

Vagamon Tourism in Kerala- Its Impact on Economy and Environment

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ABSTRACT

Development of tourism has been given a high priority in the economic development programmes of the country since 1980s. The state of Kerala, which is now stylized as 'God's own Country' in the global tourist map, has also accorded it a major position in order to reorient its economic development utilizing its natural green environment. Accordingly, development of tourism in all its variety including "beach tourism", "back water tourism", "village tourism", "ecotourism", "adventure tourism", "monsoon tourism", "heritage tourism", etc., is being promoted in the state. The Vagamon region is largely rural comprising tea plantations, forests and grasslands. The present scenario is pathetically poignant. The naturally formed streams are being blocked and the sudden huge inflow of people in large and medium vehicles that ply on the silken hills have disturbed the natural quiet, have shaken the soil, loosened the rocky structures and disturbed the entire ecology of the area. The objective of this paper is to analyze the economic and environmental impacts of Vagamon tourism and to suggest measures to protect the tourist spot. It also evolves a 'sustainable developmental strategy' of tourism, focusing on the Kerala scenario. The methodology used is both primary and secondary. The local inhabitants of the place were interviewed as the preliminary step. - Data, information and facts projected in the mass media – books, journal, national newspaper, and national seminars as well as in the apex forums of India have been used to analyze the economic and environmental impact of Vagamon tourism.

KEYWORDS: Ecotourism, sustainable development, ecosystem

I. INTRODUCTION

Kerala state situated on the tropical Malabar Coast of southwestern India, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. Named as one of the ten paradises of the world by National Geographic Traveler. Kerala is famous especially for its ecotourism initiatives and beautiful backwaters. Its unique tradition and culture coupled with its varied demography have made Kerala one of the most

popular tourist destinations in the world. Growing at a rate of 13.31%, the tourism industry is a major contributor to the state's economy.

Tourism is an important contributor to the growth of service sector in Kerala. The total revenue (including direct and indirect means) generated from tourism during the year 2015 comes to 26,689.63 crores showing an increase of 7.25 per cent over the last year. During the last decade, the total revenue from tourism registered a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.33 per cent. It grew from 7,738 crores in 2005 to 26,689.63 crores by 2015. The annual growth rate of income from tourism reveals a fluctuating trend between 2005 and 2015. Between 2013 and 2015, a declining tendency of the growth rate was noticed: from 12.22 per cent in 2013 to 7.25 per cent by 2015.

Natural resources are permanent assets of mankind and are not intended to be exhausted in one generation. Vagamon area, of Idukki district of Kerala state is a relatively remote area in sparsely populated region comprising mostly of pristine, unspoiled and natural landscape of a diverse nature. With its rich endemic flora and fauna, the area falls within the Western Ghats, and has been identified as a biodiversity 'hotspot'.

Eco-zones and bio-diversity hotspots have been the basis of diverse cultures and economic regimes. The Vagamon region is largely rural comprising tea plantations, forests and grasslands. The present scenario is pathetically poignant. The naturally formed streams are being blocked and the sudden huge inflow of people in large and medium vehicles that ply on the silken hills have disturbed the natural quiet, have shaken the soil, loosened the rocky structures and disturbed the entire ecology of the area. This paper analyze about the impact of Vagamon tourism on Kerala economy and environment.

Definition of tourism

The definition of tourism was put forward by Mathieson and Wall. According to them tourism is "the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal place of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations and the facilities created to cater to their needs" (Mathieson and Wall, 1982, p. 1)

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the role of tourism in Kerala economy.
2. To explain the concept of Responsible Tourism.
3. To analyze the economic and environmental impact of tourism initiative in Vagamon
4. Make suggestions and recommendations to protect tourist spots in Vagamon.
5. To evolve a 'sustainable developmental strategy' of tourism, focusing on the Kerala scenario

Hypothesis

Major hypotheses of this study are given below.

- i. This study holds that the tourism resource base of Kerala can support a sustainable tourism sector.
- ii. Development of tourism has brought about both positive and negative economic impacts on the local community.
- iii. Sustainable development of Vagamon tourism in Kerala demands a new approach with strategic planning for sustainable development.

Methodology and data base

The methodology followed in this study is both descriptive and analytical to find out the nature of Vagamon tourism development, major components of tourism, economic and environmental impacts of tourism, emerging trends in tourism demand and the sustainable development of tourism in Kerala. . The local inhabitants of the place were interviewed as the preliminary step. - Data, information and facts

projected in the mass media – books, journal, national newspaper, national seminars as well as in the apex forums of India have been used to analyze the economic and environmental impact of Vagamon tourism.

Scope of the study

The study is predominantly exploratory in nature, which gives a bird's eye view of this sector. The study area is limited to certain limits of Kerala state and is focused on that part of geographical region of Kerala. The focus of this study is predominantly to trace the development and potential for Vagamon tourism, the economic and environmental impacts of tourism and to suggest a strategy for the sustainable development of Vagamon tourism in Kerala.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This paper presents a review of literature on tourism at the international and national levels

- The International literature on tourism is quite extensive and well developed (Jafari and Grabum, 1991, p.1). Earliest writings were works sharing the experience of the adventurous voyages taken up by spirited travellers exploring new land and new people, with a missionary zeal.
- United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, 1999a) report to the Secretary General of United Nations briefly explained the economic, social and environmental policy challenges for the tourism industry, governments and international community.
- United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, 1999b) highlighted the need for local authority perspective for tourism and sustainable development of tourism.
- Government of Kerala (GOK, 1999) explained the concept of ecotourism, ecotourism resources, potential of ecotourism in Kerala and ecotourism policy guidelines of India.

Positive aspects of Tourism

- Tourism is a socio economic phenomenon which has become the world's largest and fastest growing industry. The major advantages of tourism can be explained under the following heads.
- Employment
- Tourism creates jobs, both through direct employment within the tourism industry and indirectly in sectors such as retail and transportation. By creating alternative sources of employment, tourism reduces problems such as over-fishing, and deforestation in developing nations
- Revenue
 - It generates extra tax revenues like airport and hotel taxes.
- Infrastructure
- Tourism will result the improvements in infrastructure and leisure amenities.
- Culture
- Tourism encourages the preservation of traditional customs, handicrafts and festivals. The interchanges between hosts and guests create a better cultural understanding between the guests and hosts..
- Environmental Tourism (eco-tourism) helps to promote conservation of wildlife and natural resources like rain forests.

Negative aspects of Tourism

The impact of tourism and tourists on both the manmade and natural environment proves to be quite harmful. Tourism is in a conflict with environment. The major disadvantages of tourism are as follows:

- Jobs created by tourism are often seasonal and poorly paid, yet tourism can push up local property prices and the cost of goods and services.
- Interaction with tourists leads to an erosion of traditional cultures and values.

- It will increase pollution through traffic emissions, littering, increased sewage production and noise.
- It leads to the destruction of natural beauty through construction of tourist resorts, hotels etc.
- Tourism can cause a greater risk of crime.

Relevance of the study

As tourism emerged as a panacea for economic development in almost all the developing nations, the ruling authorities are permitting the tourism activities without any thinking. As a result, the negative effects which mentioned in the above paragraph will be more than that of positive effects. After realizing this certain governments' introduced innovative tourism practices here and there. Responsible Tourism initiative launched in Kerala in the year 2008 is one such example. So it is the most relevant topic in tourism research.

Limitations of the Study

1. Since this study is wide, time was a major constraint in this work.
2. In the case of data collection, non-co-operation of informants was another constraint.
3. Language was another constraint in the case of data collection from foreign tourists.

Economic Impact of Tourism

According to the 2016 "Report on the Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism Industry" at the global level by the World Travel and Tourism Council, the total contribution of the sector to the global economy in 2015 was US\$7.2 trillion (at 2015 prices) and 9.8 per cent of the world GDP. In GDP growth terms, the Travel and Tourism sector outperformed several other major economic sectors, including manufacturing and retail with annual growth rate of 3.1 per cent in 2015. In terms of employment, in 2015, the Travel and Tourism sector supported 284 million jobs, or 1 in 11 of all jobs in the world. In employment growth terms, the Travel and Tourism sector surpassed various other select industries in 2015, including the financial services, education and health care sectors. The total contribution of Travel and Tourism to employment grew by 2.6 per cent in 2015 registering the creation of 7.2 million new jobs through direct, indirect and induced activities.

Share in Employment (in per cent)			
Country/ State	Direct Impact	Indirect + Induced Impact	Total Impact
India	4.4	5.8	10.2
Kerala	9.9	13.6	23.5

Allocation and Expenditure on Tourism in the State Plan over Various Plan Periods, in lakhs

Year	State Funding	Union Funding	Total
2011-12	182.49	23.75	206.24
2012-13	180.53	78.26	258.79
2013-14	214.89	34.67	249.56

2014-15	245.36	0.00	245.36
2015-16	230.45	99.34	329.79

Vagamon Tourism

A case study was taken up on the inroads into the topography and ecology of this predominantly grassland area by the emerging tourism industry and associated activities. Eco-zones and bio-diversity hotspots have been the basis of diverse cultures and economic regimes. The Vagamon region is largely rural comprising tea plantations, forests and grasslands. The present scenario is pathetically poignant. The naturally formed streams are being blocked and the sudden colossal inflow of people in large and medium vehicles that ply on the silken hills have disturbed the natural quiet, have shaken the soil, loosened the rocky structures and disturbed the entire ecology of the area. The farming community slowly disappeared from the shrinking grasslands. The labyrinth of unsettled legal and administrative disputes over the nature of land in Vagamon region – whether it was forest, grass, waste or barren land – began as early as 1940s. The Tourism Department of Kerala Government owned 762 hectares of land at Vagamon of which 150 hectares were forest land. Today it appears to have been illegally enclosed by barbed wire fencing. Who has done it, for whom and for what purpose have no answer.

Environmental Issues

Several private tourism players have encroached with or without permission the rich grasslands and sholas and also some of the tea plantations for their business promotion. They apparently have begun indiscriminate constructions on the natural grassland eco-systems, claiming that it is wasteland. The importance of Vagamon is its eco-system, biodiversity, weather and scenic beauty. It is a National Heritage. Any damage or infringement caused will amount to violation of people's right to enjoy their life and a tantamount scar on the sustainable climatology of the whole region

Land Encroachment

Ministry of Environment & Forest, Government of India where as it is mandatory for the use of forest land for any other purpose. The Supreme Court of India, on many occasions, has made it clear that no such intrusion of the land would be permissible with out proper clearances. The northern part of Vagamon is more mountainous and with the Idukki reservoir on one side. The southern part covers fabulous rolling grassland ecosystem, cliffs, and also the scenic views of the plains of Kottayam. In 1987, 440 hectares of Government land was handed over to the forest department for afforestation of which 20 hectares of pine trees are visibly present. The Kerala Government in 1965 gave 1102 hectares of land to the Indo-Swiss Project. This land was subsequently handed over to the Kerala Livestock Development and Milk Marketing Board (KLD MM Board). The KLD MM Board, then, handed over 440 hectares of its and for forestation in order to compensate the forests felled for Karappara, Kallada Chimmony and Kuriyarkutty hydro-electric projects. Extensive planting of exotic trees was done here. As per records of Peerumedu taluk office, the land owned by KLD MM Board were encroached by private settlers who invaded 193.08 hectares of land. The Kerala Agricultural University purchased the and from KLD MM Board during the year 1998–2000 under the pretext of shifting the Dairy Science College from Mannuthy to Kolahalamedu.

Encroached public lands in Vagamon.

Further, there is nothing on paper to satisfy a clearance from the

A portion of this land had encroachments by certain private individuals with the silent approval of those concerned. The idea of shifting the College was conveniently and dubiously shelved by the concerned authorities. The then Minister for Forests in Kerala Government made a statement in the State Legislative Assembly admitting that the Forest Department had at present only 255 hectares of land at

Vagamon. He also informed the Assembly that 21 hectares of land was taken by individuals in possession and that it was not possible to recover the land from them. The Minister was wrong as the alienated land was much more and there has not been any single, honest attempt from the part of the Government to evacuate the invaders. Furthermore, two of the lakes that originally belonged to a Government-owned project were encroached by private lobbies with the connivance of those in authority. Above all there is a strong evidence of political links and family connections between the invaders and those who ought to have taken action against the invaders.

Mushrooming resorts

We have visited five resorts under construction; two of them are partly completed, in the region during the study. Hundreds of visitors from different parts of the country, who include families that visit Vagamon on week-end, small or larger groups of young people who visit for merry making, tourists who camp at various hotels or resorts in the nearby towns or cities, and, of course, young couples pairs make their holidays in the exotic and gorgeous weather of Vagamon.

Biodiversity of Vagamon: From melody to malady

Over half of India's natural forests have vanished. One third of the wet-lands are drained. 70% of water bodies are polluted. 40% of mangroves are destroyed and almost all the grasslands of the country are invaded for agriculture and tourism development, which is also an alarming situation. Satellite images shocked the nation with the fact that the Indian forest has come down to a meager 17% and, out of that 12% remains primary. The deterioration and death of grasslands go largely un-recorded. If it were not in India, these grasslands would have been considered as national heritage as they are considered exceptionally diverse ecosystem all over the world. Vagamon was a virgin, pristine forest eco-system till recently.

In 1940, 86000 hectares of high -ranges were ear marked for plantations. There started the deterioration of the ecosystem of Vagamon. There were encroachments in the region from as early as n the year1950 at Vagamon. There was no re-survey in the region for the last 50 years.

12,500 ha of Vagamon remained an abode of many precious flora and fauna. The foot-hills that were rich in bio-diversity contain "humus" which is a golden storehouse for many small life forms and micro-organisms. It is from these foothills Meenachilar and Manimalayar take their origin as visible streams. The climate of Vagamon has been shaped by this unique eco-system, floristically and faunistically, profound and prosperous. Out of the 5000 floristic varieties in theregion, 2000 are endemic. This proves that there are 2000 microclimates existing in these rolling grasslands. Small holders in the agricultural sector who thrived in this region of blissful ambiance are moving to the so-called "endangered status"

Greenland as Waste Land

The grasslands in Vagamon are deliberately and capriciously labeled as 'waste lands'. This could not be a casual mistake, it was intended in order to facilitate for encroachment of the land. Since the grasslands are on laterite soil hills, any damage to the grassland eco-system creates serious inroads into the mere existence of these natural heritages and will lead to severe soil erosions and landslides. The scientific community believes that one third of the floristic heritage is in grasslands. The 35 tea estates have already done damages to the ecosystem. The wetlands and sholas are being drained, cleared and filled at an alarming pace. The marshes that act as 'sponge' by absorbing and storing water are fast vanishing. The water- absorbed humus is disappearing. Thus the wet eco-system in these grasslands is also at an impasse. This will lead to very severe water famine in the Vagamon area. We were told by the residents of the place that there existed severe and acute water scarcity from December to June, every year.

Tourism Industry

The new entrepreneurs and investors in the region in hotel industry and tourism promotion will obviously have to go for alternate source of water for their customers. Needless to say, they would prefer bore wells. Remember, the Vagamon region is the catchments area of Idukki dam. Anyone who has little knowledge about the dam would say that it could be suicidal to permit bore wells in a dam site. The chances are very high for earthquakes, landslides and draught rampantly. The artificial lake created by blocking a stream that feeds the Meenachil river.

Flora of Vagamon

The Vagamon hills are characterized by typical grassland ecosystem. 200 varieties of grasses have been reported, 30 were endemic to the high ranges. The waterlogged downhill join between the grassland hills. 170 endemic orchids are reported from this zone. 28 very specific herbs are also located here. A list of endemic and rare herbs and plants and trees, the team identified in the sensitive zone, are appended here to (Table 1). The exotic trees are planted by the forest department as part of different projects to compensate the forest land utilized for many hydel projects in the state. The pine trees as part of these so-called 'afforestation' programmes have invaded the endemic plant life of this region. Now, when the whole world is concerned about the conservation of endemic flora and fauna it is the right time to think about certain exotics, which have become a real menace and threat to the local natives.

Water and Soil Situations

The hydrological cycle is an ecological process. Streams, aquifers and rivers are originated and shaped by water absorbed and discharged by the eco-system on all seasons. Grasslands and shola forests have greater significance as protectors and providers of water sources. (Methew 1987). 1959 Decline of the inherent capability of soils, soil erosion, clay mining reclamation of land, lack of water and natural vagaries are some of the prime physical factors responsible for this scenario. (Chattopadhyay and though they are not directly applicable in the present situation, the utility for human consumption, the micro-biological status, chemical and physical aspects and the radiological assay of water available at Vagamon hillocks had to be scientifically tested.

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encroachment of the land. Since the grasslands are on laterite soil hills, any damage to the grassland eco-system creates serious inroads into the mere existence of these natural heritages and will lead to severe soil erosions and landslides. The scientific community believes that one third of the floristic heritage are in grasslands. The 35 tea estates have already done damages to the ecosystem. The wetlands and sholas are being drained, cleared and filled at an alarming pace. The marshes that act as 'sponge' by absorbing and storing water are fast vanishing. The water absorbed humus is disappearing. Thus the wet eco-system in these grasslands is also at an impasse. This will lead to very severe water famine in the Vagamon area. Jananeethi team was told by the residents of the place that there existed severe and acute water scarcity from December to June, every year. The new entrepreneurs and investors in the region in hotel industry and tourism promotion will obviously have to go for alternate source of water for their customers. Needless to say, they would prefer bore wells. Remember, the Vagamon region is the catchments area of Idukki dam. Anyone who has little knowledge about the dam, would say that it could be suicidal to permit bore wells in a dam site. The chances are very high for earthquakes, landslides and draught rampantly.

WE RECOMMEND AND WE PLEAD

- Vagamon region should be declared a National Heritage area and it should not be disturbed by construction works, what so ever.
- The Eco-system of the grasslands and the bio-diversity of the region should be protected. There must be a Vagamon Protection Council and half of the seats must be reserved for representatives of local inhabitants and the rest of the seats to be shared by Government nominees, human rights activists, voluntary organizations etc.
- Mass tourism in Vagamon region must be discouraged. The area is not ideal for mass tourism. The havoc created by mass tourism will only destroy the whole eco-system of the region and its bio-diversity.
- Steams and water sources of the region should in no way be disturbed or blocked. The present encroachers of the water sources should be held liable for the damage caused and civil wrongs committed.
- Religious shrines, monuments and pilgrim centres should not be encouraged in the region and that religious communities should not be permitted to put up religious structures on the road side or using common space.
- Use of plastics in the region should be banned. Consumption of alcohol should not be permitted in public places.
- Maintenance of law and order and guarding of social tranquillity should be ensured in the region.
- Hotels and Rest houses in Peermade, Thekkady, Munnar, Erattupetta and Palai will provide enough accommodation for the tourists who would like to visit Vagamon. Transit to the region from these locations is within the reach. The terrain and the exotic eco-system of the region need not be disturbed for construction works.

III. CONCLUSION

Referring to man's right to development, Charles Darwin says:- "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us". The purpose of Development as the Cocoyoc Declaration has emphasised, should not be to develop things, but to develop every human being. Nevertheless with few notable exceptions, development has been pragmatic, at the multiplication of and insatiable chase for material wealth. Development must be designed, even at the humblest level, as a process of ensuring the advancement of man/woman through his/her endeavours, says UNESCO.

Development must be aimed at the social, cultural, spiritual, and material advancement of the whole human being, both as a member of society and from the point of view of individual fulfilment. In the case of Vagamon, the fundamental thesis of Development has greatly been distorted by perverted political and administrative minds and the ultramodern predilections and sensual pursuits based on the misnomer of tourism that drugs our entire society

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