

## Historical and Ecological importance of Thekkady and surrounding areas in promoting tourism at Idukki district of Kerala- A study

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### ABSTRACT

Idukki is the coldest district of Kerala. Munnar, Peermade, Thekkady are some of the coldest spots in the district. Sometimes, the temperature level comes down below minus degrees there, in the tea plantation areas and the inner part of rivers. The first wild life sanctuary of Kerala is at Thekkady, Idukki district. At present it comes under the category of National Park of India. Though there are number of wild life sanctuaries in Kerala, there are only six National Parks in the Kerala state. The status of National Park gets from the final approval of the Parliament of India. Among the six National Parks in the Kerala state, five of them are in Idukki district alone. They are Periyar National Park, Eravikulam National Park, Mathikettan Shola National Park, Pambadumchola National Park and Anamudi National Park. The only other National Parks in Kerala is the Silent Valley National Park in Palakkad district. Eravikulam national Park is the biggest national park in Kerala. The highest peak in South India is Anamudi Hills located in Western Ghats of the Idukki district having an elevation of 2,695 metres (8,842 ft) height. The ecological and historical importance of Idukki has not widely noticed yet.

### INTRODUCTION

Before the formation of Idukki district in 1972, Thekkady was the part of Kottayam district of Kerala. The climate of the places like Kumily, Thekkady, Vandiperiyar etc. are very pleasant and attracted thousands of tourists even before the realization of Periyar dam. After the realization of the Periyar project, a reservoir came into existence and that also attracted thousands of tourists from inside and outside of India. Before the construction of Mullai-Periyar dam, the place was a neglected area and nobody tried to conserve it. At the time of construction, the authorities became conscious about the preservation of wild life. The British authorities gave valuable information to our authorities regarding the necessity of protecting the forest property. Thus in 1934, the Travancore government declared the place as the first Wild Life Sanctuary of Travancore. The sanctuary was known as 'Nellikampetti' during that period. Periyar Lake and Sabarimalai forests were annexed to it in 1950 and thus it occupies an area of 777.54 Sq.Km. In 1978, the Nellikampetti Sanctuary was renamed as Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary. (Vijayan, 1998) Recognizing the importance of the reserve it was brought under the 'Project Tiger' in 1978. In 1991-92, Government of India designated the sanctuary as a 'Project Elephant Reserve' as well and it became developed further. (Basha, 1997) This Sanctuary has been getting much international

importance recently because of its unique tourist potential. The domestic as well as international tourists select this place as their tourist destination because of its luxuriant vegetation, cool climate and natural beauty. The Periyar sanctuary is one of the most protected sites of India, with many endangered and endemic flora and fauna. (Geo-Data: The world geographical Encyclopedia, 1995) Today, the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary is raised to the status of 'Periyar National Park'. Before being the status of a National Park, there should be a permission needed from the Parliament of India.

The entire area of the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary falls at present in the Peermade Taluk. The forests are entirely tropical in character and include the wet-evergreen forests, the shola forests, the moist deciduous forests and the grass land. Along the valleys, where there is deep soil and good moisture the wet evergreen forests are met with generally. Hill slopes with a western aspect have often such type of forests. Hill tops are often covered with tall elephant-grass with a deciduous species of trees dotted here and there. In between the above two types of vegetation, the open moist deciduous forests with its undergrowth of grass are met with. (Menon, 1975) Among the lakes and reservoirs of the State, the Mullai Periyar reservoir, in the southern Western Ghats, is the oldest and broadest. It is situated inside the largest of all protected areas in Kerala, the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR). It forms 35% of the total protected sites in the State. There are also four tribal settlements located on the fringe of the reserve with a total population of 3,856. The names of such tribal settlements are Mannan, Paliyans, Uralis and Mala Arayans. (Sivammal, 2002)

Adventure tourism contributes to economic development of Thekkady Panchayat and the Periyar Wild life Sanctuary both directly and indirectly. Thekkady is located around the Periyar reservoir formed by the back waters of Periyar dam. Periyar is home to the most exotic fauna and flora. It is the house of about 62 species of different animals and there are about 35 to 50 tigers in the sanctuary of Periyar and the majority of tourists come there to take a look at the tigers. The animal of interest for tourists is the Indian elephant. (Nowshad, 2017)

It is a wonder to see this huge animal play recklessly by the Periyar Lake. Other animals are leopard, reindeer, Indian bison common langur, water dog, mouse deer, malabar squirrel, Indian wild dog, nilgiri langur (a kind of monkey), lion tailed macaque, porcupines, bonnet boar, sambar, macaque, nilgiri thar, dhole and barking deer, bears, iguana, wild rabbit, hill squirrel, foxes, deer, wolves, wild cat, donkey, common monkey, Otter, wild cow, wild goat, mongoose, mule etc. There are 320 varieties of birds in Periyar area. Important of them are: Feather toed Hawk eagle, Small green billed malkoha, Black eagle, Lorikeet Jungle bush quail, Brain fever bird, Bay owl, Brown wood owl, Red faced Malkoha, Fairy blue bird, Hill Myna, Blue eared kingfisher, Red winged crested cuckoo, Black bulbul, Black capped king fisher (rare), Crimson throated barbet, Heart spotted wood pecker, Scarlet minivet, Rufoustailed fly catcher, Pied fly catcher- shrike, Great black wood pecker, Nilgiri speckled picket, Yellow Bulbul, White bellied tree pie. (Anand, 2016) The reptiles like king cobras, Pythons, crabs, tree-snakes, water-snakes, crocodiles, wild lizards, tortoise, etc are seen here. (Karoor, 2017)

There are about 1965 different flowering plants (angio sperms), 1440-different dicots, 550 monocots, 168 Poaceae, 155-Fabaceae, 168- grass items and so many other rare and common plant items in Periyar sanctuary. (Loka bankum Kealathilekku: Thekkadiyudey

Mahathwam(Mal), 2012) There are so many flies and birds there. *Apis Indica* (Indian bee), *Apis florae* (little bees), *Apis dorsata* (Rock bee) are some of the bees seen at the Periyar sanctuary and nearby places. (Regi, 2016)

Climate and atmosphere of the Periyar Lake and sanctuary always give protection to those rare species. It is the duty of everyone to give a calm and peaceful life to these species. The main trees at the sanctuary are: *Tectona grandis* (Teak), *Dalbergia talifolia* (Black wood or Rose wood), *Terminalia paniculata* (Thembavu), *Artocarpus hergula*(Anjili), *Pterocarpus mersupius*(Vengai), *Dysoxylum malabaricum* (White cedar), *Cedrella toona* (Red cedar), *Hopea parviflora* (Kambagam), *Mesua Ferrea* (Iron wood). (Menon, 1975)

Other important trees found at Periyar forest are: (Anishmon, 2018)

1. *Vateria indica* - DoopMaram(Tamil);Kunthirikkam (Malayalam)
2. *Cullenia Exarillata* - Aini Pla(Tamil); Vedi Plav(Malayalam)
3. *Bischofia Javanica* - Toog tree
4. *Canarium Strictum* - Attam(Tamil); Telli(Malayalam)

The forests in this sanctuary are administered under the provisions of the Forests Act and Rules including the Game Rules under it. Wild life Guards and Foresters are deployed in different strategic points from where they could proceed on patrol and prevent and control offences against the wild life and forests. In addition to this, two sections of the Armed Police are permanently stationed at Cheriakanam near the state border in the sanctuary to prevent the trespassers. (Menon, 1975)

Tourism develops day by day at Thekkady and nearby areas for the last two decades. Tourists from foreign countries, other states and local tourists from other districts contribute much for the development of tourism at here. Sixty percent of the total tourists participate in the eco-friendly general tourism of Thekkady. Eco-tourism has attracted the attention of adventure zone and the activities associated with rock climbing (Trekking), mountain biking, elevated walk way, river crossing, river rafting etc. Boating was preferred by 20%. Ten percent of the tourists liked leisure zone. And the Deer park (5%) respectively. Major fascination for the tourists here is the boat cruise in Periyar Lake, which enable wildlife sightings on the lakeshore grasslands. The last priority went to elephant ride, plantation visits, honeymoon trips etc. It is a notable thing that, 60% of the tourists at Thekkady are in the age group of 18 and 45. In tourist purchase preferences, they prefer to buy spices than any other items from Kumily. From this data, it is evident that the demand for adventure tourism is high. Most of the foreign tourist interested to visit Kerala may not avoid Thekkady from their visit-list. Their main intention is to enjoy the extra-ordinary natural beauty and not to disturb wild life at there. But most of the native tourists intended to see to wild life at there. (Bisoye, 2006)

Thekkady and its nearby areas are different centres of tourism. Adventure tourism, Plantation tourism, Eco-tourism, Pilgrim tourism, Wild life tourism, Spice tourism, Hill tourism, Medicinal tourism (Ayurvedic), Monsoon tourism and Cultural tourism are some of them. When a foreign tourist reaches somewhere, he expects somewhat satisfactory atmosphere just like his mother nation. We have to provide European dishes and other facilities to them. We should provide non vegetarian food, proper residential facilities,

drinks etc. (Thomas, 2014). Though liquor is a slow poison, it is a part of the life of most of the Europeans. The climate in Europe prompts them to use hot-drinks as a habit. The tea-planters of Kumily and its surrounding areas were mostly Europeans. That is why the Excise commissioner of Travancore Rajas sought permission to open a liquor shop at Kumily to the Chief Secretary (Travancore, 1923) and on the basis, it was sanctioned by the Travancore Government.

On the Kerala side there are five major privately owned estates of tea, cardamom, coffee, rubber and miscellaneous crops, on the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) border and they are Mullayar, Plakkad, Wallardi, Thankamala and Mount. There are two estates owned by the Government viz: the cardamom estates of Pachchakkanam and Gavi lying within about five kilometres surrounding along the border of Periyar Tiger Reserve(PTR). They are under the management of Kerala Forest Development Corporation (KFDC). The Pachchakkanam estate also called the Down Town estate is spread out in about 208.5 hectare on the PTR fringe as forest tract linking the Ranni Reserve with the PTR. Of the total 23 estates have workforce attached to them in the form of small mixed settlements with an average strength of 100 to 300 families. (Gurukkal, 2003)

The most favourable period to visit Thekkady is from November to May, because during this period, the wild animals come to the water points in the dry forest for drinking and bathing Native birds and migratory birds from different nations can be seen. There is option for trekking and hiking at night, but permission should be taken from the forest authorities. Another option for the adventurous tourists is the bamboo raft, which can be used to watch wild animals safely. Elephant ride and a walk in the forest, accompanied by the officials of forest department, are the most fascinating activities for a tourist. (Karoor, 2017)

In addition to the tourism activities, Thekkady, Kumily, and nearby areas are the major spices marketing centres in the nation. Tourism plays a major role in Kumily's development, which is providing the major accommodation, food and marketing facilities to the tourists. This township and its relatively big population, which it supports, have developed an intricate relationship with the tourism activities and are greatly dependent on these activities. (Guruvayoorappan, 2001) There are so many supportive institutions or persons indulged for the development of tourism in Thekkady and Kumily areas. There are so many tourist travel agencies working in those areas. Tour operators conduct trips to different locations in Kumily and nearby areas. They support every tourist for the fulfilment of their needs. Tourist Resorts, Home-stays, Hotels & Restaurants, Motels etc make arrangements to the tourists for their comfortable stay. There are above 500 taxi cars, 200 jeeps and 1000 Auto Rikshaws conduct services at these spots. There are around 400 Home-stays and 150 Resorts in this area. But officially registered Resorts and Home Stays are only 42 in number. The number of spice shops in Kumily Panchayat is 48 and the Handicraft Shops is 42. There are 3 Resorts under KTDC namely Aranya Nivas, Periyar House and Lake Palace. The rate of Double room ranges from 100 to 25,000/- per day depending upon seasons and standard of rooms. The cheap rate rooms are available only at Shikshak Sadan but it is restricted only to the teachers in government or aided services. (Thambikutty, 2017)

Spice shops are common in Kumily and Thekkady area. The Spices like Nutmeg, Nut-mace, Cinnamon, Cardamom, Pepper, Star Aris, Dry Ginger, Cocoa, Clove, Tea Leaf, Tea powder, Green Tea, Cashew Nuts, Asafoetida, Cumin seed, Caraway, Vanilla, Coriander, Turmeric,

Garlic etc are available in all shops. Besides, the essence of Chilly, Green Chilly, Vanilla, Lemon Grass Oil, Eucalyptus etc are available there. Home-made chocolate is a speciality of Thekkedy and Kumily areas. There is a wide collection of antiques and hand made products here. Wooden items and cotton clothes attract the attention of everyone. But the prices are not affordable to the commons. The chief customers of these products are the foreigners. (Thambikutty, 2017)

The Government of Kerala recently launched a new programme at Kumily named 'Responsible Tourism'. By this Programme, the Government of Kerala adopted the policy of 'Adithi Devo Bhava'. It is considered that every visitor of Kumily is our guest and provides them a homely atmosphere. Food are prepared in indigenous style and given to our guests at the moderate rate. Rooms of Hotels and Resorts are given to them in a moderate rate. Hotel and Restaurant dishes and curries are prepared with locally cultivated pesticide-free vegetables and grains. Hormone-free chickens, eggs, meats etc are arranged. For this purpose lakhs of rupees was distributed to the Kudumbasrees, Self Help Groups (SHG) and other local groups and organizations. But the aims of 'Responsible Tourism' are not been fulfilled sufficiently. (Karoor, 2017)

Tourist boats are owned by Forest Department and Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC). The boat-fare is Rs.150 per person. Large amount is also collected by giving Camera Coupons and levying entrance fee. A lot of money is collected by both the departments of KTDC and Forests from the tourists. KTDC also acquires money by running a resort-palace at the lake named 'Lake Palace'. This palace was the summer palace of the Maharajas of Travancore and now owned by KTDC and is given to the tourists for daily rent. (Nowshad, 2017)

The World Food Organization recently selected Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary as one of the ten wild life centres in Asia-Pacific region. The National Ecological Department of India selected Periyar Tiger Reserve as the biggest Tiger project in India. (Thekkadi Prasanthiyudey nerukayil (Mal), 2007) International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has declared it as a bio-diversity hot-spot. The Supreme Court also made an interim judgement that Periyar sanctuary is one of the oldest sanctuary in the State of Kerala, which played a very important role in bio-diversity conservation in Western Ghats. (Bio-diversity sopt in Periyar, 2001)

United Nations Development Project (UNDP) and the Ministry of Environment, Government of India has jointly given a Best Performance Award to PTR in 2012. The PTR has achieved the award by overtaking 600 other Wild Life Sanctuaries in India. (Padavual thandi Nammudey Thekkady (Mal), 2012)

The characteristic feature of the Periyar basin is the western Ghat's forests, where about 70% of the trees and endemic to the region due to geographic barriers and where streams are the homes for a number of endemic fishes. The Periyar Lake in the upstream part of the basin is surrounded by such forests, renowned for the sanctuaries like the Tiger Reserve. It is one of the 18 biodiversity hot spots of India and a home for several endangered species. (Regi, 2016) The sanctuary is selected by World Bank as a National Study Centre for Field Learning. To implement more activities, the representatives of World Bank, Dr Anupam Joshi and Dr Neha visited the sanctuary on 07-01-2012. The World Bank programme concentrates in Bio-diversity Conservation and Rural Livelihood in collaboration between



with Central Forest-Environmental Department. (Loka bankum Kealathilekku: Thekkadiyudey Mahathwam(Mal), 2012)

The geo-climatic conditions of the Periyar Lake are significantly different from other reservoirs in the state. The increased boat plying and other anthropogenic influences, such as sewage disposal, active tribal fishing in the lake, can affect the system. Another important problem associated with this system is the fast development of Kumily town-ship in connection with the recently received importance to tourism in this region. The waste from sewage channels of the town merges with the lake in more than one location. The importance of this lake water is that it is not just a key tourist attraction, but also the core environment of the precious wildlife of the 'Project Tiger' and 'Project Elephant Sanctuary'. (Jithesh, 2008, p. 9)

Hilton and Philips in their work, 'The effects of boat activity on turbidity in a shallow broad land river' stressed the problems of boat activity and deterioration of water quantity of recreational water ways and found that the effect of boat activity is more on turbidity in shallow waters. Pandey and Soni in their work, 'Physico-chemical quality of Naukuchiyatal lake water' found that regular visits of tourists and the consequent disposal of wastes from catchment areas enhanced the degradation of water quality of Naukuchiyatal Lake in Kamaun Himalaya. (Jithesh, 2008) Periyar water is more pollutant recently because of the heavy tourism. Leakage of lubricants from the boats and the throwing of waste materials on the water by the passengers of the boats create environmental issues to the lake Periyar. (Nowshad, 2017)

Impacts of the development of Tourism in Thekkady and surrounding areas:

#### Positive Impacts

1. The fast growth and development of infrastructure facilities
2. The growth of Tourism industry and economic development of the natives at Idukki district
3. The spice trade has enormously developed
4. Different Arts forms in Kerala attracted the tourists of different states and abroad.
5. The fame of Handicraft and wooden antiques of Tekkady spread across the country
6. Hardly there is no unemployed youth at Tekkady because, almost all are engaged either in one or many duties.

#### Negative Impacts

1. Tourism badly affects environment due to the excess population
2. Tourist Boats excrement oil and other lubricants to the Periyar lake, which negatively affect the water bodies.
3. The excess migration to Thekkady and nearby areas makes threat to the wildlife.

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