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**Ecotourism in Kerala, India: Lessons from the Eco-  
Development Project in Periyar Tiger Reserve**

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to describe and evaluate the ecotourism project at the Periyar Tiger Reserve (Thekkady), in Kerala, India. The Ministry of Environment has undertaken to promote local community participation in forest management, through the “India - Eco – Development” programme in seven states. In Kerala, the ‘Thekkady Tiger Trail’ project was launched a couple of years ago in the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. In the Periyar Tiger Trail project, the members involved are the former inhabitants of the forest, who use to make a living by illegal trading of forest goods. Their activity was thus detrimental to the conservation of the forest. However, their intimate knowledge about the plants and animals, and their survival instincts could be best used for participatory ecotourism activities. Besides the Tiger Trail, other ecotourism products of the Periyar Tiger Reserve are: Bamboo Rafting, Day Trekking Programme, Tribal Heritage, Bamboo Grove, Jungle Inn and Wild adventures. A brief account of Ecotourism initiatives in the Periyar Tiger Reserve and a review of the project, based on the principles of Ecotourism are included in this article.

## **Background**

Ecotourism is a new concept in tourism, which was originally sparked off by the idea of making harmonious co-existence with nature a reality once again. As defined by the Ecotourism Society, it is the responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people. Today, ecotourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry. Its potential for growth is virtually unlimited. Any tourism program which is : nature – based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is a major concept and where local people are benefited can be called ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES )<sup>1</sup> defines ecotourism as : “*responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well - being of local people*”. Clearly, at a time when traditional conservation through enforced protection of natural areas was being questioned for its effectiveness and social impacts, strategies such as ecotourism offered considerable potential for integrating conservation with development.

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## **Ecotourism in Kerala**

The state of Kerala, forming part of the Western Ghats, contains a protected area of 2,324 sq.km in two National Parks and 12 Wildlife Sanctuaries. The Western Ghats of Kerala, with its tropical forest ecosystem, provides a natural advantage for development of Ecotourism. The Western Ghats regions of Kerala can be projected as an Ecotourism Zone in the true sense. It has now become necessary to evolve appropriate location specific strategies for sanctuaries in Kerala, in the sphere of ecotourism development. Proper ecotourism product development, it's marketing, environmental impact assessment, monitoring etc. are to be done in a systematic way.

The Tourism Department of Government of Kerala has taken steps to give focused attention to ecotourism in the State. A separate ecotourism wing has been created to give policy support for the development of the ecotourism destinations in the State. Thenmala ecotourism project was established in and around Shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary with the co-operation of departments such as Forest, Irrigation and Tourism. It is considered to be the first planned ecotourism destination in India.<sup>2</sup> Thekkady is another ecotourism destination, which offers the visitor an unforgettable experience. Except Thekkady, all other sanctuaries in Kerala are practically unknown to tourists. What is needed is a more focused strategy which is supply-driven and small group - oriented. Ecotourism activities, in an ecologically sensitive area need close monitoring. Tourism in these natural areas should be ecologically sustainable. There should be provision for the visitor to be educated about the environment. The economic benefit of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism projects the concept of sustainability in tourism, that is, the needs of today's visitor should not be met at the expense of future generations.

## **Ecotourism in Periyar Tiger Reserve**

In 1899, the core area of what today is the Periyar Sanctuary was declared a reserved forest in order to protect the catchment area of the Periyar River. This river had been dammed in 1895, resulting in several small lakes and a reservoir. In 1934 the area, including the reservoir, was declared a Sanctuary. The total area of the present Sanctuary is 777 square kilometers and it is located in the southernmost part of Western Ghats. 70% of it includes tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests. What make Thekkady a

unique destination on the tourism map are its climate, landscape and possibility of watching wildlife closely on the lakeshore while taking a boat cruise. The prime attraction of tourists visiting Thekkady is a boat cruise in the Periyar lake. This lake is artificially formed, due to the submergence of low-lying forest areas, following the construction of the Mullaperiyar Dam in 1895. It offers a variety of opportunities to cater to the needs of various classes of tourists. Tourism has become an important management issue ever since the area was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1978 (tenth of its kind in India) and there has been tremendous increase in the number of tourists visiting the park year after year.<sup>3</sup> Table.1 depicts the sustained rise of visitors in the park.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Tourists visitation to Thekkady**

Year	Number of visitors		
	Domestic	Foreign	Total
1999-00	320973	24347	345320
2000-01	303895	37038	340933
2001-02	357690	26026	383716
<b>2002-03</b>	<b>420960</b>	<b>31831</b>	<b>452791</b>

*Source : Tourism Statistics, Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala (2003)*

An experiment in forest management called “India Eco-development Project” (a World Bank funded participatory bio-diversity conservation programme) at Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary in Thekkady, developed an ecotourism component, the Thekkady Tiger Trail late in 1998. The concept and implementation of the “India Eco-development Project” made the managers of Periyar Tiger Reserve think seriously in order to identify sustainable tourism activities that ensure local participation in its fullest sense.<sup>5</sup> The Project at Periyar has two basic objectives: to manage protected areas and to get local people involved in it. To implement the project initially, local communities living off the forest were organized into eco-development committees (EDCs). Two basic objectives for the EDCs were to reduce the negative impact of local people on the Sanctuary and to involve encroachers in conservation, instead of exploitation. This was done by addressing the economic needs of those living in and around the park (about 250,000 people) by

finding viable and innovative livelihood alternatives for them. The project has so far benefited about 40,000 people of 5,540 families.<sup>6</sup>

Ex-Vayana Bark collectors, who were involved in the illegal de-barking of Cinnamon trees (Vayana) as well as in Sandalwood smuggling and poaching formed an eco-development committee (EDC) in 1998. 23 smugglers came forward to begin life anew. They pledged to protect the very forests that they had plundered in the past and in return, the Forest Department withdrew all the cases against them. They initiated a Bamboo Rafting programme for tourists in November 2002 and major part of the earnings from this goes to a community development fund. The Tribal Trekkers Eco-Development Committee (a group of 20 tribal youths), and the Periyar Tiger Samrakshan (PETS) (a group of 70 members who were earlier employed by the Forest Department as watchers), have an involvement in the tourism. They provide services like day treks through the forest, arranging nature camps, horse riding and special programmes for the tourists. The members of all the committees help the Forest Department in undertaking the census of animals in the reserve. Members of the Tribal Trekkers group have added four species of birds to the checklist of the reserve. There is also clear evidence for a significant increase in the number of animals in the sanctuary.

### **Periyar Tiger Trail**

It is an adventurous trekking and camping programme in dense forest. It is offered in two packages, one- night and two-night stays, depending upon the preference and wallet of guests. Trekking in the Thekkady Tiger Trail is in reality participation in forest patrols within Periyar Sanctuary and National Park. Trekking with tourists during peak season is normally limited to two occasions a week. Each trekking is unique in the sense that different paths are chosen randomly. The physical condition of the trekking tourist determines to some degree the difficulty of the path chosen. As the terrain is undulating, every trekking program demands that each participant is in good physical condition. From the beginning, the trekking follows an easy footpath, but then the team enters terrain and vegetation of varying difficulty to penetrate, in an untouched landscape without tracks. There are no facilities within the Sanctuary, so everything needed has to be carried along. Under the scheme, a maximum number of five tourists will be accompanied by five guides and one armed forest guard. The guides are very

knowledgeable on every nook and cranny of Thekkady forest, and on wildlife behavior. During the night, the guests are put up in temporary erected tents right in the interior. Guests feel at the lap of Mother Nature and can have a close-up view of wildlife and observe their behavior. Considering the vulnerability of biodiversity the number of slots has been limited.<sup>7</sup>

Although much publicity has been given to the project recently and its popularity is increasing, the number of trekking is limited to not more than a couple of tours per week. This is typical of ecotourism. An ecotourism project is never meant to be expanding with increasing popularity - then it ceases to be a true ecotourism project, which entails a minimum of damage and disturbance of the environment. One very important result of the project so far, is that the former poachers have been converted to devoted trackers with a genuine interest in conserving the Sanctuary. Some trackers have reported that the number of wild animals is already increasing. One national award for ecotourism was given to this project by The Ministry of Tourism for excellence in environmental concern in January 2000. A state award (Kerala) was also given recently for innovation in tourism.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Other Ecotourism products of Periyar Tiger Reserve**

***Bamboo Rafting*** : Ex-Vayana Bark collectors initiated a Bamboo Rafting program for tourists in November 2002. A full day nature trail package is offered to nature lovers to enjoy the panoramic beauty of Periyar Lake and undulating surroundings. A maximum of ten tourists can be accommodated in one slot. They will be accompanied by five guides and one armed guard. Only one slot will be allotted per day. Under this package the guests can enjoy two-hour long trekking, one and half hours long rafting upwards, and then after lunch break the party returns in the same manner. During the trail the party can have a feeling of pristine forest, see even large mammals, birds and indigenous people fishing in the lake. The guests will be helped to identify flora and fauna.

***Day Trekking Programme*** : Trekking programme, conducted by EDC, an Eco-development Committee (involving Tribal trekkers cum Guides), formed by 20 selected youths from the nearby tribal hamlets, offers a possibility to know the richness of an ideal tropical evergreen forest within a short span of time. The trekking duration is 3 hours. Five guests

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will be accommodated in one slot and they will be accompanied by one tribal youth. Born and brought up right in the lap of forests, the guides are well familiar with the forest life. The guest will be taken through selected nature trails. The programme is also ideal for bird enthusiasts as it starts early morning.

***Jungle Inn:*** A well furnished hut-like building right inside the forest, near by a vast expanse of wetland, is open to the tourists for night-stay. Two tourists will be accommodated and one guide will accompany them. During the stay in the inn they can have a close watch of the movement of wildlife and if it is a full moon day their experience in the jungle will be unforgettable. The guests will complete short duration trekking to and from their destination. The accompanying guide will serve light food during the stay in the inn.

***Learning Program in Bamboo Grove:*** Typical tribal like huts and tents erected right in a vast bamboo grove in the middle of Anavachal vayal are offered to serious nature lovers for their experiential learning programme. In addition to the huts and tents, a seminar hall also exists for conducting sensitization programs. These programs include interactive lectures by topic specific faculties/ professionals, simple food, accommodation in the tent etc.

***Tribal Heritage:*** Under this programme tribal life and culture of 50 years ago has been recreated in an exhibition centre right in the tribal hamlet. It is a 2-hour program and includes an exhibition and interpretation of the heritage and a nature trail in the hamlet. The guest can get acquainted with their traditional life, such as medicinal herbs, weapons, musical instrument, household articles etc.

***Wild Adventures:*** This programme involves a close interaction with the nature in the midst of a typical evergreen forest in Gavi, about 40 Kms. from Thekkady. The full programme is conducted by the eco-development committees of Meenar, Gavi and Kochupanpa. The package includes vehicle safari from Thekkady to Gavi and trekking in the forest. Animal sighting is common and abundant. Night-stay is also facilitated for a limited number of tourists. Rowing, bird watching, outdoor camping in the forest, tree-top stay and night safari are also arranged on request.<sup>9</sup>

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## **Facilities at Thekkady**

*Elephant ride:* Children and adults can go for a short elephant ride near the Turtle nature park after contacting the wildlife information centre near boat landing.

*Boating:* Boats of different capacities are maintained by the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) and the Kerala Forest Department. Boats can be hired for a 2-hour cruise - the easy option for sighting wildlife.

*Watch Towers and Rest house:* A watchtower and a forest rest house, one each at Edappalayam and Manakkavala for overnight stay inside forests are available with advance booking.

*Visitor centre:* Visitors arriving at Periyar Tiger Reserve can drop by at the Gandhi Park near Kumily town. Besides screening wildlife films, essential information on the reserve is provided here.

*Information Centre at boat landing:* Visitors are advised to contact the wildlife information centre at boat landing for basic information including guidelines to be observed in the park and the facilities available.

*Interpretation centre:* At the Rajiv Gandhi Center for Nature Education and Research, there is an Interpretation Center that houses various specimens of flora and fauna and up to date information on the park. A reference library also functions in the same building.<sup>10</sup>

## **Review of Eco-development Project**

The Eco-development project in the Periyar Tiger Reserve can be reviewed on the basis of ecotourism principles like nature-based, ecological sustainability, scope of education and interpretation, benefits to local people etc.

*Nature-based:* All the activities in the eco-development project are nature based. Programs like the Tiger Trail, Bamboo Rafting and Day Trekking are carried out in the interior parts of the Sanctuary. Each trekking in the Tiger Trail is unique in the sense that different paths are chosen randomly. At the beginning, the trekking follows an easy

footpath, but then the team enters shifting terrain and vegetation of varying difficulty, to penetrate an untouched landscape without tracks. There are no facilities within the Sanctuary. So everything needed, has to be carried along.

***Ecologically Sustainable:*** The ecotourists are expected to accept the environment as it is, without trying to change it. This is also the case for less attractive portions of the Sanctuary. The only facilities are a few bamboo rafts used to cross lakes and ponds with. No foot-bridges or other installations to facilitate trekking are planned to be laid out. It is a rule here that those who might enter the same trail, should, in principle, not see that others have been there before, even if it has been a campsite.

***Education and Interpretation:*** Education is also an important factor of the project - a crash course for the ecotourist, and a permanent conservation education for the trackers. Tiger Trail provides a first-hand encounters with the natural environment. As the trekking in fact is a trail that is randomly chosen each time, the Thekkady Tiger Trail programme definitely provides a first-hand encounter with the natural environment for the ecotourist. The small group of ecotourists, who have booked for this trail, gather on the evening before the start for a briefing about what they can expect, what they should consider, and dos & don'ts, by a professional environmentalist. This briefing with a slideshow is a short but good lesson in environmental ethics and "preferred" behaviour, as well as providing information about the Sanctuary. Opportunity for learning is also available at the Tribal heritage center, the bamboo grove, the visitor center and at the Rajiv Gandhi center for Nature Education and Research.

***Benefits to local people:*** In the communities bordering the Periyar Sanctuary, EDCs (Eco-development Committees) were implemented as part of the program. Also, some well-known poachers and exploiters of the Sanctuary were reformed and became members of these committees when they were attached to the project. The project has also laid the foundation for a welfare fund for the 22 trackers with families, and other improvements remain to be made. One very important result of the project so far, is that the former poachers have been converted to devoted trackers with a genuine interest in conserving the Sanctuary. A major part of the earnings from the bamboo-rafting program goes to the

community development fund from which the members earn a monthly wage of Rupees 3,500. The earnings from various activities and services also go into a community development fund.

## Conclusion

The success of the Eco-development project in the Periyar Tiger Reserve reflects the concern for achieving a balance between conservation of the sanctuary and livelihood of people living in and around it. The involvement of local communities in Ecotourism activities is a step in the right direction. It provides for alternative sources of income to local communities, which live in and around protected areas, thus decreasing their dependence on forest resources and increasing their commitment to keeping the forests intact. For the vast protected area network in India, the lessons from the Periyar experience is important, as it legitimately shows the need for communities and conservation to go hand in hand.

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