



## COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM FOR THE SUSTAINED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF KERALA: A STUDY WITH A FOCUS ON ECOTOURISM

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### **Abstract**

*Because of the enviable tourism resources of Kerala, the State is often projected before the world as 'God's own Country' with a view to attract more tourists into the State. Consequent to the proactive policy measures by the stakeholders, there has been steady growth in foreign tourist arrivals (FTA) into the State and also in the foreign exchange earnings (FEE). The State's natural beauty, vast coastal areas, comfortable climatic conditions, and governmental support, have all created an environment conducive for the fast growth of tourism in Kerala. But, there are growing concerns regarding the sustainability of its tourism initiatives in view of the fast degradation of the natural environment. In this context, this paper seeks to critically assess the scope of promoting Community Based Tourism (CBT) as a model for sustainable and equitable economic development of Kerala state in the Indian union.*

**Key Words:** *Community Based Tourism (CBT), Ecotourism, Foreign Exchange Earnings.*

### **Introduction**

The high potential of tourism for employment generation and economic growth is widely acknowledged in the literature, and tourism can fetch foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) to the host country as the foreign tourists spend money for their boarding, conveyance and other purchases. Hence, most countries of the world, particularly developing nations including India have been promoting tourism in a big way for faster economic development. A nation like India have got a special advantage in this regard this country is endowed with marvelous tourism resources in the form of extremely rich cultural heritage, world renowned historical spots (like, Taj Mahal), lengthy coastal areas, wide range of flora and fauna along with serene natural beauty and so on. Kerala state in Indian union is particularly suitable for tourism promotion because of its enviable endowments in respect of natural beauty as well as moderate and conducive climatic conditions throughout the year. However, the excellent tourism resources of Kerala is still underutilized (Manoj, P. K., 2008)[6] and hence there is enough scope for aggressive promotion of tourism in the state. However, it is equally or more important that environment needs to be closely protected and its purity maintained in tact because Kerala's natural environment is facing strong threats of degradation or an 'ecological overkill' (Oommen, M. A., 2008)[14] and tourism promotion without harming the environment alone can be sustainable in Kerala in the long run (Manoj, P. K, 2010)[8]. In the above context, it seems very meaningful to study the scope of promoting Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Kerala in an environment-friendly manner, that is, without adversely affecting the natural environment, for the rapid economic development of the State. This paper is an attempt in the above direction.



## Relevance and Significance of the Study

Kerala has got one of the highest achievements in the whole of India in terms of its universal literacy, and indicators relating to the progress in social, cultural, health and such other fields. In respect of some of these indicators, like, those relating to public health and hospital facilities, literacy rate etc. Kerala's achievements are commendable and the State is comparable with advanced nations of the world. The so called 'Kerala Model' of development, has not been able to address the issue of poor industrialization in the State, slow growth in agriculture etc. In the 'rudely shaken' state of 'equity and sustainability foundations' of the economic growth of Kerala, wherein 'Ecological Overkill' (Oommen, M. A., 2008)[14] still persists it is relevant to critically study the scope of CBT as a means of sustainable and equitable economic development of the State. The emphasis being on the equitable nature of the growth CBT has been chosen as it can accommodate women as well as most of the marginalized segments like tribal communities as the active players and ensure their livelihood. Sustainability of the natural environment can be preserved through environment-friendly models like Ecotourism. This paper seeks to critically study the scope of promotion CBT as a sustainable and equitable growth model for Kerala state.

## Review of Literature

Even though empirical studies on Community Based Tourism (CBT) per se are rather scarce, many tourism studies have focused on the economic benefits accruing to the local community because of tourism as well the environmental sustainability aspect of tourism. Whether local populace is benefited out of tourism and if so whether such benefits are sustainable in the long run needs to be assessed. Similarly, the case of adverse impact of tourism on the ecology and environment is equally or more important in the present context of Kerala. Tourism studies focusing on the aspects like long-term sustainability (especially from the natural environment perspective), and equity (especially from the perspective of local population and the benefits derived by them from tourism initiatives) are discussed hereunder.

A research article by Kumar, Yathish (2007)[5] "Tourism Sector and Sustainable Development" has observed that while the basic objectives of tourism include improving the quality of life of respective local community and also offering a good experience to the tourists, it is vital to ensure that the purity of the natural environment is preserved. This is because of the fact that the environmental quality is very important for both the tourists and also the local populace, the long-term sustainability of tourism being dependent on the environmental quality. Based on his study, the author has underscored the utmost need for maintaining environmental purity for long-term sustainability of tourism. Oommen, M. A., 2008) [14] has pointed out that Kerala's economic growth is glaringly characterized by the 'Ecological Overkill' in the form of serious damage to the hydrological cycle, natural systems (like, forests and rivers), disappearing wetlands – the kidney of the economic system', one of the lowest per-capita availability of fresh water despite reasonable good rainfall, etc. leading to destruction of 'beautiful matrix of agro-eco system'. The steady deterioration in the fiscal situation of Kerala as evidenced by growing fiscal deficit, poor debt sustainability as reflected in the declining net availability of funds after the loan repayments and steady growth in per capita debt have been pointed out as indications of losing sustainability. Similarly, declining equity in the growth pattern too has been noted by pointing out the high Gini co-efficient (41 percent) of Kerala which is second only to Chattisgarh (44 percent) in India. Thus, going by the drastic fall in sustainability and equity in Kerala's economic growth pattern (Oommen, M. A., 2008) [14], growth models that can ensure equity and sustainability, especially from the perspective natural environment alone seems to be relevant in Kerala from a long-term perspective.



A macro level analytical study on the sustainability of tourism sector in India with a focus on Kerala's tourism sector done by Manoj P K (2008) [6], 'Sustainable Tourism in India: A Study from a Global Perspective with Focus on Tourism Prospects of Kerala' has analyzed the vast growth potential of India's tourism sector from a global perspective. The case of Kerala tourism and its special characteristics have been discussed in detail in this paper. Based on the findings of the study, the author has suggested strategies for the faster growth of Kerala tourism in a manner that is sustainable in the long run. Another macro level study done by the author Manoj P K (2009) [7], 'Environment Friendly Tourism for Sustainable Economic Development in India', has highlighted the vast growth potential of Indian tourism for the rapid national economic development. This study too have underscored the vital significance of preserving the environmental purity by all tourism initiatives, and pointed out that only environment-friendly ones can be sustainable in the long run.

A book on development of ecotourism in India by Singh, Sarvjeet (2009) [16] has stated that ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism and it provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful displays of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity, conservation and local cultures. Ecotourism concentrates on volunteer tourism, personal growth, and also seeks innovative ways to live on the earth. It involves travels towards locations wherein flora, fauna, cultural heritage etc. are the main attractions. It ensures the active involvement of the local people towards the conservation and education aspects of the process of tourism development. A research paper by Manoj P K (2010) [8], 'Tourism in Kerala: A Study of the Imperatives and Impediments with Focus on Ecotourism', in *Saaranish-RKG Journal of Management*, has studied the Kerala's tourism sector in detail by using the SWOT analysis method. Based on the findings of his study, the author has made suggestions for rapid and sustainable development of Kerala tourism. Sudheer, B (2015) [17] in his report on the UGC-sponsored research project on Responsible Tourism in Kerala – A Case Study of Kumarakom Panchayath' has noted the need for alternative and innovative practices like Responsible Tourism (RT) to mitigate the adverse effects of tourism on the environment and to make tourism sustainable in the long run. Regarding Kumarakom RT project, its positive effects (such as employment to the local populace), empowerment of local women through RT-based jobs (like, providing vegetables, fish, meat etc. all being gathered from local sources), favorable linkage effects on the local community (eg. earnings from the purchases made by tourists) etc. are noted.

World Economic Forum (WEF) (2015) [20] in its report on tourism competitiveness made a detailed study of the competitiveness of various countries of the world, in the area of travel and tourism. This report contains the competitiveness of nations at the regional and global levels using a few well-defined parameters; the global competitiveness of Indian tourism is 52 as against 17 of China. At the regional (Asia Pacific region) level too, there is a huge gap in the competitiveness, as India is the 12<sup>th</sup> rank as against the 6<sup>th</sup> rank of China. An empirical study of an ecotourism project in Kerala by Manoj P. K (2015) (a) [9], 'Prospects of Ecotourism in Kerala: Evidence from Kumarakam in Kottayam District' has analyzed the prospects of the said ecotourism initiative. Based on the findings the above study, the author has suggested strategies for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the State. Another field-based study done by Manoj P. K (2015) (b) [10], 'Employment Generation from Rural Tourism: A Field Study of the Local Community at Kumbalangi, Kerala' has analyzed the responses of the local community regarding the employment prospects of rural tourism as perceived by them, their own anticipations regarding the suitable interventions by the State Government and so on. The bright growth prospects of employment creation and economic development have been pointed out, subject, however, to the utmost need for improving the tourism infrastructure, primarily through the initiatives of the



State Government. WTTC (2015) [21] in its comprehensive report relating to the economic impact of tourism and travel industry has made a detailed study of the relative performance of different nations of the world in the tourism front, along with region-wise performance as well as future projections. WTTC has pointed out that South Asian region, spearheaded India and the Middle East, is globally the fastest growing region in terms of the share of Travel and Tourism sector to the GDP value. India is one of the large and fast growing markets along with China, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey. It has also been reported that South Asia will be the fastest growing sub-region in its long-run growth to 2025 (7.0 percent) of Travel & Tourism GDP, and that India will outpace China by the year 2025.

A study by Manoj P K (2016)(a) [11], “Impact of Rural Tourism on the Environment and Society: Evidence from Kumbalangi in Kerala, India” in *International Journal of Advance Research in Computer Science and Management Studies* has observed the definite positive impact of rural tourism but has warned about the vital need for preserving environmental quality by way of strictly limiting the number of tourists, prohibiting the use of non-degradable materials (like, plastic items), exercising more emphasis on environmental cleanliness, and so on.

An empirical study on the sustainability of rural tourism done in the context of central Kerala by Manoj P. K. (2016)(b)[12], “Determinants of Sustainability of Rural Tourism: A Study of Tourists at Kumbalangi in Kerala, India”, in *International Journal of Advance Research in Computer Science and Management Studies* has sought to find the factors influencing the sustainability of rural tourism in Kerala and to suggest strategies for its promotion from a long-term perspective. First and foremost strategy is on preserving the natural environment which is of “paramount significance”. Other strategies suggested include (i) good service and safety to tourists, (ii) preserving the culture of the local people, (iii) improving transportation and other infrastructure facilities, (iv) enhancing ICT-based facilities.

In spite of the fact there have been a number of studies on ecotourism (and its variants) made in the Indian scenario, including some studies made in the Kerala context, studies on the scope of promoting Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Kerala for the sustainable and equitable economic development of Kerala. So, this study seeks to bridge this research gap by making a critical study on the scope of CBT for the sustainable and equitable economic growth of Kerala by utilizing the State’s immense but grossly underutilized tourism resources.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To make an overall study the scope of promotion of tourism in India for the fast economic development of the nation, with special reference to the case of Ecotourism in Kerala;
2. To study the prospects of ecotourism in Kerala and the scope of promoting Community Based Tourism (CBT) for the sustained and equitable economic development of Kerala;
3. To suggest strategies for the sustained growth of CBT in Kerala through the various ecotourism initiatives in the State based on the findings of this study.

### **Methodology of the Study**

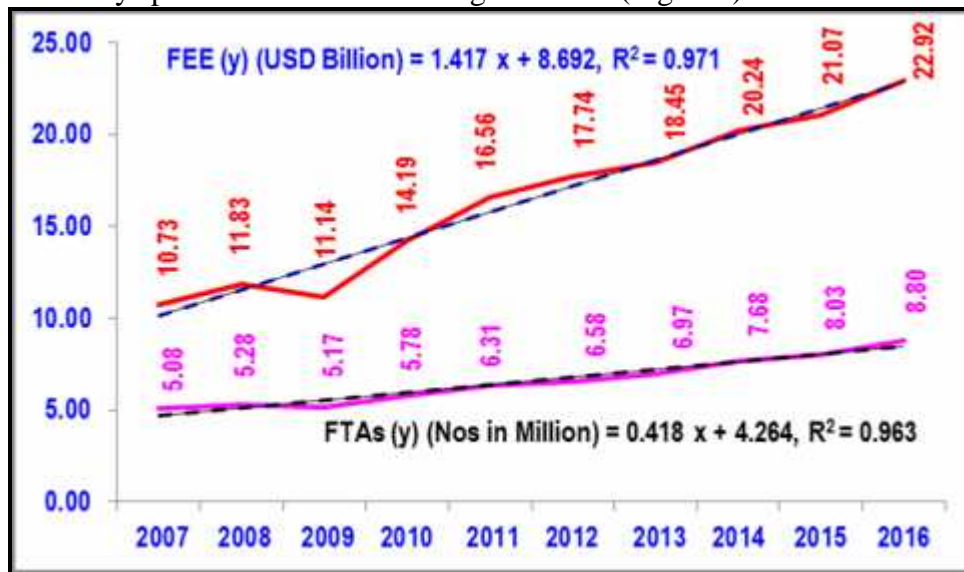
The present study is structured as an evaluative and descriptive study that is primarily based on the analysis of macro level secondary data available from authentic sources, like the publications of the Government and those of the Ministry of Tourism. As this is an exploratory study, no hypothesis has been formulated. Common statistical tools alone are used for data analysis.



### Scope for Promotion of Tourism in India: An Overview

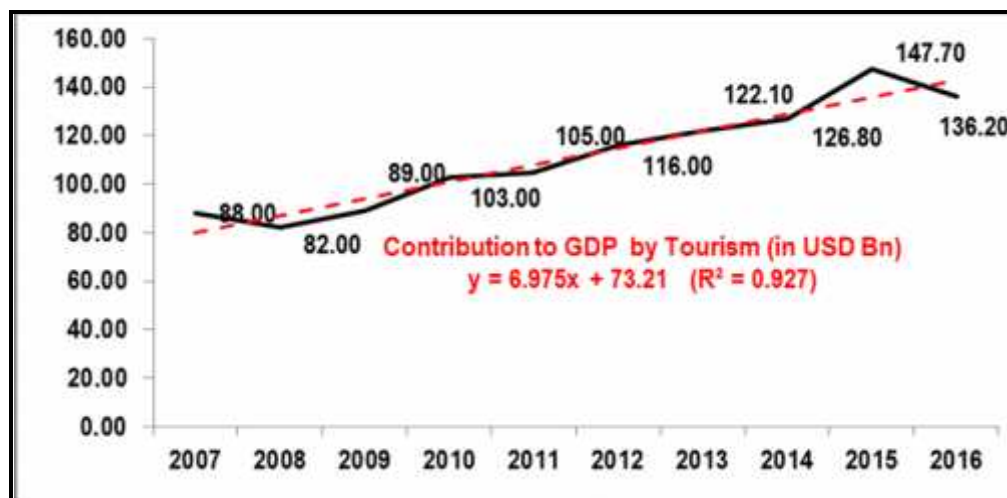
Over the years there has been constant growth in the performance of India’s tourism sector in terms of the trend in contribution to GDP, number of tourist arrivals, foreign exchange earnings (FEE) from tourism, etc. These aspects are very briefly discussed hereunder:

It is noted that there has been consistent growth in respect of foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) into India and foreign exchange earnings (FEEs). There has been a more than proportionate growth in FEEs. This suggests that it is always preferable to attract foreign tourists. (Figure I).



Source: Govt. of India (2017), *India Tourism Statistics 2017* [25], p.21 & p.72.  
 Figure I: Total contribution of tourism and hospitality to GDP of India (USD Billion).

Further, it is also noted that the total contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP of India has grown at a CAGR is 4.97 percent, as it increased from USD 88 Billion in 2008 to USD 136.2 Billion in 2016, its projected level as of 2026 being USD 280.5 Billion. (Figure II).

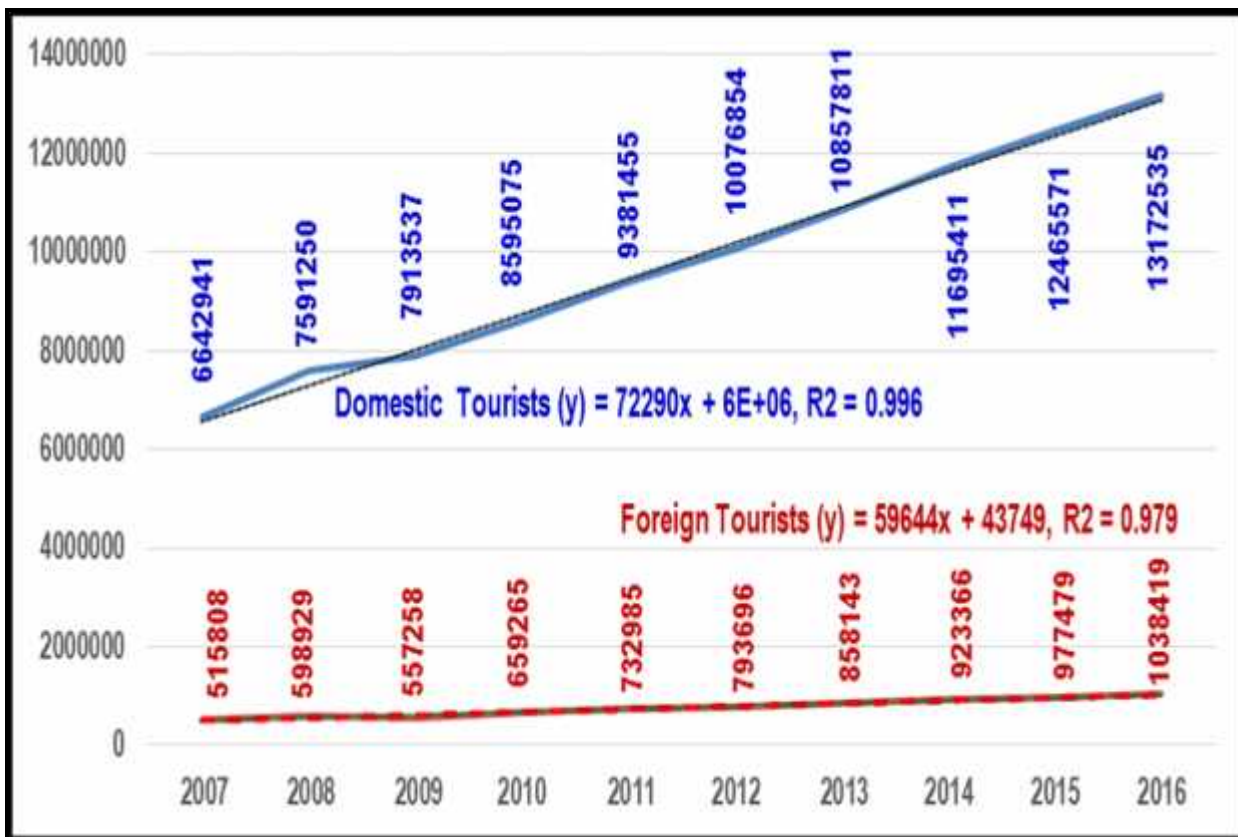


Source: WTTC, 2015 [34], and IBEF, Jan. 2017, p.11. [9]  
 Figure II: Total contribution of tourism and hospitality to GDP of India (USD Billion).



Given the appreciable growth trends of Indian tourism in respect of the major performance parameters, it may be noted that tourism sector needs more encouragement through additional budget outlays and promotional campaigns so that its contribution to the country’s GDP will go up further, ultimately leading to faster economic development of the nation.

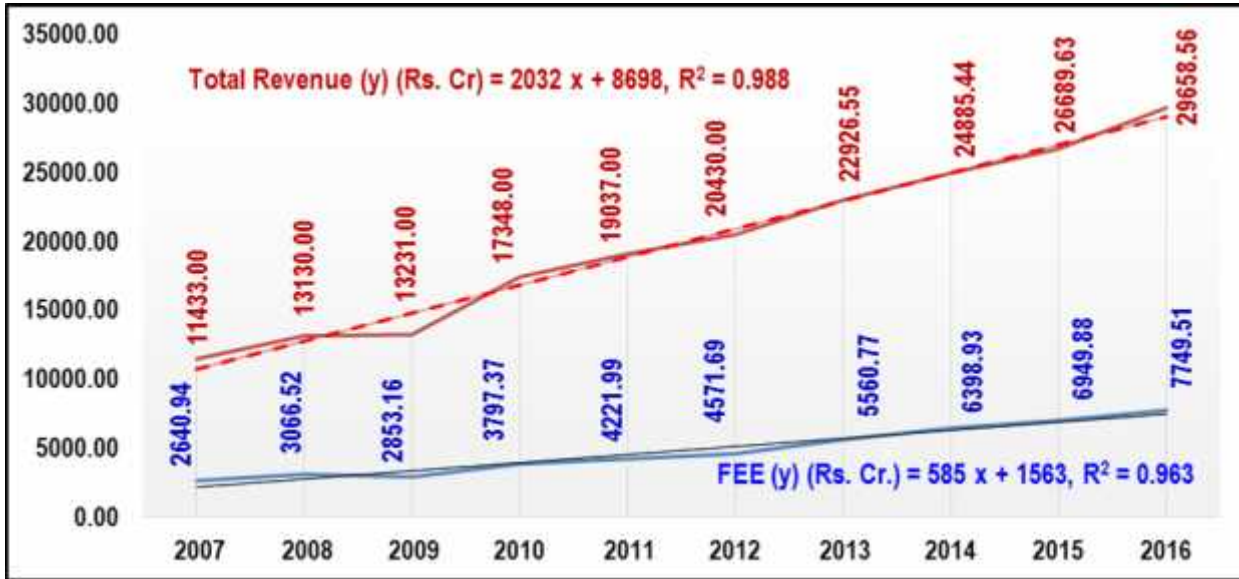
In respect of the tourism sector in Kerala, there has been steady increase in the growth of domestic tourists as well as foreign tourists (Figure III). However, it may be noted that the growth rate in respect of domestic tourist arrivals (DTAs) has been much higher than that in respect of foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs). From the respective trend lines, it is noted that while the number of domestic tourists on an average grows at the rate of 72, 290 per annum, the average growth in the number of FTAs has been only 59,644 per annum. (Figure III).



Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017), *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016* [34], Jan.

Figure III: Trend in Tourist Arrivals to Kerala – Domestic and Foreign Tourists.

In respect of the earnings from the tourism sector in Kerala, it is noted that there has been constant increase in the foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) from tourism as well as total revenue from the tourism sector. While FEEs has been increasing at the rate of Rs. 585 Cr. per annum on an average, the total revenue from tourism has been growing at an average rate of Rs. 2,032 Cr per annum. (Figure IV). Comparing the growth rate in FTAs vis-à-vis DTAs (Figure III), and the relatively higher earnings from FTAs it may be stated that FTAs need to be further promoted so as to attract more foreign exchange from tourism activities. (Figure III and Figure IV).



Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017), *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016* [34], Jan.

Figure IV: Tourism Earnings in Kerala – Foreign Exchange Earnings and Total Revenue.

### Scope for Promotion of Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Kerala

Situated in the south-west coast of the Indian Peninsula, Kerala is considered as one among the 50 most favored tourist destinations in the world. With a population of over 33 million, Kerala is well-known for its unique development pattern characterized by exceptional social development indicators in respect of education, health, hospital facilities etc. – many of which are comparable with advanced nations of the world. But, excellent achievement in social development has not been associated with concomitant industrial development in Kerala. Rather, a somewhat stagnant situation is observed in the economic activities in Kerala, especially in its industrial sector. Economic stagnation has been primarily because the State has not kept pace in aspects like industrial development, agricultural development, etc. In many policy debates, industry meets and other development discourses, including the Global Investors Meet (GIM) held in Kochi way back in 2003, many experts have suggested the ecotourism and other nature tourism models for the sustained economic development of Kerala. One of the sustainable and eco-friendly models for the fast economic development of Kerala in the twenty-first century is ecotourism, given the State’s peculiar geographic features like natural beauty and other factors conducive for the development of tourism. With over 14 million tourists visiting Kerala in 2016, generating nearly Rs. 30,000 Cr. as revenue, contributing nearly one-tenth to State’s GDP and almost one-fourth to its employment, tourism becomes the best-fit model for the socio-economic growth of the State.

As part of Kerala’s tourism development, the State’s competitive advantage lies in the wide variety and extent of natural environments and biodiversity. Thus, the unique positive features of Kerala in the tourism front lies in its ecology and environment. But, the facts are that (i) Kerala’s hydrological cycle is seriously damaged, almost in an irreversible manner, its forest systems and river systems are spoilt irreparably, and wetlands are fast disappearing; (ii) Kerala’s lengthy coastal system extending to 580 km, mountains and terrains have been fatally modified, and its bio-diversity has been tremendously interfered; (iii) Kerala’s rich and extremely diverse natural resources have been damaged and its beautiful agro-eco system being badly destroyed; and (iv) Kerala’s growingly consumerist society is



throwing out heavy solid, liquid and medical wastes every day making its environment highly polluted. (Oommen, M. A., 2008) [14]. The case of promotion of community based tourism (CBT), or any kind of tourism for that matter, for the purpose of faster economic growth of Kerala – implying large scale expansion of tourism activities – needs to be analyzed considering the aforementioned stark ‘environmental realities’ of the State. So, a policy of ‘Nature first, Development next’ alone is going to be sustainable in Kerala. Thus, as ecotourism seeks to preserve the nature, its promotion as a CBT initiative, seems to be sustainable.

Now, setting aside the environmental concerns as noted above, and presuming that strict measures for preserving the environmental purity and conserving the natural resources would be in place, let us consider the suitability of Kerala in the tourism front, especially ecotourism in the CBT format. With its immense natural attractions such as backwaters, beaches, and hill-stations, Kerala can promote ecotourism very well. Earlier studies had pointed out that ecotourism was expected to grow at the rate of 25 percent in the next 10 years, and would offer potential tour agents and tourist destinations opportunities for capitalizing on the State’s rich natural resources (Herliczek, 1996)[3]. But, the fear was that, owing to its popularity, ecotourism could degenerate into a marketing mechanism that could earn profit to the operators but might cause many adverse effects of traditional tourism that ecotourism sought to curtail. (Herliczek, 1996)[3]. For the purpose of this paper ecotourism is defined as, environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature, which has low adverse visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (International Ecotourism Society, 1991). Since ecotourism was first defined, there has been a general consensus as to its basic elements; its basic elements as delineated by United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) deserve mention and are briefly discussed hereunder:

According to UNEP, (i) Ecotourism contributes to conservation of biodiversity, (ii) it sustains the wellbeing of local people, (iii) it includes interpretation/learning experience, (iv) it inculcates responsible action by tourists as well as the stakeholders of the tourism industry, (v) it is targeted basically at small groups and small scale businesses, (vi) it needs the least possible utilization of non-renewable resources, and (vii) it emphasizes local participation, ownership and business avenues; and focuses particularly on the rural population.

Just as there are many definitions of ecotourism, there are many interpretations of what the label means to tourism agents and operators. Many have argued over who has the right to use the term in describing their activities, even though there is no legal document outlining these activities (Weaver, 2001) [19]. One authentic document that we can refer is the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (CTDRTD). It was developed in 2002 at Johannesburg in a side event in connection with the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The CTDRTD sets forth the following characteristics of all Responsible Tourism (RT) projects: (i) RT minimizes negative economic, environmental, and social impacts; (ii) RT creates larger economic benefits for the local population, it enhances the well-being of host communities, and also improves the working conditions and access to the industry; (iii) RT involves the local populace in decisions affecting their lives and life chances; (iv) RT makes positive efforts towards the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the maintenance of the diversity of the world; (v) RT provides greater enjoyable opportunities for tourists by way of more meaningful interactions with the local people, and greater understanding of the local cultural, social and environmental concerns; (vi) RT provides access to physically challenged tourists; and (vii) RT is culturally sensitive, it stimulates mutual respect between tourists and hosts and creates local pride and





confidence. (CTDRTD, 2002). Presuming that all service providers follow the RT guidelines (CTDRTD) we can classify the range of ecotourism types by nature of their operation.

### **Initiatives of the Government of Kerala in Promoting Nature Based Tourism Models**

Government of Kerala (GOK), has been taking concerted efforts for promoting Ecotourism and other tourism models like RT. According to GOK, the simplest way to conceptualize ecotourism is, any tourism program which is (a) nature based, (b) ecologically sustainable, (c) where education and interpretation are major components and (d) where local people are benefited (GOK, 2002). Ecotourism and RT have been high priorities for GOK since the early 2000s.

There are 60 major ecotourism destinations in Kerala spread across the 14 districts in the State and these are being closely monitored by the Department of Tourism, GOK. Of these 60 destination, as high as 12 (which accounts for one-fifth or 20 per cent of the total of 60) destinations are located in the backward district in North Kerala with sizeable tribal population (1,51,443 as per 2011 Census) as well as the maximum percentage of forest cover (83.30 percent) among the 14 districts in the State. Table I gives the distribution of ecotourism destinations in Kerala.

Sl. No.	Name of the District	Ecotourism destinations (Nos)
01.	Thiruvananthapuram	06
02.	Kollam	03
03.	Pathanamthitta	05
04.	Alappuzha	00
05.	Idukki	09
06.	Kottayam	02
07.	Ernakulam	03
08.	Thrissur	02
09.	Palakkad	06
10.	Malappuram	03
11.	Kozhikode	05
12.	Wayanad	12
13.	Kannur	03
14.	Kasaragode	01
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>

Source: Govt. of Kerala, Dept. of Forests. ([www.kerala.forest.gov.in](http://www.kerala.forest.gov.in))

Ecotourism is a nature based tourism model that strives to maintain ecological sustainability. Those who love nature in its original and undistorted form search for ecotourism destinations for the above kind of experience. The number of such kind of tourists is on the rise year after year. Hence, there is good scope for the further promotion of ecotourism. In a State like Kerala, the growth prospects are particularly high owing to its enviable natural beauty.

Dept. of Tourism of Govt. of Kerala (GOK) has identified more spots having potential for being developed as full-fledged ecotourism destinations. Such emerging tourist spots are being developed as ecotourism destinations by giving thrust on conservation and environmental education. In such spots, products like trekking, bird watching etc. are being designed and launched by forming Eco Developed



Committees (EDCs)/Vana Samrakshana Samithies(VSSs), thus ensuring adequate local community participation and that ecotourism benefits reach them. Ecotourism Directorate of GOK is mainly concerned with planning, granting financial assistance for the setting up of ecotourism spots, developing infrastructural facilities in various ecotourism destinations, developing ecotourism products in various emerging ecotourism destinations etc. GOK believes that there are broadly four types of ecotourism profiles viz. (i) Dedicated Eco tourists, (ii) General Eco tourists, (iii) Casual Eco tourists, and (iv) Recreational Eco tourists. Dedicated Eco tourists typically prefer highly specialized activities like bird or butterfly watching; they often seek the help of expert tourist-guides and are willing to pay extra amount for such services. General Eco tourists are those attracted towards activities in the undisturbed natural setting, like, rafting, trekking and so on; they need little infrastructural facilities but expect high quality educational information. Casual Ecotourists are those who visit the attractions of the nature, though the basic focus of their tour is not that; and they are not very much concerned about the uniqueness of their experience with nature. Lastly, the recreational Ecotourists are those who want to enjoy by relaxing themselves in natural settings; they appreciate the greenery and often prefer some level of infrastructure facilities too in the respective destination.

It is worth pointing out here that apart from ecotourism, GOK has been keen in promoting other nature-based tourism models like Responsible Tourism (RT). In fact, RT is largely recognized as an alternative tourism model that can combat the adverse effects of Mass tourism. RT is being actively promoted by the GOK. GOK has been active in promotion of RT and an RTI (Responsible Tourism Initiative) is in vogue under it right from 2008, initially with four destinations. Later in 2011, three more RT destinations have been added to it, thus making the total to seven destinations. Because of the focused attention of GOK on its tourism sector, the tourism sector in the State could win large number of national and international awards over the years, including awards like the renowned Pacific Asian Tourism Award (PATA), several times. In 2015, it was awarded the reputed PATA Award from Macau Govt. Tourism Office (MGTO). But, sustainability of Kerala tourism vitally depends on the State's environment and ecology.

### **Sustained Growth of CBT in Kerala: Some Broad Strategies**

It is vital to point out that for making the ecotourism initiatives viable and hence supportive for the economic development of Kerala, complete participation and involvement of all stakeholders must be ensured right from the very planning stage. Thus, the Government, both at central and state levels, local authorities, developers and operators, NGO's, scientific and research institutions, visitors, the local community etc. should actively participate. Each stakeholder has to be mindful of the local environment and traditions while formulating the guidelines for the development of ecotourism. Community-based Tourism (CBT) models like ecotourism can flourish in a State like Kerala, provided proper precautions are taken to preserve its environment and ecology. This is because of the severe challenges that Kerala is facing in the form of degradation of environment and ecology, probably irreversibly too. (Oommen, M. A., 2008)[14]. Hence, a 'Nature first, Development next' policy is vital in Kerala at least in the tourism front. Based on the above discussions, some strategies for the sustained growth of CBT are as follows:

- First and foremost, only tourism models that fully takes care of the environment and ecology, like, ecotourism needs to be promoted by way of CBT initiatives;
- CBT is particularly relevant in tribal settlements where the special features of ecotourism (like, rural focus, undisturbed nature etc.) converges with the ground realities of the tourist settings. Concepts like Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) assume special significance.



- Efforts towards attracting more foreign tourists to Kerala should be encouraged because foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) received by the State have got a bearing on the foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) into the State. Concerted actions to improve FTAs into Kerala, and hence generating more than proportionate FEEs, are required jointly by the stakeholders.
- Promoting the less known tourist destinations and projecting them before the world would help to minimize the adverse environmental effects of tourism by reducing ‘overcrowding’.
- Green initiatives like the ‘Green Carpet’ launched by the Dept. of Tourism, GOK should be promoted aggressively, further expanded, and more such initiatives be launched also;
- Last, but not the least in significance, is the utmost thrust that is required to be taken so as to avoid the adverse impact ecotourism on the environment and ecology of the State. So, it is suggested that a ‘Nature first, Development next’ policy be followed in respect of all tourism initiatives, including CBT type ecotourism, so as to ensure their sustainability.

### **Concluding Remarks and Scope for Further Exploration**

In view of the foregoing discussions, it may be noted that CBT type tourism development has got vast development potential in Kerala. Ecotourism and allied nature based tourism models can be meaningfully promoted as CBT initiatives. Focusing on ecotourism initiatives in the vicinity of tribal settlements and such other rural settings is particularly relevant. Many ecotourism initiatives in Kerala, like those associated with Periyar Tiger Reserve, Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, etc. are some examples in this regard. It is noted here that a macro study focusing on ecotourism in Kerala (Manoj, P. K, 2010)[8] and also another empirical study with reference to a particular tourism destination in Kerala (Manoj, P. K, 2010) (a) [9] have both pointed out the utmost need preserving the natural environment for the long term sustainability of tourism projects in the State. From the experience learnt from the existing ecotourism projects, the authorities have to formulate suitable ‘environment-friendly’ policies for tourism development. In respect of the forthcoming projects, i.e. those in the pipeline, due consultation with all the stakeholders is required so as to arrive at a consensus on preserving the natural resources. Needless to mention, as already noted earlier, first priority shall invariably be on preserving the nature viz. the ecology and the environment of the State. This is because of the fact that sustainability of tourism in the State can be ensured only if its natural resources are preserved well. The following are the topics suggested for further exploration of the present study:

- (i) Scope of Community based Ecotourism (CBET) in Kerala – A Conceptual Study
- (ii) Sustainability of Ecotourism Initiatives in Kerala – A Critical Review
- (iii) ‘Green Carpet’ Initiative of the Dept. of Tourism, GOK– Relevance and Progress
- (iv) Sustainability and Other Issues of Responsible Tourism in Kerala: A Critical Study
- (v) Emerging Tourism Models in Kerala – A Study of the Prospects of Cruise Tourism
- (vi) Sustainable and Environment-Friendly Water Transport in Kerala: Some Strategies
- (vii) Solar Powered Water Transport in Kerala: Prospects and Challenges

It may be noted that the topics suggested above focus on the preservation of natural environment and the allied sustainability issues relating to Kerala’s tourism sector. Given the support from the State Government by way of conducive tourism policies, and also the growing concerns on preserving the nature among the stakeholders, let us hope that future tourism initiatives in Kerala will ensure the right balance between ‘Green cover’ and ‘Tourism growth’.



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