Tourism industry has steadily acquired an increasingly significant position in the global economy. A naive impression of it may illustrate the industry, merely as a provider of basic facilities with a view to meet the expectations and perceptions of the tourists. A closer look would, however, reveal that, it incorporates and entails a whole set of complex factors and forces. Tourism promotes people-to-people contacts, ethnic cultural understanding, mutual appreciation and co-operation, thereby propagates peace. The development of tourism depends on various factors such as attraction, accommodation, transportation, recreation, restaurants, shopping, hospitality, safety and security, attitude of the host community, tourist destinations and so on.

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2011) reports that in 2010, the contribution of travel and tourism to the world GDP was about 9 per cent, whereas, its total employment effect was more than 235 million jobs, which amounts to 8 per cent of global employment. Further, the employment effect of international tourism appears to be optimistic in the medium for long-term. According to the UNWTO forecasts, the sector is expected to provide nearly 296 million jobs by 2019 given that there would be sustained growth of global tourist arrivals and the major economies maintain their momentum.

In India, tourism has been gaining popularity with the active involvement of Government and other promotional agencies. India, with its diverse culture and
geographic areas and its relatively low cost man-power is suitable for the development of the industry. Tourism in India is growing well as it is evident from the tourism statistics.

Kerala, a State situated on the tropical Malabar Coast of South-Western India, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. Named as one of the "ten paradies of the world" and "50 places of a lifetime" by the National Geographic Traveller, Kerala is famous especially for its ecotourism. Its unique culture and traditions, coupled with its varied demography, has made Kerala one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Growing at a rate of 10 per cent, the tourism industry is a major contributor to the State’s economy. Today, Kerala tourism is a global super brand and regarded as one of the destinations with highest brand recall. In 2010, Kerala attracted 0.66 million foreign tourists and 8.6 million domestic tourists. There is an increase of 18 per cent in foreign tourists and 9 per cent in domestic tourist arrivals when compared to the previous year (Tourism Statistics, Government of Kerala) thus making it one of the fastest growing tourism destinations in the world. The State’s tourism agenda promotes ecologically sustained tourism, which focuses on the local culture, wilderness adventures, volunteering and personal growth of the local population. Efforts are taken to minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. The most significant contribution of tourism is the creation of employment in rural areas by stimulating local art, handicrafts and folklore. Tourism employs 10 per cent of total workforce and also contributes 5 million US Dollar annually as foreign exchange to the State (Economic Review, Government of Kerala). Major tourism destinations in the State include beaches, hill stations, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and the backwaters.
Forests have been a source of wonder and inspiration for human societies and cultures since time immemorial. Our fascination for these unique wilderness areas has been partly based on their remoteness and inaccessibility. Yet, today, the elements that attract people to hills – clean air, diverse landscapes, rich biodiversity, and unique cultures – are under threat, partly because of poorly managed and non-sustainable tourism. Travel to hill areas, which already attract up to 20 per cent of global tourism, is increasing rapidly. The investment, operational and managerial decisions of tour operators, other tourism professionals and the wider industry are helping to determine the level of both negative and positive impacts of tourism in mountain environments. Forests are second only to coasts and islands as popular tourism destinations, generating 20 per-cent of annual global tourism income. While modern forms of transportation have made even remote hill areas accessible to increasing numbers of visitors, Eco-tourism tends to be very unevenly distributed, with a small proportion of locations having significant tourism infrastructure.

Eco-tourism is one of the fast growing tourism sectors in Kerala, contributing 30 per cent of the total revenue from tourism sector (Tourism Statistics, Government of Kerala). Eastern Kerala consists of land encroached upon by the Western Ghats; the region thus includes high mountains, gorges and deep-cut valleys. The wildest lands are covered with dense forests, while other regions lie under tea and coffee plantations or other forms of cultivation. The Western Ghats rise on average to 1500 metres elevation above sea level. Certain peaks may reach to 2800 metres. The Kerala Eco-tourism sites offer pleasant and pleasurable diversions that range from going on hiking, biking,
trekking and hill climbing tours, wildlife safaris to the numerous wildlife sanctuaries located on the hills.

**Statement of the problem**

Eco-tourism in India is still at a very nascent stage, but there are sure conscious efforts to save the fragile Kerala Eco-tourism/biodiversity which is probably one of the finest in India.

For making the Kerala economy more vibrant there is a need for strengthening various sectors having good potentiality. Tourism particularly Eco-tourism is one of the promising sectors in the economy of Kerala to bring economic development. In Kerala naturally there are many attractions available to mobilise tourists in the state and to generate income.

Even though Eco-tourism offers various opportunities and promises, it possesses some shortcomings too. Scarcity of the ancillary service and facilities, protest from environmentalists and local communities are some of the hurdles confronted by the Eco-tourism industry. This sector is not in a position to meet the increasing demand of the tourists. In this context, the researcher tries to identify the potentiality of Kerala as an eco-tourist centre and to evaluate the shortcomings to attract more customers. It is also relevant to examine the various issues confronted by the tourists in the state of Kerala, since their overall satisfaction is highly essential for marketing the destinations and for the state to achieve its overall economic growth.
In the area of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation, the customer is the King who determines the success or failure of any industry. Here also tourists are customers. Hence their opinion, taste, interests, spending pattern and preferences are to be identified in the right perspective to provide better facilities that optimise the satisfaction of tourists. The present study in this direction is to identify the expectations of tourists and their satisfaction levels.

The absence of clear and well defined Eco-tourists related policies and effective monitoring are some of the most important challenges. Poor quality of facilities and services will also hamper the image of the state even at international scene. The present study is conducted in these backgrounds and it anticipates that the results of the study will be highly useful to the state tourism policy makers for further refinement which in turn will help to increase the prospects of Eco-tourism growth in the state.

Scope of study

The state of Kerala in India is considered as a ‘tourist paradise’. As many as seventy five tourism products are found in the length and breadth of this tourism state. Tourism in Kerala is really non-seasonal in nature. The flagship of tourism industry in Kerala is Department of Tourism (DoT), Government of Kerala. The budgetary allocation for the department for the year 2002-2003 is Rs: 50 crore. Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), Bakel Resorts Development Corporation(BRDC),Tourist Resort (Kerala) Ltd (TRKL), District Tourism Promotion Councils (DTPCs), Kerala Institute of Travel and Tourism Management Studies (KITTS), Kerala Institute of Hospitality Management Studies ( KIHMS), Thenmala Eco-
Tourism Development Agency, and a host of Government departments such as Forests and Wildlife, Irrigation, Museum, Zoo and Archaeology are the other important state sponsored institutions which play key role in the tourism sector of Kerala. Considering the vast and varied potential of tourism in the state and its impact on the economic, social and cultural environment of the state, a detailed study is found to be relevant and imperative.

Besides there are a number of agencies working in the semi-government and private sector for the promotion of tourism in Kerala. So, deep studies are necessary to ascertain whether the optimum management potential is made use of the above units. Moreover, based on the above study the strategic management principles and methods to be adopted by the tourism industry in Kerala can also be worked out for implementation in the years to come. This study has been made to analyse the problems and prospects of tourism in Kerala and to manage tourism by effectively employing new management strategies. Being, a great state with favourable climate, and natural surroundings, Kerala can make rapid strides in the tourism sector. The study covers the views expressed by various informants representing government, semi-government, private institutions and that of tourists.

**Significance of the study**

There are many economic benefits other than those commonly associated with tourism. Tourism can also have a positive impact on regional development, and may help to even out some of the inequalities between different parts of a given country. Regions which do not have access to some major resources or do not have major urban centres
may be able to use tourism to improve regional income and reduce the exodus in search of employment. It has also been suggested that tourism encourages entrepreneurship and the development of new small scale business enterprises, particularly among groups who might not have easy access to formal labour markets. Special interest tourism, because of its being at a relatively early stage of development, is thought to be particularly conducive to entrepreneurial activity. Such entrepreneurial activity can range from specialised tour and guiding services to manufacturing local handicrafts. In this context, a study on the hills, - which have been isolated from the plane lands for several decades,- as tourism destinations, with special thrust on the facilities provided for the tourists and also the impact of tourism on the host community, is very much significant. It is hoped that the present study would be beneficial to tourists, host community, service providers and also the government and other tourism promotion agencies for formulating suitable policy decisions for the betterment of eco-tourism.

Objectives

The main objectives of the proposed study are:

1. To identify the various eco-tourism activity centres in Kerala.

2. To find out the various eco-tourism activities in the above centres.

3. To assess the various problems faced by the tourists visiting the above centres.

4. To evaluate the overall satisfaction level of tourists visiting the above destinations
5. To assess economic benefits obtained by other businesses due to eco-tourism activity in the state.

6. To assess the potentiality of Kerala to promote eco-tourism.

7. To develop ways and means for further strengthening of eco-tourism centres in the state.

**Hypothesis**

1. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism provides an enjoyable place to the tourists.

2. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism benefit to the economy.

3. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism protects flora and fauna of the destinations.

4. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism contributes awareness to the community.

5. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism does not need to visitor education.

6. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism creates damages to the ecology.

7. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that there is strict enforcement of rules in eco-tourism destinations.
8. Not more than one half of the tourists viewed that eco-tourism leads to congestion to the destinations.

**Methodology**

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data are collected from the tourists who are visiting the eco-tourism projects in Kerala by using an interview schedule. The secondary data are collected and compiled from various sources such as official publications of tourism department, District Tourism promotional Council, Magazines, Journals, Newspapers and various Websites, Research studies etc.

For the purpose of the study and for collecting primary data, the entire state of Kerala is divided into three destinations where three eco-tourism projects are located. The places selected for intensive study is Neyyar eco-tourism project in Thiruvananthapuram, Thenmala eco-tourism project in Kollam and Wayanad eco-tourism project in Wayanad. These districts are proposed to be selected considering the presence of eco-tourism projects. It is also assumed that tourists concentrate more on these centres, which have ample facilities and amenities to attract them. Since the total number of tourists, especially tourists visiting the eco-tourism project is large, a sample of four hundred respondents is proposed to be selected randomly so as to ensure a large sample for the conduct of the study. From equally, hundred and fifty respondents are again classified on the basis of their age such as young people, middle aged people and old aged people, constituting fifty respondents each from each of these categories. The
collected data is compiled and analysed using suitable quantitative and non-quantitative methods to bring out the views of the respondents.

**Chapterisation**

The proposed study consists of seven chapters.

1. The first chapter of the study is Introduction.
2. The second chapter is Review of literature.
3. The third chapter is an overview of the eco-tourism destinations in Kerala.
4. The fourth chapter is an analysis of personal preference of eco-tourists.
5. The fifth chapter is Opportunities of eco-tourism in Kerala.
6. The sixth chapter is Challenges of eco-tourism in Kerala.
7. The seventh chapter contains the summery of findings, suggestions and conclusions.

**Limitations of the study**

The limitations which influenced the study are listed below:

1. The co-operation of respondents is very much required for a survey based research. The co-operation of a few respondents did not come up to the expectations.
2. The secondary data published by the various publications on a particular aspect are found to be different.
3. The primary data collected from the host community might not be accurate as they provide them from their memory.
4. A few respondents were reluctant to provide information regarding income, costs etc., doubting whether the investigation was from the government departments.
5. In a few cases, the host community and the domestic tourists took a negative approach in their response to the interview schedule and in a few other cases, despite strenuous efforts, it was found difficult to locate foreign tourists.
References:


2. United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)

3. ’50 places of a life time’ by National Geographic Traveller.


5. Economic review, Government of Kerala

6. Department of Tourism, government of Kerala- 2002-2003

7. Kerala Tourism Development Corporation. (KTDC)

8. Bakel Resorts Development Corporation. (BRDC)

9. Tourism Resort (Kerala) Ltd. (TRKL)

10. District Tourism Promotion Councils. (DTPCs)

11. Kerala Institute of Travel and Tourism Management Studies

12. Kerala Institute of Hospitality Management Studies (KIHMS)

13. Thenmala eco-tourism Development Agency. (TEDA)