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ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE OF TOURISTS TOWARDS ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Nature, a wonderful gift of God, with its full diversity and glory, has always been attractive to man. Since ancient times, men have been keeping a symbiotic relation with nature in all his activities, including travel. In due course of time, by making addition to the mode and purpose of travel, industrial revolution and greater disposable income, man-made attractions and recreational facilities have led to modern mass tourism. It has grown to be a major dynamic component of the world economy and one of the highly developed and dynamic industries with an important contribution to income and employment. While countries benefit due to the growth of tourism industry, on the other hand, it destroys the nature and environment which is considered as important attractions for the tourists. Ecotourism is a new concept in tourism, which was originally sparked off by the idea of making harmonious co-existence with nature a reality, once again. Among the Indian states Kerala is a highly potential state which has undertaken many initiatives to develop ecotourism. An attempt has been made in the present paper to assess the level of awareness and attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala. The paper also explore the relationship between awareness and attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation with the help of correlation and regression analysis.

KEYWORDS

Attitude, awareness, ecotourism, conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a complex phenomenon. It encompasses almost all the facets of social life – economic, socio-cultural and environmental. Till the 18th century, nature was as unkempt and fit to be tamed. Nature was a raw material to be moulded. It did not occur to man that nature was as well a resource to be conserved. In the 19th century, a new attitude to the natural environment emerged. By the end of 19th century, the impact of human activity on the environment became a matter of serious concern. In the modern world, the increase in the capacity to consume, disposable income and high level of literacy create a widespread desire for travel. The desire for travel was so intense that tourism acquired the status of the world's largest and fastest growing economic activity. From being the preserve of a few wealthy and leisurely people, tourism was transformed into a mass market. Now, tourism is about enriching people's lives. Usually, for people, holidays and travel are among the happiest recollections. Tourism is leisure activity and recreation is the main purpose for participation in tourism. But, according to WTO, tourism is a model form of economic development that is designated to improve the quality of life in the host community, provide a high quality experience for the tourist, and maintain the quality of the environment on which both the host community and the tourist depend. Mass tourism has no doubt ruined the landscape and caused environmental pollution and disrupted the indigenous way of life of societies with weak cultural traditions. Although, even in the near past, environmental friendliness was used as a differentiating factor, it is now taking the shape of being a necessary factor. This shift is giving rise to a new product offer called 'Ecotourism' and is considered a specialty segment of the larger nature tourism market. As per the estimates of World Tourism Organization, nature tourism contributes 7 percent of all international travel expenditure (Lindberg et al, 1997).

ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION

The term 'ecotourism' was unknown in the English language as recently as the mid 1980s. The Mexican ecologist Hector Ceballos-Lascurain used the Spanish word 'ecoturismo' even earlier in the decade, while the National Forestry Service in Canada was marketing the concept of an educational 'ecotour' along the Trans-Canada Highway as far back as 1973. Fennel suggests that ecotourism most likely has a convergent evolution 'where many places and people independently respond to the need for more nature-travel opportunities in line with society's efforts to become more ecological minded' (Fennel 1998).

Hvenegaard and Orams write that the term 'ecotourism' can be traced back only to the late 1980s (Hvenegaard 1994; Orams 1995), while others suggest that it can be traced to the late 1970s through the work of Miller on ecodevelopment (Miller 1989). The term has been traced further back to the work of Hetzer who used it to explain the intricate relationship between tourists and the environments and cultures in which they interact (Hetzer 1970). This particular stand in illustrating that the idea of ecotourism is in fact an old one, which manifested itself during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nelson 1994). There seems to be universal acceptance of the fact that ecotourism was in practice long before 1980s. The relationship between tourism and the natural environment tended to be one of conflict, but that the potential existed for a relationship based on symbiosis or mutual benefit (Budowski 1976).

The terms "nature tourism" and "ecotourism" were used interchangeably (Mc Neely *et al*, 1992). Since the early 1990's a plethora of non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) campaigns and academics have advocated ecotourism as a way of overcoming the dichotomy between conservation and development. The rationale, put simply is that, if tourists will pay to experience the relatively untouched nature, then the revenue they bring, can be used to maintain those environments and provide benefits for the local community. This ecotourism - for - conservation agenda is an important one.

The estimation enumerated by the WTO on nature travel was 7 percent of all international expenditure. WTO's prediction on the prospect of nature travel is estimated to be rising by 20 percent which will be 5 times more than the average rate of growth in tourism industries as a whole. Developing countries will capitalize the abundant potential of ecotourism by generating US\$ 5 to 10 billion revenue annually. According to The Ecotourism Society (TES) in 1998, 40–60 percent of all international tourists were nature tourists and 20–40 percent wildlife tourists. The demand for ecotourism and nature-based holidays is expected to get doubled and even tripled in the next 20 years.

The Green Travel Guide assess that tourism can be a powerful force for conservation and notes that there are more than 5000 National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and reserves around the world today, many depending on tourism for financial need. The aid arm of the United States Government, USAID, uses ecotourism as a strategic tool for 'environmentally responsible development' in more than a dozen countries. Conservation International, one of the biggest and richest players in international conservation, utilizes ecotourism in 17 out of the 25 countries in which they operate. Thus, it is clear that ecotourism in Protected Areas, National Parks and Reserve forests will help to reduce negative impacts on these environmentally fragile areas and bring income to the local community which would prevent them from destroying forests and encourage to conserve the natural assets. Thus ecotourism is accepted and used widely as a tool for supporting the conservational efforts of the Protected Areas which have lot of tourism potential. Creating awareness among the tourists about the ecotourism activities and conservational efforts in nature based tourism destinations will help to bring a favourable attitude among the tourists towards ecotourism and conservation of nature and will result in their active involvement.

IMPORTANCE AND NEED FOR THE STUDY

Tourism in natural and protected areas is economically important to many countries, both developing and developed (Lindberg *et al.*, 1998). The impressive, relatively recent, growth of the world's network of 30,361 parks now covers an area of 8.84 per cent of the total land area of the planet (Eagles, 1999). In India,

the Government owns more than 95 percent of the forests, including 88 National Parks and 490 Wildlife Sanctuaries, where people do not have any rights. Policing seems to be a failure in several instances. The rules and regulations pertaining to forests and wildlife always alienated people and private sector from using such resources suitably. These areas are environmentally fragile but needs to be protected.

Major chunk of the population in India is contained in rural areas and is below poverty line. Hence, how far conservation efforts will be successful in the long run without generating income from Protected Areas and how best we will be able to justify such an extent of reserves in a highly populated country like India, are the real concerns. But these areas are rich in biodiversity and are very attractive to the nature lovers, having high potential for ecotourism. However, the relationship between tourism and protected areas is not an easy one, and the threat of negative ecological impacts from rapidly increasing levels of visitation and visitor infrastructure continues to cause considerable anxiety for protected area managers and conservation agencies (Sheppard, 1999). The main motivation behind ecotourism development is the employment of tourism receipts for protection of resources, sustainably.

Many Protected Areas have already developed as mass tourism centers and losing their natural beauty. Though it is very difficult to replace the mass tourism practised here by ecotourism, it is very much required to protect these area from environmental degradation. At the same time, tourism is also a must to this area. Otherwise, it will lead to heavy encroachment and will destruct the forests. To avoid this, it is necessary to develop a suitable pattern of tourism which contributes to the preservation of the natural beauty and biodiversity of this area and generate income to the local people and the government.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the level of awareness and attitude of tourists towards Ecotourism and conservation of Protected Areas in Kerala.
2. To explore the relationship between awareness and attitude of tourists towards Ecotourism and conservation.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

In the course of the study, following hypotheses have been formulated.

1. There is a significant correlation between the attitude of the tourists and their awareness towards ecotourism and conservation.
2. The attitude of the tourists towards ecotourism and conservation depends significantly on their awareness of ecotourism and conservation.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study, based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The population considered for the purpose of this study is the tourists who visited Kerala in the year 2010. For collecting primary data from the tourists, convenience sampling method has been adopted. The respondents were selected merely on the basis of their being available on the spot where survey was conducted and the willingness of the tourists to co-operate with the researcher. The sample size is 1000 (750 domestic tourists and 250 foreign tourists). Primary data were collected from the tourists through a Structured Questionnaire. For measuring the awareness and attitude level of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation, ten statements each were given to each respondent and a five point Likert scale has been used. The level of awareness and attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation have been analysed through cross tabulation. Correlation analysis has been used for measuring the degree of association between attitude and awareness of tourists and Regression analysis has been applied to determine the variation in attitude based on the variation in awareness.

PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA

Kerala – one of the beautiful states of India, richly blessed with serene beaches, enchanting backwaters, mist clad hill stations, lush forests, exotic wildlife, exciting trekking trails, scintillating waterfalls, extensive plantations, tropical islands, invigorating monsoon, ayurvedic health care, historic monuments, spectacular art forms, splendid cultural heritage, spectacular boat races, spicy cuisines and everything else enthralls a visitor⁴. Kerala has achieved a remarkable growth in tourism both in arrival and receipts during the last decade.

The picturesque state of Kerala, forming part of the Western Ghats, contains a strictly Protected Area of 2324 km² in two National Parks and 12 Wildlife Sanctuaries. Ecotourism is a sustainable management option for this state, since a major part of tourists paying visit to Kerala are visiting the Protected Areas. Kerala's natural resources are unique and known worldwide. Ecotourism provides the opportunity to present Kerala's natural environment to the world for a long period. Ecotourism can create new and exciting tourism experiences, promote excellence in tourism, preserve and protect natural areas, benefit local communities and encourage commercially successful and environmentally sound tourism operations in Kerala. As the first step in developing ecotourism, Government of Kerala has formulated a project in Thenmala and its surroundings. In the year 1998, the 'Thenmala Ecotourism Society' was established as a Government of Kerala undertaking to promote ecotourism activities at Thenmala and its surroundings with the co-operation of the Forest, Irrigation and Tourism departments. This is India's first planned ecotourism destination, based on sound principles of ecological sustainability and has become a model for other ecotourism destination development programmes. Afterwards almost all the nature based tourism destinations in Kerala have started to practice ecotourism and taken conservational efforts from the revenue generated through ecotourism.

AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE OF TOURISTS TOWARDS ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION

Awareness means the information or knowledge possessed by a person about something. As far as this study is concerned, awareness of tourists about ecotourism is assumed to play an important role in participation and co-operation of ecotourism implementation, as tourists who are not aware of ecotourism in the particular destination, will not follow the environmental rules applicable to that area.

The term attitude means the way of thinking or behaving towards somebody or something. It may vary from person to person. According to the view of the experts, unfavourable attitude towards ecotourism and conservation and lack of awareness about ecotourism and need for conservation, among the tourists are the most important problems in implementation of ecotourism initiatives (Shini,2009). This paper measures the level of awareness and attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation of Protected Areas in Kerala and explore the relationship between the awareness and attitude of tourists. Since awareness and attitude of tourists are qualitative factors, which cannot be measured in quantitative terms, these can be measured with the help of Likert scaling technique.

FRAMING OF AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE SCALE

On the basis of the ecotourism resources, practices and activities, required measures for the implementation of ecotourism, totally twenty statements-ten each representing the awareness and attitude of a tourist towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala were framed. All the ten statements from each category jointly measure the awareness and attitude level of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala respectively. For every statement, five choices, namely, strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree were given to the respondents for measuring their responses.

If a respondent has given his opinion as 'strongly agree' for all the ten statements in each case, the respondent's total score will be 50 (10x5), in each case. If the respondent 'disagrees' with all the statements the total score of that respondent will be 10 (10x1) in each case. Hence, the total score of a respondent varies from 10 to 50 for each case. Table - 1 classifies the respondent's awareness and attitude into high, medium and low level towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala.

TABLE – 1: AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE SCORES OF THE RESPONDENTS

Particulars	Awareness	Attitude
Sum of scores	32847	36024
Number of respondents	1000	1000
Percentiles 33.3333	29.00	32.00
66.6667	36.00	43.00
Low level	≤ 29	≤ 32
Medium level	30 – 36	33 – 43
High level	> 36	> 43

Source: Survey data

On the basis of the scores for awareness and attitude of the respondents, the distribution is divided into three equal parts. Each part consists of 33.33 percent of the normal distribution. In case of awareness, the first part in the distribution is up to the total awareness score of 29. So, respondents who secured awareness score equal to or below 29 are considered as respondents with low level of awareness. The second part is from a total awareness score of 30 – 36 and the respondents who scored in between 30 – 36 are having medium level of awareness. The third part is the total awareness score above 36 and those who secured 36 – 50 are considered as having a high level of awareness about ecotourism and need for conservation in Kerala.

In case of attitude, the first part has a total attitude score of 32 and below 32 are considered as respondents with low level of attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala. The second part of the distribution is from a total attitude score of 33 – 43 and the respondents who scored in between 33 – 43 are having medium level of attitude. The third part has the total attitude score above 43 and those who secured 43 – 50 are considered as having a high level of attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala. Table - 2 shows the classification of respondents on the basis of their level of awareness and attitude.

TABLE – 2: CLASSIFICATION OF THE RESPONDENTS BASED ON AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

Sl. No.	Level	Awareness		Attitude	
		Number of respondents	Percentage	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	Low	535	53.5	509	50.9
2	Medium	305	30.5	232	23.2
3	High	160	16.0	259	25.9
Total		1000	100.0	1000	100.0

Source: Survey data

It could be assessed from table - 2 that in case of awareness, out of the total 1000 respondents, 535(53.5 percent) respondents are in the low level, 305(30.5 percent) respondents are in the medium level and the remaining 160(16 percent) are highly aware of ecotourism conservation in Kerala. In case of attitude, 509(50.9 percent) respondents are in the low level, 232(23.2 percent) respondents are in the medium level and 259(25.9 percent) respondents are in the high level attitude.

Nationality of the respondents also influence the awareness and attitude level of tourists. On the basis of nationality, tourists are broadly classified into domestic tourists and foreign tourists. Foreign tourists are visiting India for her natural beauty and they are very much interested in participating in the nature-based tourism activities than domestic tourists. So, it is assumed that their awareness and attitude are higher than that of domestic tourists.

TABLE – 3: NATIONALITY STATUS AND LEVEL OF AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

Sl.No.	Nationality	Level of Awareness			
		Low	Medium	High	Total
1	Domestic(India)	462(61.6)	197(26.3)	91(12.1)	750(100)
2	Foreign	73(29.2)	108(43.2)	69(27.6)	250(100)
Total		535	305	160	1000
		Level of Attitude			
1	Domestic (Indian)	440(58.7)	178(23.7)	132(17.6)	750(100)
2	Foreign	69(27.6)	54(21.6)	127(50.8)	250(100)
Total		509	232	259	1000

Source: Survey data

It could be inferred from the table - 3 that only 28.4 percent of domestic tourists have medium and high level of awareness. But, in the case of foreign tourists, 70.8 percent have medium and high level of awareness. It is also evident from the table that only 41.3 percent of domestic respondents have medium and high level of attitude. But, in case of foreign tourists, 72.4 percent have medium and high level of attitude. 52.4 percent of the domestic tourists show a low level of attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala.

CORRELATION AND REGRESSION BETWEEN AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

Attitude is highly influenced by awareness. If a person has a clear idea about the merits and demerits of certain things, it will be reflected in his attitude. So, it is acceptable that the level of attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation vary according to their level of awareness about ecotourism and conservation.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant correlation between the attitude of the tourists and their awareness towards ecotourism and conservation.

Correlation analysis is used to test the above hypothesis and to measure the degree of association between the two sets of quantitative data. Table - 4 shows the correlation between Awareness score of tourists and their Attitude score towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala.

TABLE – 4: CORRELATION BETWEEN AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

	Mean	Standard deviation	Awareness	Attitude
Awareness	2.03	0.81	1.000	0.805**
Attitude	2.11	0.81	0.805**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed)

The result of the analysis reveals that the two variables, namely, awareness of tourists and their attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala are highly and significantly correlated. Hence the first hypothesis of the study, **there is a significant correlation between the attitude of the tourists and their awareness towards ecotourism and conservation** holds true.

Hypothesis 2: The attitude of the tourists towards ecotourism and conservation depends significantly on their awareness of ecotourism and conservation.

Regression analysis is applied to test the above hypothesis. It explains the variation in one variable (attitude - Y), based on the variation in other variable (awareness - X). A regression equation of attitude on awareness is constructed as follows :

$$Y = 4.16 + 0.970 X$$

The ANOVA table pertaining to the testing of significance for this regression is given in Table - 5.

TABLE – 5: ANOVA FOR TESTING REGRESSION OF ATTITUDE ON AWARENESS

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	R ²
Regression	420.762	1	420.762	1832.608	.647
Residual	229.138	998	.230		
Total	649.900	999			

Source: Survey Data

R² is a measure of the percent variation explained by the independent variable (awareness) on the dependent variable (attitude). The critical value of F (1,998) is 3.85 (Rao.C.R, 1966). Clearly from the ANOVA table there is significant effect of awareness on the attitude score of the tourists. Hence, it is concluded that the **second hypothesis, the attitude of the tourists towards ecotourism and conservation depends significantly on their awareness of ecotourism and conservation**, is true.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Awareness about ecotourism and conservation among the tourists is playing an important role in effective implementation of ecotourism in destinations. The analysis of the study shows that out of 1000 respondents, only 160 respondents (16 percent) have high level of awareness; 305 respondents (30.5 percent) have medium level of awareness and the majority of 535 respondents (53.5 percent) have only low level of awareness. Out of the 1000 respondents, 509 respondents (50.9 percent) have low level of attitude, 259 of them (25.9 percent) have high level of attitude and 232 respondents (23.2 percent) have medium level of attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala. Foreign tourists are highly aware and having a more favourable attitude than domestic tourists towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala. The awareness and attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and conservation are significantly correlated with each other. The result of the regression analysis shows that there is significant effect of awareness on the attitude of the respondents towards ecotourism and conservation.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Attitude is directly affected by the awareness. So, it is necessary to make the tourists aware of the need for conservation and the importance of ecotourism in this direction. This will create a favourable attitude among tourists towards ecotourism and conservation. Without the support of the tourists, it is impossible to implement ecotourism effectively. A 'Cause related marketing' approach i.e., relating tourism with environmental protection will bring the desired result in this direction.
2. The promotional materials like pamphlets and brochures published by the Tourism Department, District Tourism Promotion Council, Forest and Wildlife Department of Kerala, Kerala Forest Development Corporation etc. should include the details regarding the need for conservation and ecotourism practices in Kerala.
3. Foreign tourists should be targeted more, since they are having higher level of awareness and attitude towards ecotourism and conservation in Kerala.
4. Setting up of an Environmental Education Centre at the entry point of the ecotourism destinations will be useful to make the tourists aware of the features of the ecosystem of the area, the flora and fauna available, need for conservation of that place, the environmental rules to be followed by the tourists during their visit and the consequences of the depletion of the natural and ecological resources.

CONCLUSION

Though ecotourism is considered as a special type of tourism used to attract tourists having an interest in nature and environmental consciousness, it can be used as a powerful weapon for preventing environmental degradation of ecologically sensitive tourism destinations. Also, the expenditure for the conservation of habitats in these areas can be contributed by the revenue generated from ecotourism. Ecotourism has the advantage of winning the co-operation and participation of tourists for the preservation of the natural attractions of a particular tourism destination. As far as Kerala is concerned, tourism growth depends on the natural beauty of the state, and it is necessary to preserve this beauty to continue the present benefits of tourism in this state. To make it practical, the need for the hour is to create awareness among the tourists about the ecotourism activities, environmental laws followed and the conservational efforts of the tourism destinations they are visiting. This leads to a favourable attitude in tourists towards ecotourism and conservation of natural tourism resources of the destination and ensure their full co-operation and involvement in the promotion of a low impact form of responsible tourism.

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