Chapter - IV

Eco -Tourism in Tamil Nadu

*Traveling in the company of those we love is home in motion*

- Leigh Hurt

India has attractive natural and cultural tourist attractions. There are landlocked mountainous regions, lush valleys and plains, arid desert regions, white sandy beaches and islands. The geographical diversity of India makes it home to wealth of eco-systems, which are well protected and preserved. These eco-systems have become the major resources for eco-tourism. Biosphere reserves are multi purpose protected areas for preservation of the genetic diversity and the integrity of plants, animals and micro-organism in respective ecosystems. India is very rich in biotic as well as abiotic resources. If offers enormous potential for utilizing natural resources like landscapes, mountains, beaches, rivers etc., for the economic benefit of the population.¹

Of the 3T’s – Technology, Telecommunication and Tourism, the Tourism industry plays a vital role in the global economy. It is the largest export industry and it is the largest single item in the world’s foreign trade. India is known for her warmth and friendliness to all visitors without any partiality. The country’s cultural heritage, colourful climate, varied life styles, rolling meadows, icy cold glaciers, racing rivers, exotic orchids etc., are the tourist attractions.²

The concept of Eco-tourism has been already introduced in India and some planned approaches are being done for its establishment. The Government of India has also taken initiatives for the promotion of eco-tourism in India. The following are the guidelines initiated and developed by it.

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**Eco-Tourism Guidelines for India:**

The set of guidelines and policies for the development of eco-tourism is the result of the initiatives taken by the Ministry of Tourism in pursuance of Government policy to achieve sustainability in tourism development and ensure regulated growth of eco-tourism with its positive impacts of analyzing various documents and papers available on the subject, including the:


b. PATA (Pacific Area Travel Association) code for environmentally responsible Tourism.


d. The Himalayan Codes of conduct prepared by the Himalayan Tourism Advisory Board.

e. Eco-tourism guidelines by Eco-tourism society.

The Ministry has a committee comprising of experts and eco-tourism promoters to deliberate on the issues to prepare basic papers for the formulation of an eco-tourism policy. The contribution of this committee headed by Mr. Chuder Tshering Misra, Joint Secretary, as well as deliberations of the Himalayan Tourism Advisory Board in preparation of these guidelines has been substantial. The draft was discussed in a workshop organized on 26th June 1997, which was attended by representatives of state governments, tourism industry associations and experts in the field of environment. The suggestions made were incorporated and the State Tourism Ministers in the Tourism Minister’s Conference held on 27th June 1997 approved the final draft. It identifies the eco-tourism resources of the country and lays down the need for a specialized, participatory, policy planning approach for the development of eco-tourism

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destinations. It also stipulates the role to be played by the stakeholders such as the government, the tour operators, the destination managers, the tourists, the host community and the voluntary organizations.⁴

The national parks and wildlife sanctuaries have been assiduously promoted as ecotourism attractions. The National Tourism Policy of 2002 clearly states that wildlife sanctuaries and national parks need to be integrated as an integral part of India tourism product and priority needs to be given to the preparation of site and visitor management plans for key parks after prioritization of parks.⁵

According to the Eco-Tourism guidelines proposed by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the local communities will monitor the activities of tour operators to ensure that they do not cause disturbance to animals while taking visitors to the protected area. Furthermore, the state governments will levy a ‘local conservation cess’ is to be decided by the states and the money thus collected will fund, protected area management, conservation and local livelihood development.⁶

As a major segment of Indian tourism, eco-tourism is given importance in publicity and promotion. The places being developed for eco-tourism are given publicity through print and electronic media.

**Eco-Tourism in Tamil Nadu:**

The resource potential of Tamil Nadu in tourism is so rich that it attracts all kinds of tourists with varying degree of motivations. Be it cultural, scenic, wildlife etc., Tamil Nadu has all this in its repertoire as a tourist destination. Most importantly, the geographical location has made it, a tourist destination.

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⁴ Abilash Mallya, op.cit., p.39.
⁵ Equations, Equitable Tourism Options, Bangalore, 2008.
⁶ The Hindu, 4th June, 2011.
Tamil Nadu has a spectrum of scenic landscapes, pristine forests and wildlife reserves and a rich cultural heritage. A combination of sun kissed beaches, tropical climate, serene hill resorts, friendly people and ancient culture make Tamil Nadu an ideal holiday destination. Nested between the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, Tamil Nadu has a coastline of about 1076 kms which is the third largest in the country. As per the 2002 Bureau of Indian standards (BIS) map, Tamil Nadu falls in a region of low seismic hazard Zone.  

Tamil Nadu, with its varied geography and climatic zones offers several areas to enjoy the scenic, aesthetic, socio-cultural and educational aspects of nature in its pristine condition. These include some of the highest peaks in South India such as Doddbetta, the coastal plains and mangrove areas such as Muthupet and Pichavaram. Forests constitute approximately 17.59% of the state’s geographical area of 1.3 lakh sq.km. The State is also a home to five national parks, eight sanctuaries and twelve bird sanctuaries. Tamil Nadu has two biosphere reserves namely, the Nilgiris and the Gulf of Mannar. Mudumalai, originally spread over 6.2 sq.km is the first wildlife sanctuary to be declared as early as 1940. The extent of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve now is 321 sq.km. It is one of the oldest sanctuaries of India. Anamalai Tiger Reserve at Anamalai is the largest protected area in the state which spreads over 958 sq.km. Both these Reserves are now being brought under the ‘Project Tiger’ of Government of India. While Mudumalai and Anaimalai Tiger Reserves are internationally famous for their rich and endemic wildlife. 

Anamalai Tiger Reserve near Pollachi in Coimbatore district can be reached through Topslip in Anamalai Hills on the Western Ghats.

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Mudumalai Tiger Reserve is located on the foothills of Nilgiri Hills. The Moyyar river in this region forms a series of spectacular cascades on its way. This Reserve is situated at a distance of 65 kms away from Udhagamandalam and it is located along the Udhagamandalam-Mysore highway.\(^9\)

Kalakkadu and Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve are situated in an area of 895 sq.kms in Tirunelveli district including the foothills of Western Ghats and the adjoining area. It is also declared as Project Tiger Reserve. It holds the distinction of being the southern most habitat for wild tigers in India. In addition to tiger and elephant, important wildlife harbouring the protected areas in the Western Ghats include gaur or Indian bison, sloth bear, Nilgiri langur, lion-tailed macaque and slender Loris. Besides a host of other significant flora and fauna, these forest areas are dotted with lush green shoals, perennial streams, beautiful lakes and picturesque villages offering a haven of opportunities for eco tourists and nature lovers. The State also has other areas such as zoological parks, elephant camps etc., to enrich the experience of the tourists.\(^10\)

The United Nations Organisation celebrated the International Year of Eco-tourism in 2002. Eco-tourism is considered the fastest growing market in the tourism industry. According to the World Tourism Organisation, eco-tourism is growing at the rate of 5\% worldwide and represents 6\% of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In countries such as Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar, eco-tourism represents a significant portion of their Gross Domestic Product. India, which is attracting about 30 lakhs tourists a year, has been ranked as the 9\(^{th}\) top tourist destination in the world. Of this, one third visit Tamil Nadu, giving it the second position in terms of attracting foreign tourists. In respect of domestic tourists, Tamil Nadu ranks third among all the states, next to Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, attracting about 300 lakhs of them in a year.

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\(^9\) *Eco-Tourism Policy of Tamil Nadu*, op.cit., pp.37, 39.

\(^10\) *Forest Management in Tamil Nadu*, op.cit., p.193.
While a 10% growth is observed in general tourism, the tourism industry estimates, indicate a 30% growth potential in eco-tourism.\textsuperscript{11}

The rich wildlife, unique foresting sites and varied habitats hold immense eco-tourism potential. Eco-tourism helps to boost the local village economy besides providing healthy leisure and recreational facilities to the visiting tourists.

Eco-tourism has been given a big thrust in Tamil Nadu since 2007. The state has come up with a new branding. ‘Enchanting Tamil Nadu, Experience yourself’. The idea behind this new campaign is to make the tourist experience and cherish their experience of visiting Tamil Nadu to give them the holistic feel of having been in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{12}

Tamil Nadu Tourism has been taking ceaseless efforts for the promotion of eco-tourism. It is the responsibility of the local populace towards fragile eco-system, best practices and caring the guests towards culture, conventions and customs to avoid exploitation. Tamil Nadu Tourism is promoting eco-balance activities in all tourists’ spots. As a part of its efforts, a separate Eco-tourism wing is functioning in the Directorate of Tourism, Chennai.\textsuperscript{13} This wing has been established on 19\textsuperscript{th} October 2009 in Tamil Nadu Tourism headed by a senior officer of Indian Forest Service.\textsuperscript{14}

Trekking tours were organized by the TTDC through Eco-Tourism Wing to Shervarayan Hills (Yercaud) Topslip Aazliyar, Thirusoolam Hills and Kelly Hills. The TTDC operates these tours to inculcate high achievement motivation in the young minds and profit is not given priority while performing them. The participants were able to

\textsuperscript{11} Anon, A Proposal for Development of Eco-Tourism in Tamil Nadu, Tamil Nadu Forest Department, Chennai.
\textsuperscript{12} Tamil Nadu Tourism, Enchanting Tamil Nadu, Brand India-2007, Department of Tourism, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai.
\textsuperscript{13} News Letter, Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation, April 2010, p.7.
\textsuperscript{14} Policy Note, 2009-10, Tourism and Culture, Department of Tourism, p.11.
appreciate nature and the need to conserve it. Eco-tourism wing is also taking steps to provide, ‘Tree Top Houses’ in wildlife sanctuaries in Tamil Nadu. It has been proposed to have a shelf of projects to give a fillip to the promotion of eco-tourism in the state.

The Eco-tourism wing has drafted an elaborate eco-tourism policy in consultation with the Environment and Forest Department. The State Government Eco-tourism Policy of 2010 envisages major role for local communities in its implementation.

Policies are dynamic in nature reflecting the emerging perspectives and techniques of development. Therefore, policy formulation, benefits from guidelines brought out at different times, at different governance levels and by different agencies. Nevertheless, it is realized that eco-tourism is a vast business domain having wide repercussions and its policies need to reflect state-specific needs and imperatives. A well devised policy formulates national, regional and local eco-tourism policies and development strategies that are consistent with the overall objectives of sustainable development.

The key players are government, developers / operators and suppliers, visitors, host community, NGO’s and research institutions and the policy prescribes operational guidelines for these key players. The policy defines eco-tourism with a clear conservation bias. It lays out the importance of involvement of local communities, minimizing the conflicts between livelihoods and tourism, environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacities. It also perceives that eco-tourism should be a part of development of an area. It emphasizes the role of careful planning in infrastructure development and a detailed benefit cost analysis prior to implementation. It talks about structural, continuous monitoring and codes of conduct for visitors. The way to go ahead is to develop these guidelines into action plans, incorporating the missing components, institutional support, monitoring criteria, incentives and regulations.

15. Ibid., p.50.
The focus in all development programmes, particularly tourism related development, should be primarily on:

The upgradation of the quality of life safeguarding and maintaining their socio-cultural identity and a general improvement in town’s economy.\(^\text{17}\) In fact, tourism should be considered as a means to achieve this end rather than an end in itself.

**Vision of the Eco-tourism Wing:**

The Government of Tamil Nadu according to the eco-tourism policy has a vision to make Tamil Nadu a world renowned destination specializing in sustainable tourism through focused efforts on creating synergy among all stakeholders, encouraging capacity building and public private partnerships with revenue generating strategies. To use eco-tourism as a tool to stimulate and nurture natural and cultural conservation with phenomenal socio-economic growth and showcase Tamil Nadu’s uniqueness throughout the world.

**Mission:**

- To select eco-tourism sports in the state and conduct activities such as rock-climbing, forest visits and trekking for youth.
- To evolve an action plan to promote awareness on preserving the unique aspects of a place.
- To take steps to prevent the usage of plastic and other non-biodegradable products around water bodies, parks, zoos and reserves.\(^\text{18}\)

**Objectives:**

The state strives to promote eco-tourism and its activities by pursuing the following objectives:

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\(^\text{18}\) *Eco-Tourism Policy of Tamil Nadu*, op.cit., p.8.
1. Identification and promotion of lesser known areas having eco-tourism potential in addition to popular destinations.
2. To unwind stress through nature.
3. Securing involvement of the local communities living in and dependent on peripheral and other areas for their livelihood without adversely affecting their cultural ethos.
4. Create awareness on education and conservation techniques among tourists and local communities.
5. To underline the vital role of tourism activities in the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.
6. Propagate conservation awareness among the tourists and expand public support for conservation.
7. To lead to better understanding of forests and better participation in conservation of forest biodiversity.

Guiding Principles:

The development, management and promotion of eco-tourism in the state are to be governed by following guiding principles:

1. Rules and guidelines regarding technical procedures stakeholder participation and impact mitigation to be developed and strictly adhered to.
2. Adherence to standards in terms of quality and safety in developing and operating ecotourism facilities and activities to be given highest priority.
3. Creation of environmental awareness amongst all sections age groups especially the youth, to be incorporated as a major activity for each ecotourism destination.
4. Only activities and facilities having least impact on the natural resources and the local culture to be permitted.
5. Preference to the ‘quality of experience’ rather than the number of visitors without compromising on financial viability as far as possible.
6. Resources that are traditionally used by the local community, are to be harnessed for eco-tourism wherever required.
7. Activities and facilities to be developed in consultation with the local community and mechanisms to ensure flow of benefits to the community.
8. Monitoring mechanisms to evaluate guidelines, codes of conduct and benefit sharing among local communities to be evolved.

9. Marketing strategies to be based on market research and segmentation analysis, making wide use of electronic, print and cyber media for promoting Tamil Nadu as a multi-faceted eco-tourism destination.

10. Promote group oriented tourism with focus on youth, trekkers and other interested tourists.

11. Recognise and respect land and property rights and avoid transgression into the cultural sovereignty of indigenous and local communities, including their protected, sensitive and sacred sites as well as their traditional knowledge.

12. All activities to be carried out in accordance with the provisions of forests environment, labour and other relevant local laws of India.

13. Ensure the integrity, serenity and the natural values of the destination through appropriate travel choice, responsible behaviour and activities of the visitors by communicating to them to qualities and sensitivities of destinations.

14. Encourage Public-Private partnerships model as far as possible to mobilize investment in infrastructure development.

15. There is need to provide comfortable stay and basic amenities to travellers and the role in promoting eco-tourism which would result in making the destination a favoured one among tourists. The major players are to be a part of Eco club which could discuss strategies in order to sustain eco-tourism activities. The government will help the sector to set up hotels in potential eco-tourism spots outside the wilderness / protected areas.

16. Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in promotion of the states eco-tourism action plans to be identified.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp.11-13.
**Strategies:**

The following are the strategies mentioned in the eco-tourism policy of Tamil Nadu Tourism:

1. Priority is given to development of places, which are closer to the existing popular destinations and also to the lesser known eco-tourist spots. Suitable eco-tourism destinations will be identified and tied up with existing eco-tourism circuits.

2. There is need to ensure that activities are promoted within the framework of rules and regulations and to achieve this, appropriate prescriptions will have to be made to incorporate low impact ecotourism as a tool for conservation management of forest.

3. The most parameters that are considered unfavourable and counter to good ecotourism practices are the huge crowds that throng any wilderness destination and the casual approach the visitors might display in their attitude to nature and wildlife which will have many undesirable impacts on the immediate environment in the form of mounting waste materials, unhygienic surrounding etc., thus violating the physical and environmental thresholds of the area.

4. Substantial inflow of tourists means develop of facilities, corresponding with the requirement. Wherever it is warranted to build up additional infrastructure, efforts will be taken to encourage the same in the lands outside protected areas, where only current activities will be permitted which do not disturb the wildlife habitat. In case of infrastructure development within protected areas, temporary structures will be built in tune with the surroundings.

5. Once the destination is finalized, the development and management of the same will be preferable done by the forest department, involving the local community. The individuals from the program area will be organized into Eco-Tourism Management Committees (ETMC).

6. Public Private Partnership in professionally managing the camping areas, and eco-tourism destinations will attempted in a limited way, especially in areas of infrastructure sharing, knowledge exchange in the hospitality sector and other promotion efforts.

7. There is an urgent necessity to enhance the skills and capacities of the local community in process of empowering them. Eco-tourism at a given site will call for
specific skills from the communities. Capacity building programs will be organized to promote competence and infuse confidence among the local people and the forest staff so as to undertake the tourism related services. The local community will be trained in managing home stays, basic education and awareness, health and sanitation, code of conduct, forest and wildlife conservation, litter control and developing skills in making souvenirs. They could be trained in welcoming tourists to create a sense of belonging.

8. An effective monitoring and evaluation criterion must be ensured to ascertain that the activities are conducted in accordance with the guidelines and policies prescribed. Impact of these activities must be assessed on a continuous basis by designated personnel and systems, so that it will ensure positive ecological impact on the environment and development on a sustained basis.\(^\text{20}\)

Regarding the strategies in the involvement of local communities, employment will be provided to the communities by enlisting their services in the manufacturing of boats, cooking, rescue operations and maintenance of the premises. Apart from providing skills and formal education, the communities can be given benefits, keeping in mind the future of their children. Opportunities can be provided to them for showcasing their skills in handicrafts and pottery. The development of and adherence to rules and guidelines on stakeholder participation, impact mitigation and technical procedures in one among the governing principles. The compliance with standards in terms of quality and safety in developing and operating eco-tourism facilities and activities will be given the highest priority. Creation of environmental awareness among all sections and age groups especially youth, will be a major activity for each eco-tourism destination. A shelf of eco-tourism projects may be identified by line departments, especially the Forest Department. The Tourism Department will act as the nodal agency for clearing various projects prepared by the line departments and their funding. Priority will be given to development of places, closer to existing popular destinations and lesser known eco-tourist spots suitable eco-tourism destinations will be identifies and tied up with the existing circuits.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Ibid., pp.17-18.
\(^{21}\) *The Hindu*, 7\(^{th}\) June 2010.
Eco-tourism is sustainable, site specific, people friendly approach, where indigenous people’s participation is ensured both at planning and implementation levels. In other words, ecotourism is tourism of the people, for the people and by the people.