

A Panoramic Odyssey of Eco-Tourism in Placid Puducherry

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Abstract: *Eco-tourism has gained ample momentum in recent years setting scope for niche tourism. Eco-tourism by all means generates huge economic benefit, better destination value and unique tour experiences. At the same time, managing the elements and resources which enable eco-tourism in a destination are highly challenging. The purpose of eco-tourism is ultimately not to bring in myriad of tourists to the destination, but to create a sustainable tourism for a gainful future. In Tourism, the destination itself becomes the product in spite of having several attractions and so a holistic way of managing and developing the destination is vital. In fact, Eco-tourism is an approach to green tourism where issues and challenges keep rising. In order to understand and highlight the opportunities, nuances, practices and challenges of eco-tourism, the famous historic tourism destination Puducherry, is identified for the study. Rich theoretical inputs coupled with field study serves as the information base for the paper. After a thorough study, suitable suggestions are offered.*

Keywords: Eco-Tourism, Tourists, Destination, Host Community.

1. Introduction

The concept of eco-tourism is novel and imminent. It involves travelling to fragile and pristine places, especially in less number so as to preserve the eco-system (Honey, 1999). Eco-tourism is nature-based and ethically managed so as to create less impact and enable conserve such areas (Fennell, 2007). As per Ceballos-Lascuráin (1987), eco-tourism is defined as “...*Traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural area with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural manifestations found in these areas...*”

Though different definitions have evolved on eco-tourism, the above one forms the base for the research which clearly defines the nature of eco-tourism. The focus here lies in not only visiting an undisturbed location, but also to keep in mind that the resources like flora, fauna, local culture and other elements are to remain undisturbed during visitation by the tourists. Eco-tourism also involves observing and appreciating natural features and cultural assets of the destination (Wood, 2002). To ascertain these aspects, the historic destination Puducherry is identified for the study.

1.1 Study Methods

This is a real time factual study and does not assume any concept thereby eliminating the need for any hypothesis. The sources of data are primarily constituted from field visits, personal visit to the spots, observation method, Government publications, books, historical records and so on. This research is a qualitative one and relies on historical research method to accomplish the study.

2. Essentials of Eco-Tourism

There are several vital areas that a destination should consider while planning to develop or practice eco-tourism. Eco-tourism should involve travelling to archaeological sites or unusual locations and it should benefit the local communities (Chesworth, 1995). Kusler (1991) suggests

that, in Eco-tourism the tourists should be interested to know about the forests, rivers, local people and also the causes of the destruction of the forests and so on. The flora, fauna and its species, the ecosystem etc., should also be given due importance in eco-tourism (Orams, B.M, 1995). Thus, from the above, it could be gleaned that a Destination would comprise framing of proper guidelines and involving host community in practicing Eco-Tourism.

3. Destination Puducherry

The Union Territory of Puducherry in India is located in the Coromandel Coast facing Bay of Bengal. It is 160 Kilometres away from Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu. The original name of the destination is “*Puducheri*”, a French word which means ‘new settlement’. The history refers this place as *Vedapuram* which means ‘seat of knowledge’ on account of sage Agastya’s sojourn at this place during his travel towards the South of India. Right from the 4th century till 14th century A.D, Puducherry has been ruled, nourished, carved and sculptured by different empires like the *Pallava, Chola, Pandya* and *Vijayanagar*. From the 15th century A.D, the destination saw the Colonial hands of the Dutch, Danes, British and French. Right from 1815 until the merger of Puducherry with the Union Territory of India in 1954, the French instilled their culture, heritage, economy and polity, which now helps the destination to showcase its pristine glory to the world in the form of tourism (INTACH, 2005).

‘*Arikamedu*’ - The Archeological Site

Arikamedu is situated at the banks of *Ariyankuppam* river, 4 Kms., south of Puducherry. The excavations reveal that, this port town was inhabited by the Romans, Cholas and the French who imported goods from the Mediterranean basin such as Olive oil, ceramic lights, etc., and also exported clothes, beads, spices and so on. The excavations suggest that *Arikamedu* was inhabited during 300 A.D to 700 A.D. Chola coins, Chinese pottery and East Asian glazed ceramics were unearthed. The remains of the Seminary, built by the Bishop of Adran Monsieur Pigneau De Behaine, during

1771-73 A.D, bring to light the use of mixed style of bricks. The site is now declared as the Heritage site and is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (Puducherry Tourism, 2011). Thus the place has a rich history and a huge potential for eco-tourism. As of now, this site is not open for the tourists. The Department of Tourism, Government of Puducherry is working on with some restoration aspects before it could be declared as a tourist spot (The Hindu, 2012).



Figure 1: Remains of the Seminary in Arikamedu

3.1 The backwaters of ‘Ariyankuppam’

The *Ariyankuppam* River which hosts the backwaters is clean and composed. This embraces the *Arikamedu* site and serves as a sanctuary for several species of birds. Nature lovers, bird watchers and eco-tourists are facilitated by its quaint atmosphere. These backwaters are yet to be promoted as tourists’ spot, as required infrastructure is not available.

3.2 The French Quarter

In Puducherry, the French settled in a separate area which is known as ‘The French Quarter’. The entire area has houses built in a European style. The roads are spacious and the buildings are lofty. The houses have flat roof with front and back yards. Their interiors include paintings in golden frame, chandeliers made of Belgian Crystal, clocks and mirrors from France. The French had an utmost penchant for luxury. They adorned the living spaces with hand painted silk panels, lacquered folding screens, ivory objects and porcelain figurines (The Times Group, 2005). The facade is elegant and gives a historic feeling to the tourists who pass through the French quarter. Though Heritage walk is conducted in this area, eco-tourism is yet to be implemented.



Figure 3: Houses in French Style in Puducherry

4. Some observation on the Chosen site

The paper considers the above mentioned locations individually, for developing eco-friendly tourism practices. *Arikamedu*, which is an Archaeological site is isolated from the residential area of the destination which itself is an

advantage as it stays away from the villagers. Still, for a tourist, it is difficult to pass through the narrow lanes of the village and reach the site that too without the presence of any signboard. The area around the site has absolutely no authority to monitor, where certain unfriendly practices and garbage disposals on the very area near the site are common. A professional guide or an expert to explain the significance of the site is yet to be witnessed. It is high time, an information board be placed describing the importance of the site, so that any tourist will glean the history. It should also be ensured that the tourists’ vehicles be parked at least half-a-kilometre away from the site and may approach the site by walk.

The backwaters of *Ariyankuppam*, has actually no access as a jetty is yet to be constructed. Eco-friendly ferry may be used and strict monitoring should be done with regards to smoking and drinking during boating. Since the backwaters have mangroves, many birds find it as a sanctuary. Hence, cameras with flash should be prohibited as it may disturb the fauna. Waste disposal into the backwaters should be thoroughly monitored.

The French Quarter, though clean most of the times, witnesses movement of tourists cabs, vans, cars and so on which should be prohibited. Information boards stating the significance of the Colonial styled buildings should be made available on prominent locations. A tour guide should be present, who can conduct heritage walk at any given point of time.

5. Framing Guidelines

Once the locations are thoroughly analyzed, the required infrastructure should be developed and be equipped to conduct eco-tours. Since the chosen locations do not have a definite guideline for the guests and hosts, the following opinions may be carefully considered to concoct set of contours for the guests and hosts with respect to Eco-tourism.

1. The tourists’ parking lot should be at least 500 metres away from the eco-site, so that the site and the inhabitants are not disturbed
2. Mass tourism should be restricted, as it may not comply with the carrying capacity of the site
3. Any sort of disposals should be strictly prohibited, which may include throwing away the used bottles, papers, cigarettes, eatables and so on
4. Disturbing the flora should be avoided
5. Use of mobile phones should be restricted
6. Use of flash cameras should be avoided so that the fauna is not disturbed
7. Signage and information boards should be eco friendly
8. The host community should be educated about the importance of the eco-tourism sites so that they actively involved in conserving the area
9. Any kind of snack bars should be made available only in the vicinity of the site and not in the interiors

The study reveals that, the Destination has a huge potential for Tourism. As per the statistics, the Destination Puducherry has witnessed an increase of 16.11 per cent growth in foreign tourists’ arrivals during the year 2011(The

Hindu, 2011). In 2010, the foreign tourist's arrivals were 73,412, whereas in 2011 it went up to 80,687 which clearly indicate that the Destination is much sought after (The Hindu, 2012). Hence the concept of Eco-tourism should be well defined and implemented in the Destination, so as to foster the inflow of eco-tourists.

6. Scope for Further Development

The Destination has a wide scope for further development in this area of eco-tourism and may consider the following suggestions for furtherance.

6.1 Creating Eco-friendly provisions

The Destination should focus on converting all the current entertainment and other related provisions into an eco-friendly one, as that of the resting shades in the Promenade beach. The picture shown below is an ideal eco-friendly resting place for the tourists.



Figure 4: Eco-friendly shades for the tourists

6.2 Creating Eco-tourist' Club

Eco-tourists clubs can be created which may include the tourists, local residents and Government officials, where certain activities may be taken up to promote eco-tourism in the destination (Reddy, S.E, 2008).

6.3 Separate wing for Eco-tourism

The Department of Tourism, Government of Puducherry may dedicate a special wing only for Eco-tourism. This wing can actively involved in identifying spots for Eco-tourism and develop them. They may also create Natural History Library which may have collections pertaining to history of the Destination, the Geography, Indigenous species of flora and fauna etc.

6.4 Devising Eco-tourism tour packages

The Tourism Department and the Tour operators may join together to create special tour packages which involves only eco-tours. Normally the Destination offers one day tour package to the general tourists. In Eco-tourism packages, it could be extended for one more day where more time could be spent in nature based tourism. The tourists should be given a copy of the guidelines well in advance so that they are kept informed about the responsibility in conserving the nature.

6.5 Promoting Bird Watching Tourism

The backwaters of *Ariyankuppam*, has an amazing stretch of trees and plants which hosts different species of birds. As per the season, birds from various countries migrate and sojourn here. Proper means of promoting this aspect could be identified to benefit the Destination and Tourists as well.



Figure 5: Backwaters – Scope for Bird Watching Tourism

6.6 Developing Naturalists

Naturalists are guides who know the geography of the eco-site, the species of flora and fauna, their characteristic features and so on (Buckley, 2010). These naturalists should be from the local community and rigorous training should be given in the special areas of eco-tourism as well as in the behavioral skills, which will enable them to move professionally with the tourists.

6.7 Education and Capacity building for the Hosts

Hosts are the local community who live near the eco-tourism sites and who access these sites for their regular use (Schmink, 1999). The local community should be exposed to various aspects of eco-tourism, its vitality and they should be economically benefited (Brandon, 1996). They can be trained as guides, naturalists, snack vendors, sellers of hand made goods like soaps, incense, candle, wall hangings etc.



Figure 6: Handmade eco-friendly items for sale

6.8 Developing Eco-friendly accommodations

Eco-hotels or eco-lodges are those which depend on the natural environment, be ecologically sustainable and contribute to the conservation of environment (Faiers, 2005). These hotels reuse the waste and recycle the used elements of the hotels, thereby functioning without disturbing the environment. In this chosen Destination, there are only a couple of eco-friendly resorts available. The Government

should grant enough incentives to those owners who wish to come up with eco-hotels.



Figure 7: Eco-friendly guestrooms made of bamboos at 'The Dune', Puducherry

7. Conclusion

The study has witnessed a holistic approach in exploring Eco-tourism in the Destination. Each and every element goes hand-in-hand in strengthening the Eco-tourism potential of the place. Government's involvement along with Private entrepreneurs' is mandatory in formulating and implementing the Eco-tourism plan. The Local community's contribution in the site conservation should be acknowledged and certain assistance should be rendered to sustain the site. The study has thus given roots to explore in future, certain other areas like Public Private Partnership in Eco-tourism, Community Empowerment and so on.

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