

Events Standard

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expertcolumn

'Make tourism sustainable in Vembanad backwaters'

(Part I)

Dr.Latha Bhaskar, the project co-ordinator, Community Environmental Resource Center (CERC), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), has been seriously engaged in research studies on sustainable tourism. In this article she shares few of her findings.

What has happened with the tourism industry in the past decade in Kerala, has brought some changes in the life of people around destinations, either in the form of economic upliftment or the other way social changes or the worst we talk about the environmental collapse in the destinations that either are set in. This beautiful state of Kerala landlocked between Arabian Sea in the west and the Western Ghats in the east can be rightly called the



'Biodiversity Park' of India. This adds to the enchanting beauty to the destinations that we have in Kerala, set amidst scenic mountains or near protected areas; considered to be the last refuge for endemic, endangered, rare flora and fauna of the western ghats or in coastal areas amidst the poorest of communities, or by the rivers, lakes and reservoirs which supply water to numerous people and is a source of livelihood

to millions. The Vembanad Lake is one of the most exotic tourist destinations in Kerala where nature is at the peak of its beauty. The shimmering waters of the ocean like Lake, lush green paddy fields, towering coconut trees and criss-crossing canals, makes it a dream world for every tourist. Vembanad wetland is a Ramsar site of international significance. It is also the lifeline of millions of people. As a hub of backwater tourism Vembanad has emerged as number one destination. The challenge now is to conserve and enhance the beauty of this lake and its ecosystem, creating an economic

stake in its conservation for the long-term sustainability of backwater tourism. The environmental conditions of the Vembanad Lake have been on steady decline due to severe anthropogenic pressures. The major livelihood activities of this wetland are water-based and depend largely on the Lake. Reclamations for agricultural purposes and human settlements have resulted in the horizontal shrinkage of the backwaters in the last century. Sanitation is a constant worry for residents as well as tourists. Organic and industrial pollution is high, and weed invasion are visible. Stretches of lake boundaries have been cordoned off affecting landscape aesthetics as well as preventing access to the lake. If pollution, reclamation and stakeholder conflicts continue in the current scale, this beautiful landscape may change in to a degraded and dilapidated water body, which is auspicious neither for the tourism industry nor for the local population. Tourism industry is a latest entrant in this region that brings revenue to the local communities as well as to the state. The growth rate of this industry is exponential, which opened a new arena of livelihood opportunities. We know that tourism industry contributes greatly to the state's economic growth. Despite this significant economic contribution, tourism is often blamed for the ecological crisis in Vembanad region. In fact the activities of different stakeholder groups in this region are rarely mutually beneficial and conflicts of various intensities exist at various levels.

We need to take a strong stand against the 'free' tourism policies that the industry is following. The fundamental reason to believe that Tourism has brought drastic changes in the Vembanad Region of the state or in particular Alleppey, is more to do with the way Alleppey looks now for an outsider, the beautified canals, more houseboats, more shops and associated structures. Once a centre for trade and an active place for exports Alleppey suffered a bit in 80's and 90's when Cochin port developed and all trade centres shifted to Cochin. So there is every reason to say that things are changing from a Visual interpretation. But we should also remember that we are sitting on a plethora of issues both at Health aspects and Environmental aspects, both being interrelated. Quoting Dr. Padmakumar, Superintendent, Medical College people here in Kuttanad are carriers of major communicable diseases. So for this to be curbed we need to have clean waters and a healthy lake that feeds it people as well as an additional income generation source from Tourism and it shouldn't be by just suppressing all other traditional sources of income, that we need not just one industry to thrive here, but a symbiotic relation between natural heritage and revenue form this by the way of tourist arrivals by preserving our environment for the future generation to come, see and enjoy. Natural beauty of the backwaters is the single most driving force for tourism industry, hence it is the need of the hour of industry, decision makers and the Government to realize this and start doing actions more than lip service for responsible tourism practices.