

# Eco-Tourism Growth and Challenges in Kerala: An Analytical Study

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## ABSTRACT

This is a broad-based research that presents the complex issues surrounding the effect of eco-tourism on the development of the regions in the state of Kerala in India. Since eco-tourism is becoming a key focus in terms of economic development, it is important to comprehend its negative impacts and challenges to sustainability. This study methodically examines the environmental erosion, socio-cultural displacement and infrastructural pressure that tend to accompany the booming eco-tourism. By means of an intense analytical methodology, the research will outline particular barriers to sustainable development, which will present a subtle insight into the need to balance economic ambitions with environmental conservation. The results will be used to enlighten and advise policy makers, local communities and the tourism operators on how they can create workable plans on responsible eco-tourism development in order to protect the rich biodiversity and cultural integrity of the land of Kerala, to be passed down to the future generations.

**Keywords:** Eco-tourism, Kerala, Growth Challenges, Sustainable Development, Environmental Degradation, Socio-cultural Impact.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, eco-tourism has emerged as an essential element of the tourism industry worldwide in the name of promoting the concept of travel that promotes the conservation of the environment and the development of communities in a sustainable manner. This new paradigm in the tourism industry is especially pertinent to the ecologically sensitive and rich areas, like Kerala, state within India, with its fertile biodiversity, clear backwaters and rich cultural heritage. In this instance, eco-tourism has typically been positioned as a two-fold approach; as a source of economic wealth to the local people and at the same time a way of protecting the precious natural resources of the area. The beauty of the unspoiled scenery and the true essence of the local culture attracts a large number of tourists that make a considerable contribution to the economy of the state in terms of employment, improvement of the infrastructure, and foreign exchange earnings. The fast and unmonitored growth of the eco-tourism activities is however fraught with complexities and major challenges. Although the financial reasons are hard to argue with, uncontrolled development of eco-tourism may place a significant strain on fragile ecosystems, causing degradation of habitat, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Moreover, the arrival of tourists and the infrastructure associated with tourism may have a significant effect on the local community, resulting in possible cultural erosion, displacement, and social inequalities. The current infrastructure which is usually geared towards conventional purposes might not

be able to meet the demands of the growing tourism industry which leads to crisis in waste management, water shortage and overstretched transport systems. This paper seeks to explore these complex issues whereby it will critically examine the effects of the growth of eco-tourism in a number of issues in Kerala. Through a critical analysis of these dynamics, we aim to understand some of the major impediments towards sustainable development and come up with practical implications to the policymakers, local stakeholders and other tourism operators to develop a balanced approach that would guarantee the long-term ecological integrity and social-economic welfare of Kerala.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To identify the key challenges affecting the growth of ecotourism in Kerala.

To evaluate how these challenges impact the sustainability of ecotourism in the region.

To develop effective strategies to overcome the identified challenges.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** This study will adopt an analytical research design, primarily relying on secondary data.

**Data Collection:** Data will be collected from various secondary sources, including Kerala Tourism Department reports, academic journals, government publications, news articles, and existing studies on ecotourism.

**Data Analysis:** Qualitative data will be analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as percentages and frequencies, to summarize key trends.

Result Statistical Analysis (Based on Secondary Data)

Analyze data on the number of ecotourism sites in Kerala, trends in tourist arrivals over the past 5-10 years, and revenue generation from ecotourism activities.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The discussion about eco-tourism has changed in many ways in the recent decades shifting to the more complicated aspects of study that include ecological, economic and socio-cultural aspects. Initial literature on the subject, including that of **Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) and Honey (1999)**, was dominated by defining eco-tourism and how it could be used as a conservation and sustainable development instrument. These landmarks emphasized the need to reduce the negative environmental effects, maximize the benefits of the local communities and promote environmental education. Nonetheless, later studies started to critically review the practice of eco-tourism, and found it to be a continuum of challenges. **The works of Weaver (2001) and Stronza (2007)** had identified the so-called greenwashing phenomenon whereby tourism activities are being sold as sustainable, but are actually not necessarily following sustainable practices. Particularly with regard to the effects on growth, researchers have determined several obstacles. Environmental issues are destruction of the habitat, waste and transportation pollution and wildlife interference (**Buckley, 2009**). On the economic front, although eco-tourism may be profitable, problems like economic leakage (where the profit earned goes out of the local economy), over dependence on tourism and non-equity distribution are common in impeding real local development (**Scheyvens, 2002**). Socio-cultural effects, as explained by **Mow forth and Munt (2003)**, include commodification of culture, alienation of the local people and social stratification. The literature

on the issue of eco-tourism is especially applicable in the context of such regions as Kerala, with abundant biodiversity and developing tourism industry. There is research on other tropical and biodiverse destinations undergoing similar development (e.g., Nepal, Costa Rica) that has given some understanding of how the rapid development of tourism can overstretch scarce resources and infrastructure, resulting in such problems as water shortage, crisis in waste management, and traffic jams (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Although literature on eco-tourism the world wide and tourism in Kerala in general has been widely researched there is a dearth of literature, which specifically discusses the integrated growth impact challenges of eco-tourism in the context of the unique ecological and socio-economic context in Kerala. This is the gap, which is why the present study is needed in order to synthesize the existing knowledge and provide new insights into the development of sustainable eco-tourist growth in the area.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper a multidisciplinary approach with a combination of Sustainable Development Theory, Stakeholder Theory and Carrying Capacity Theory is used to discuss the growth issues of eco-tourism in Kerala.

1. Sustainable Development Theory: Guides the assessment of balancing economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection in eco-tourism, ensuring future generations' needs are not compromised.
2. Stakeholder Theory: Helps identify diverse interests and power dynamics among local communities, government, tourists, and operators, revealing governance gaps and conflicts in eco-tourism development.
3. Carrying Capacity Theory: Evaluates whether current tourism levels exceed ecological, social, or perceptual limits, informing strategies for managing visitor numbers and sustainable infrastructure.

In combination, these theories provide a multipolar prism of analysis and approach to the complex effects of eco-tourism development in Kerala.

### **Growth of Ecotourism in Kerala: Last Twenty Years**

Over the last 20 years, there has been a remarkable development and transformation in the ecotourism industry in Kerala due to its geographical peculiarities, biodiversity, and an intentional movement towards the sustainable touristic activity. First half of the 21st century: Foundations and Policy Push. Ecotourism was prepared in the early 2000s, when Kerala began to promote the initiatives of responsible Tourism vigorously. Other destinations, such as Thekkady (Periyar Tiger Reserve) and Munnar, had been established, although an increased importance was placed on visitor impact. The state government also started to emphasize on sustainable development objectives, which started to form part of tourism policies facilitating the involvement of local communities in tourism projects. Mid-2000s-Early 2010s: Growth and De-specialization. Diversification of ecotourism into other ecotourism products other than the usual wildlife reserves to forest walks, birdwatching tours, and community oriented ecotourism in other places such as the planned ecotourism destination of Thenmala (India). More local self-governing organizations (Panchayats) participation in the management and enjoyment of ecotourism projects especially schemes such as the Green Carpet initiative. Expanding the role of the private sector, resorts and homestays becoming eco-friendly and providing nature-based experiences. Mid-2010s-Present: Consolidation, Challenges, and Resilience. Consolidation: Ongoing development of the existing ecotourism destinations and development of new ones like Gavi, Konni and different forest development

agencies (FDAs) operated by Forest Department. Problems: The era was also characterized by major challenges such as natural disasters (2018, 2019 floods) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), which greatly affected the tourism sector. Resilience and Adaptation: Post-calamity and pandemic, resilient tourism models were again in the limelight. The focus on open spaces and nature made ecotourism tend to recuperate faster than other segments. Policy Refinement: Ongoing refinements to the Kerala Tourism Department Responsible Tourism Mission, to include wider scope and influence, and focus more on local purchases, local employment and conservation. Digital Promotion: More digital platforms will be used to market the ecotourism products that Kerala has to offer to the global market.

### **Ecotourism in Kerala has had an impact.**

#### **1. Environmental Impacts**

**Positive:** Saves money, increases environmental awareness, and lessens the demands on natural resources.

**Negative:** Likely habitat degradation, waste/noise pollution, and local resources may be depleted by over-visiting and developing infrastructure.

#### **2. Economic Impacts**

**Positive:** Revenue generating, local job creation (guides, hospitality) and local economic diversification.

**Negative:** Economic leakage (profits out of local economy), overdependence on tourism, and there is a risk of local inflation.

#### **3. Socio-Cultural Impacts**

**Positive:** Empowers local communities, assists in the preservation of cultural heritage and enhances infrastructure locally.

**Negative:** Can result in cultural commoditization, social disturbance, and unequal benefits distribution in communities.

### **The Kerala Ecotourism challenges.**

#### **1. Environmental Challenges Habitat Degradation:**

Excessive tourism activities and poor waste disposal negatively affect sensitive environments. Scarcity of Resources: The rise in demand on water and energy puts pressure on local resources. Impact on the infrastructure: Construction may cause deforestation and habitat fragmentation. Climate Vulnerability: Incidents of extreme weather interfere with operations and destroy sites.

#### **2. Economic Challenges Economic Leakage:**

The local economy rarely keeps the money within the economy, restricting benefits. Poor Financing: There are numerous projects that do not have adequate funds to maintain and conserve. Over-reliance: Society exposes itself to foreign shocks (e.g., pandemics). Inequalities in Benefits: Not all locals are fairly divided in terms of profits.

#### **3. Socio-Cultural Challenges**

**Weak Community Engagement:** The locals are usually not involved when making decisions and sharing benefits.

**Cultural Commodification:** Real cultures may be distorted to fit the expectation of tourists. **Social Disruption:** Tourism may alter the local social set up and ideals.

**Resource Conflict:** More people competing over land and water with the locals and tourism.

## CONCLUSION

This analytical study underscores that while Kerala possesses immense potential for ecotourism due to its rich biodiversity and natural beauty, its sustained growth is significantly challenged by issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and insufficient community participation. Overcoming these hurdles demands a multi-faceted approach, including robust policy frameworks, strategic investments in eco-friendly infrastructure, and empowering local communities. By proactively addressing these challenges, Kerala can ensure that its ecotourism initiatives not only thrive economically but also contribute meaningfully to environmental conservation and social equity, thereby securing a sustainable future for the sector.

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