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## **Eco - Tourism And Sustainable Nature In Thiruvananthapuram District**

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### **Abstract**

Eco-tourism is catering for holiday makers in the natural environment without damaging it or disturbing habitats. It is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial mass tourism. It means responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of the local people. Its purpose may be to educate the traveller, to provide funds for ecological conservation, to directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, or to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights. Since 1980s, eco-tourism has been considered a critical endeavour by environmentalists, so that future generations may experience destinations relatively untouched by human intervention. Several university programmes use this description as the working definition of eco-tourism.

**Keywords:** Eco-Tourism, Environment, Attractions, Sustainable Tourism, Eco Development.

### **Eco-Tourism**

Eco-tourism deals with interaction with biotic components of the natural environments. Eco-tourism focuses on socially responsible travel, personal growth and environmental sustainability. Eco-tourism typically involves travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Eco-tourism is intended to offer tourists an insight into the impact of human beings on the environment and to foster a greater appreciation of our natural habitats.

Responsible eco-tourism programmes include those that minimize the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, an integral part of eco-tourism is the promotion of recycling, energy, efficiency, water conservation and creation of economic opportunities for local communities. For these reasons, eco-tourism often appeals to advocates of environmental and social responsibility. Many consider the term "eco-tourism", like "sustainable tourism" an oxymoron. Like most

forms of tourism, eco-tourism generally depends on air transportation, which contributes to global climate change. Additionally, "the overall effect of sustainable tourism is negative where like eco-tourism philanthropic aspirations mask hard-nosed immediate self-interest. That said, carbon offset schemes, are being provided by large airlines these days, and passengers can make use of them to eliminate these impacts.

### **Benefits of Eco-tourism**

Eco-tourism is tourism which is conducted responsibly to conserve the environment and Sustain the well-being of local people. It builds environmental awareness and Provides direct Financial benefits for conservation. Eco- tourism Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people and respects local culture.

It supports human rights and democratic movements such as:

1. Conservation of biological diversity cultural diversity and cultural diversity through ecosystem protection
2. Promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity, by providing jobs to local populations
3. Sharing of all socio-economic benefits with local communities and indigenous peoples by having their informed consent and participation in the management of eco-tourism enterprises
4. Tourism to unspoiled natural resources, with minimal impact on the environment being a primary concern.
5. Minimization of tourism's own environmental impact
6. Affordability and lack of waste in the form of luxury
7. Local culture, flora, and fauna being the main attractions and
8. Local people, who benefit from this form of tourism economically, and often more than mass tourism

The International Eco-tourism Society defines eco-tourism as "responsible travel to Natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education". For many countries, eco-tourism is not simply a marginal activity to finance protection of the environment, but a major industry of the national economy. For example, in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar and territories such as Antarctica, eco-tourism represents a significant portion of the gross domestic product and economic activity.

Eco-tourism is often misinterpreted as any form of tourism that involves nature. Self-proclaimed practitioners and hosts of eco-tourism experiences assume it is achieved by simply creating destinations in natural areas. According to critics of this commonplace and assumptive practice, true eco-tourism must, above all, sensitize people to the beauty and the fragility of nature. These critics condemn some operators as green washing their operations:

using the labels of "green" and "eco-friendly", while behaving in environmentally irresponsible ways. Although academics disagree about who can be classified as an eco-tourist and there is little statistical data, some estimate that more than five million eco-tourists the majority of the eco-tourist population come from the United States, with many others from Western Europe, Canada and Australia. Currently, there are various moves to create national and international eco-tourism accreditation programmes, although the process is also controversial. National eco-tourism certification programmes have been put in place in countries such as Costa Rica, Australia, Kenya, Estonia, and Sweden.

### **Eco -Tourism in Thiruvananthapuram District**

Thiruvananthapuram District in Kerala state has got immense potential for the development and promotion of eco-tourism. The potential eco-tourism resources of Thiruvananthapuram include the three wildlife sanctuaries, two National Parks, the coastal ecosystem, the mangrove forests, other potential are as in the forests etc. Realising the importance of eco-tourism in Thiruvananthapuram District, Government designated an officer as the Director for Eco-tourism under the Tourism Department in 1995. The eco-tourism wing thus created offers policy support, identify, develop and promote the eco-tourism programmes. 34 places were identified as potential areas for developing forest based eco-tourism.

Thenmala is a model for eco-tourism in Kerala becoming a pilot eco-tourism programme developed in Thiruvananthapuram District. The eco-tourism programmes in the forests of Thiruvananthapuram are materializing only because of the close co-ordination between the Forest and the Tourism departments. The Forest department prepares visitor management plan for the areas inside forests which has tourism pressure. The planning is done in a participatory approach with the local community. The local forest depended community is brought together under a committee called the Eco Development Committees (EDC) in sanctuaries and National Parks and the Vana Samrakshana Samith is (VSS) in other forest areas.

The VSS/EDC and the forest department plan for the method of visitor management to the ecologically fragile area. A tourism micro plan is prepared. Eco-tourism products are planned in such spots so as to manage the tourists in a strategic manner. The basic required facilities are provided. Thus the negative impacts due to tourism in the pristine areas could be minimized. The programmes become a method for the positive dependent livelihood option for the local community.

Kerala Tourism provides the VSS/EDC with the necessary financial, technical and marketing assistance to promote district Tourism. Kerala Tourism provides the necessary fund required for the creation of the basic infrastructure. Once the requisite infrastructure is ready the Department of Tourists provides help in marketing the products to the appropriate target market segment. Such a coordinated effort ensures the sustainability of the product created. Eco-friendly Tourism is planned in the periphery of the sanctuary so

that pressure of tourism will not affect the sanctuary. The real eco-tourism is to take place in sanctuary and only eco tourists opt for that. Others experience the eco-friendly products such as small nature trails, elevated walkway through canopies, mountain biking, boating in the Sanctuary Reservoir, Boardwalk, etc. which may give them a feeling of what awaits as eco-tourism in the sanctuary. Facilities such as Sculpture Garden, Amphitheatre, Musical Dancing Fountain, etc. are also provided at Thenmala.

The sustainability issues are addressed through the conduct of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), regular monitoring and practicing vermi-composting techniques, battery powered vehicles, use of solar lamps, zoning of site, use of site hardening techniques, promoting tree planting through the concept of astro forest etc.

Environmental education is an area, which the destination gives a lot of importance through providing classes to students, special concession for educational institutes, celebrating various environmental days in coordination with local educational institutions etc. The local community participation is envisaged through supporting the local women self-help groups for operating shops and cafeteria within the project area, training youth for utilizing opportunities of self-employment supporting community led eco-tourism products like management of unique waterfalls within the forest area, conduct of bird watching trails, trekking programmes, butterfly watching trails etc.

Any conservation project needs co-operation and coordination amongst take holders. Here, this project has institutionalized the coordination of the Tourism, Forest & Wildlife, Irrigation departments and Local bodies etc. in the implementation. The local community support for eco-tourism products are institutionalized through the committees of the local dependent community called the Eco-Development Committees (EDCs). The project also envisages a unique synergy among Government, private Sector and the local community. There are opportunities for the private sector in the areas of accommodation, transport etc. for local community in eco-tourism product management, local traditional transport, local handicrafts, local art etc. within the overall regulatory and supportive frame work provided by Government.

Thenmala Eco-tourism is a learning experience. The novelty of the planning process adopted and its implementation conforms to the accepted principles of eco-tourism and the operational results achieved so far suggests that it can become a viable model both environmentally and economically. Thenmala has today become the world's leading eco-tourism destination.

## **Management issues**

### **Ensuring local community participation:**

All eco-tourism programmes in forest areas are done through an association of local community, which is called Eco-Development Committee (EDC). This will help to channel the local benefit in right direction. In this system, the local community will maintain the facilities and will also organise trekking programmes with the assistance of Forest department. The income generated will be shared between the Government and local community. Government will be given royalty and balance will be used for operational expenses, honorarium and contribution towards a common fund. During off-season the members of local community will assist the Forest department in preventing illicit felling, poaching etc. Another benefit here is the conservation of the forest eco system through local community. People's participation will bring in more transparency and effectiveness and will also ensure sustainability.

### **Training of local people:**

One of the main thrust areas of eco-tourism is local benefit. In order to reap benefit from the emerging economic opportunities local people has to be empowered. Continuous training programmes on various aspects of tour guiding, souvenir development & selling, providing local accommodation, development of community-based eco-tourism enterprises etc. are to be undertaken by government. Similarly a lot of awareness creation programmes are to be done at local level on various issues related to tourism.

### **Marketing of trekking and camping facilities:**

Marketing of facilities will be done with the help of private sector. The local community with the help of Forest Department will select a tour operator through a transparent process for conducting various programmes such as trekking etc for a period of three years at a time for an amount. The set of our operators will market this product and local community (Eco-Development Committee) will ensure smooth functioning as and when tourists are brought by tour operators concerned.

### **Support from various Departments:**

Co-ordination among various departments is the crucial factor for success of any tourism project and it is very much crucial for eco-tourism. Forest, Tourism and Local Self-Government departments have to co-operate effectively in order to achieve desired results.

### **Social benefits**

Eco-tourism development aims to provide local economic benefits in a much bigger way. It can lead to development of positive economics that takes among local people with regard to conservation of natural resources. Since various eco-tourism programmes are designed in different localities, it can lead to a balanced regional development. Thrust given to local horticulture; handicrafts etc. will also contribute to local economic development considerably. The institution of Eco-Development Committees in eco-tourism is a novel

concept, which ensures the local benefit from eco-tourism. It is the local people who organise the eco-tourism programmes with technical assistance from Forest Department. Apart from providing financial benefits, this will also empower the local population, especially through the training programmes intended to help them in this. There will be direct employment to large number of local people and a double of that indirectly during the course of time the employment opportunities will mostly be in private sector or in community led eco-tourism enterprises.

### **Mankayam Eco-tourism**

Mankayam, situated about 45 kms North-east of Thiruvananthapuram, is one of the popular eco-tourism spots in Kerala. From the mighty hill ranges of Chemunchi emanates the Chittar River flowing down through the forests, creating a tributary in the form of the Mankayam River. The various picturesque milky cascades are the major tourist attractions at Mankayam. Among this two beautiful waterfalls are the Kalakayam and Kurissadi which are among the biggest waterfalls in southern Kerala. State Forest Department has come up with exclusive trekking options and special mention must be given to the Iruthala Moola and Varayadin Mottai Trails, both famous for the visuals, experience and rare display of endemic species.

### **Pandipathu Eco-tourism Spot in Thiruvananthapuram**

A natural gem on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border that is gaining attraction among a lot of our visitors lately is Pandipathu. It comes under the Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary and is located on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border in Thiruvananthapuram District. It is accessible from Bonacaud, another picturesque plantation site. The Forest Department of Kerala set up a 'Visit to Bison Abode' project in the area. This is because of the presence of the Indian wild buffalo or the 'Gaur' on the rolling grasslands and hillsides that cover its landscape. The two-day package on offer ideally caters to a group of eight, who should seek permission in advance before proceeding. Campfire and trekking programmes also form part of the two-day programme. There is a registration fee for the two-day programme, which is inclusive of food and accommodation.

### **Arippa forest in Thiruvananthapuram**

Arippa forest or Ammayambalam Pacha is located at Thiruvananthapuram District and the place is known for its vibrant greenery. It is located 52 km from Thiruvananthapuram city on the Thiruvananthapuram- Shenkottah State Highway, and covers an area of about 1,000 hectares. With its rich flora and fauna, this lowland evergreen forest is an ornithologist's delight as well.

### **Eco-tourism avenues in Thiruvananthapuram District**

The tourism traffic to Thiruvananthapuram shows an increasing trend over the past few

years. The total tourism inflow to Thiruvananthapuram is about 15 lakhs during 1977. Foreign tourist arrival is about 1082 lakhs. Government of Kerala is working on a strategy to increase the foreign tourist inflow to the tune of five lakhs by the turn of the century. Eco-tourism is becoming popular in Thiruvananthapuram. Eco-tourism contributes to the conservation of the natural areas by providing economic incentives and revenue for the government to preserve and manage natural areas. It utilizes the natural resources and provides employment to the local people. The built in environment education programmers raises the awareness of the local people and helps in conservation of the natural resources.

Kerala has commissioned an exclusive eco-tourism project at Thenmala in the Western Ghats. Activities such as trekking through rain forests and wild life sanctuaries, staying in tree top huts etc are also gaining popularity. United Nations has declared the year 2002 as the year of eco-tourism. Kerala has already geared up to meet the challenges of converting the entire tourism trade in the state to eco-friendly tourism. Generally, tourism is a large consumer of power. However, the tourism trade in Thiruvananthapuram is motivated to promote power conservation by encouraging natural ventilation instead of artificial air conditioning. It aims to create the absolute minimum impact on forests, wildlife sanctuaries, farms and other environmentally sensitive regions that the Tourism has resulted in.

### **Conclusion:**

Kerala has already geared up to meet the challenges of converting the entire tourism trade in the state to eco-friendly tourism. Generally, tourism is a large consumer of power. However, the tourism trade in Thiruvananthapuram is motivated to promote power conservation by encouraging natural ventilation instead of artificial air conditioning. It aims to create the absolute minimum impact on forests, wildlife sanctuaries, farms and other environmentally sensitive regions that the Tourism has resulted in.

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