values
		Very Much Satisfaction (+3)	Satisfaction (+2)	Less Satisfaction (+1)		Very Much Dissatisfied (-3)	Dissatisfied (-2)	Less Dissatisfied (-1)	
Kovalam	Ecological	51	44	7	102	3	2	2	7
	Socio-Economic	78	36	3	117	3	2	1	6
Neyyar Dam	Ecological	48	38	8	94	6	6	2	14
	Socio-Economic	42	38	10	90	6	6	2	14
Varkala	Ecological	57	28	7	92	6	8	4	18
	Socio-Economic	51	32	5	88	6	8	6	20
Veli	Ecological	36	26	8	70	15	12	6	33
	Socio-Economic	45	36	8	89	3	8	4	15
Poovar	Ecological	42	30	7	79	12	10	5	27
	Socio-Economic	21	30	9	60	18	16	5	39
Aruvikara	Ecological	15	22	4	41	27	20	11	58
	Socio-Economic	15	14	7	36	33	28	6	67

Ponmudi	Ecological	39	26	9	74	15	12	4	31
	Socio-Economic	27	24	9	60	18	14	7	39

Source: Field Survey

Results and Discussion

Based on the broad conditional of ecological as well as socio economic components, the scope and status of ecotourism development in the seven selected spots of Thiruvananthapuram district revealed a number of strength, opportunity, weakness and threats in connection with varied descriptive information from tourists of different sites (Table.3 & Table.4).

Table:5

SWOT evaluation of Ecotourism Sites in Tourism Spots

Sites	Strength (in %)	Weakness (in %)	Opportunities (in %)	Threats (in %)
Kovalam	10 (18)	6 (3)	117 (22)	7 (4)
Neyyar Dam	94 (17)	14 (7)	90 (17)	14 (7)
Varkala	92 (17)	20 (10)	88 (16)	18 (10)
Veli	70 (13)	15 (8)	89 (16)	33 (18)
Poovar	79 (14)	39 (19)	60 (11)	27 (14)
Aruvikara	41 (7)	67 (33)	36 (7)	58 (31)
Ponmudi	74 (14)	39 (20)	60 (11)	31 (16)
Total	552	200	540	188

Source: Field Survey

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dam site with fishing 2. Ayurveda and Yoga tourism 3. Good infrastructure 4. Hill station near to city 5. Internationally recognized tourism destination 6. Lion safari and Crocodile camping 7. Good atmosphere for home-stay and boating 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Waste management 2. Less space for tourists 3. Less Safety conditions 4. Costly accommodation 5. Accessibility and accommodation 6. Less tourist visit
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increasing number of tourists 2. Medical tourism 3. Place of calmness with backwater 4. Only spot in India handling both lion safari and crocodile camping 5. Increased scope for health tourism 6. Nearest to airport, railways and waterways 7. Nearness to Agasthyavanam Biological Reserve and Tribal settlement 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Crowding 2. Reduced number of wildlife 3. Mismanagement of wildlife and fishing 4. Mismanagement of water resources 5. Development to other spots 6. Mismanagement of fishing machinery 7. Limited spots (only 2 spots)

It is to be noted that although Kovalam beach is appraised as one of the important tourism destination in India, the spot waits for implementation of more opportunities than the implemented strengths. It should be taken into consideration that as development continues in parallel way, their can be chances of reduction of strength factors of ecotourism here with the improper utilization of available opportunities. Neyyar Dam and Varkala beach has a least satisfactory score in strength, with 80% of strength component are achieved by opportunity factor. The overall development of the spot is necessary with good show done by lion safari and Crocodile camping (ecotourism Component) and Ayurvedic tourism in the respective spots. Veli also awaits with more chances of opportunities with more stress to be focused on developing beach sports activities. It is to be noted that Poovar and Ponmudi shows good strength factors with more than 50% of strength value lying in opportunity. But the score of weakness is also higher here with achieving 50% of opportunity. Hence there is an urgent need of focus on

removing the weakness factor in these spots with increasing the publicity. The best scope to develop Aruvikkara is to increase the facilities for fishing because this spot ranks higher in the level of threats with least awareness and non development of tourism infrastructure.

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