

Historical and Analytical Study on Eco-Tourism In Pichavaram In Cuddalore District, Tamilnadu

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Abstract

Eco-tourism is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial tourism. Its purpose may be to generate funds for conservation of environment, to provide environmental education to the traveler to enable economic empowerment of the local dependent communities and to foster respect for various cultures. Pichavaram the second largest Mangrove forest in the world, near the temple town of Chidambaram, is one of the unique Eco-tourism spots in India.

(Key Words: Eco Tourism, Mangrove, Forest, Fishing, Boating.)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most important industries of the World. It stands next only to the oil industry. It provides employment opportunity to Millions of people, besides earning considerable foreign exchange for the Nation concerned.

The term **Eco-Tourism** was coined in 1983 by “**Hector Ceballos-Lascurian**” a Mexican environmentalist, and was initially used to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with an emphasis on education. The concept has, however, developed into a scientific approach for planning, management, and development of sustainable tourism products and activities.

Scope of the Study

Eco-tourism stresses on significance of conservation and welfare activities along with recreation. Many tourists assume that merely traveling to natural areas is ecotourism. But the true meaning of eco tourism is uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel. A walk through the rainforest is not eco tourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. A rafting trip is only eco tourism if it raises awareness and funds to help protect the watershed.

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Pichavaram- As a Tourist Centre

Cuddalore District is one of the districts of the Southern Indian State of Tamilnadu. The city of Cuddalore is the district headquarters. According to the 2011 Census, Cuddalore district had a population of 2605914 with a sex-ratio of 987 females for every 1,000 males.

Pichavaram the second largest Mangrove forest in the world, near the temple town of Chidambaram, is one of the unique Eco-tourism spots in India. The backwaters, inter connected by the Velar and Coleroon river systems, offer abundant scope for water sports, rowing, kayak and canoeing. The Pichavaram forest not only offers waterscape and back water cruises, but combines another very rare occurrence the mangrove forest trees permanently rooted in a few feet of water.

Mangrove Forest

Pichavaram mangrove forest is located between two prominent estuaries, the Velar estuary in the North and Coleroon estuary in the South. The Velar-Coleroon estuarine complex forms the Killai backwater and Pichavaram Mangroves.

Pichavaram has a well-developed Mangrove forest. Pichavaram consists of a number of Islands interspersing a vast expanse of water covered with green trees. The area is about 1100 Hectare and is separated from the sea by a sand bar. The Pichavaram Mangrove biotope consisting of rare species like *Avicenna* and *Rhizophora* presents a special attraction, with its particular topography and environmental condition. It supports the existence of many rare varieties of economically important shell and fin fishes.

The Pichavaram Mangroves attract an appreciable bird population of residents, local migrants and true migrants. Amongst others, one can view birds like snipes, cormorants, egrets, strokes, herons, spoonbills and pelicans. At the Mangrove, so far, 177 species of birds belonging to 15 orders and 41 families have been recorded. The season for birds is from September to April every year. Peak population of birds could be seen from November to January. This is due to high productive nature (in terms of prey organisms) of the ecosystem and coincidence of the time of arrival of true migrants from foreign countries and local migrants from their breeding grounds across India. The availability of different habitat types such as channels, creeks, gullies, mud flats and sand adjacent sea shore offers ideal habitat for difference species of birds and animals.

The Mangroves

Mangroves are salt tolerant plants. They are found in tropical and subtropical coastal areas. Mangroves are of two dominant types, riverine-type that fringes rivers and tidal creeks and the open water type that is directly exposed to waves. The former type is the most common. In India, Mangroves at Pichavaram and Gulf of Mannar Islands are examples of above types.

The word mangrove may be derived from Portuguese and English. ‘**Mangue**’ means **tree**, and ‘**grove**’ means **group of trees**. The vegetation in Mangrove consists of many species. It may be a woody plant in the form of a tree or a shrub. The ability to live in brackish to seawater conditions vary with species.

Importance of Mangroves

Mangroves act as a barrier against cyclonic storms, protecting the land behind. They also act as a buffer against floods, preventing soil erosion.

Mangroves trap fine sediments that are carried into the coastal zone by floodwaters, and there is a significant net export of nutrients from the Mangroves into the coastal zone, which acts as a source of enrichment for the marine environment. Mangroves prevent inorganic nutrients being sunk in the sea through swift flowing terrestrial runoff and synthesis organic matter absorbing the inorganic nutrients. Hence various inorganic nutrients from the terrestrial runoff are recycled within the Mangrove environment.

Pichavaram Forest

The Pichavaram Mangrove wetland has 51 islets and the total area of the Vellar-Pichavaram-Coleroon estuarine complex is 2335.5 ha of which only 241 ha. is occupied by dense mangrove vegetation. Nearly 593 ha, of this wetland is occupied by helophytic vegetation like *Suaeda*, 262.5 ha. by barren mud flats and 1238.50 ha. by barren high saline soil. Of this, the mangrove wetland occupies only 1100 ha., comprising the entire mangrove vegetation located in the middle portion of the Vellar-Pichavaram-Coleroon wetland which has been declared on 15th December 1987 as a reserved forest by the Department of Forest, Government of Tamil Nadu.

Two major rivers viz. Vellar and Coleroon drain into the Bay of Bengal in this area. The area between the two rivers has brackish water with Mangrove vegetation. The area is covered by alluvium in the western part and fluvial marine and beach sands in the eastern part.

Boating

The backwater connected by the Velar and Coleroon systems, offer abundant scope for water sports such as rowing, kayaking and canoeing. The Pichavaram forest not only offers waterscape and back water cruises, but combines another very rare occurrence the mangrove forest trees permanently rooted in a few feet of water. There are more than 400 water routes available for boating.

Film Shooting Spot

In late 1970s, the scenic beauty of Pichavaram Mangroves has attracted movie makers to shoot their films in the shallow waterways. Through the movies, Pichavaram has become a tourist place. With the advent of tourist flow, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) has also announced this place as a tourist spot and listed it in State’s tourist map from 1985 onwards. TTDC is maintaining Cottages, Dormitory and Restaurant for tourists. About 500-1000 tourists visit Pichavaram every day.

Aquaculture

Aquaculture of shrimps is carried out in about 40 ha area, around Pichavaram. Traditional and semi-intensive type of aquaculture is practiced. Species of *Penaeus* are cultured in aqua farms. No Mangrove area has been converted for aquaculture.

Role of Socio-Economic – Pichavaram Mangroves

Decrease in Mangrove area could be attributed to large scale felling by human activity and grazing of cattle. Mangrove vegetation is traditionally known for fodder for the cattle and the trees as timber and fuel for households. Discussion with local people and officials revealed that usage of Mangrove for fuel has been greatly reduced. Though large scale felling has been reduced to a great extent, illicit felling is still continuing on a miniscule level in the dense interior areas.

Use of Mangrove for fuel wood and fodder seems to be an important factor causing degradation. Another important factor observed was insufficient tidal flushing to interior / elevated areas, where soils have become hyper saline and devoid of vegetation.

Birds

Pichavaram Mangrove Ecosystem attracts a number of true migratory and local migratory birds. Favorable season for the visit of birds is from September to April every year and the peak population could be observed between November and January. Shallow water area with high density of macro benthos serves as excellent feeding grounds for the birds. Macrobenthos form staple diet for shore birds. Common occurrence of piscivorous birds (members of Ardeidae and Laridae) is due to occurrence of many species of fishes in plenty which form their diet. In the food web, egrets, herons, storks, gulls, terns and raptors hold top position owing to their habit of feeding on fishes. As many as 57 species of birds are reported from this area.

Fishing

About 147 species of fishes are recorded from the Pichavaram area. Of this, 74 species are marine forms and 64 species are brackish water forms. Total catch of fish is around 200 tones/year. Mulletts are the dominant fishes captured. *Metapenaeus monoceros*, *M. dobsoni*, *Penaeus indicus* and *P. monodon* are the dominant species among shrimp. Crafts such as catamaran and dugout canoes and gears such as small seine net, push net, scoop net, cast net, crab traps, etc, are used for fishing.

Dawn Fest (Vidial Vizha)

The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation and the District Administration of Cuddalore District conducting an Eco Tourism Festival namely “Dawn Fest” (vidial vizha) at Pichavaram. The highlights of ‘Dawn Fest’ are:

- i. Boat ride witnessing the Irula Tribals prawns and crabs.
- ii. Enjoying folk and traditional instrumental music performance on a “Floating stage” from boats.
- iii. Night dinner(sea food festival)
- iv. Viewing ‘Sun rise’ in the back ground of south Indian instrumental and yoga demonstration.
- v. Early morning bird watch and Boating through the mangroves.

Dawn Fest offers a unique experience to international and domestic tourist at very national. This rare Eco-tourism event also offers an opportunity to witness the devastation of Tsunami and the spectacular recovery.

Domestic and Foreign Tourists arrivals in Pichavaram

The Table-1 shows the growth pattern of Domestic and Foreign tourist arrivals in Pichavaram. Notably, the foreign tourist arrival has increased from 0.60 lakhs in 2010 to 1.93 lakhs in 2019 in the city. The number of domestic tourists also increased from 8.70 lakhs in 2010 to 13.32 in 2019. This is because either directly or indirectly by the improvement in the basic infrastructure provided by the Government of Tamil Nadu in Pichavaram.

Table - 1
Domestic and Foreign Tourists Arrivals in Pichavaram (2010-2019)
(in lakhs)

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total
2010	8.70	0.60	9.30
2011	8.90	0.65	9.55
2012	9.01	0.68	9.78

2013	9.50	0.70	10.20
2014	9.88	0.81	10.69
2015	10.87	0.87	11.74
2016	11.49	0.95	12.44
2017	12.67	1.10	13.77
2018	12.90	1.68	14.58
2019	13.32	1.93	15.25

(Source: Tamilnadu Tourism Development Corporation)

Revenue from Tourists Arrivals in Pichavaram

The revenue (Table - 2) by the foreign tourists in **Pichavaram** was Rs.50.60 lakhs in 2010 and it was steeply increased to Rs.97.34 lakhs in 2019. As well as the domestic tourists revenue was Rs.170.40 lakhs in 2010 and it has increased to Rs.301.65 lakhs in 2019.

Table - 2
Revenue from Tourists Arrivals in Pichavaram (2010-2019)

(in lakhs)

Year	Foreigners	Domestic
2010	50.60	170.40
2015	75.60	210.50
2016	86.70	230.40
2017	92.40	247.11
2018	95.11	277.31
2019	97.34	301.65

(Source: Department of Tourism, Government of Tamil Nadu).

II. CONCLUSION

Ecotourism development in Pichavaram aims to ensure local economic benefits in a much bigger way accrue to the local communities which will lead to economic development of the local community by and large coupled with conservation of fragile ecosystem leading to balanced over all holistic development of the area.

Pichavaram is a tourism destination that focuses on sustainable and eco-friendly development of tourism. A treasure-trove of biodiversity and unparalleled natural attraction makes Pichavaram a unique ecotourism hotspot, of which the people are largely unaware. and at the same time impact and improve the livelihoods of the local.

Ecotourism may play a crucial role the way local communities benefit from mangrove ecosystem. The underlying cause of the indiscriminate, unsustainable use of natural resources is poverty. The dependent communities need to take out a living to survive by adopting alternate livelihood practices to give a go by to the previously followed unsustainable practices exerting stress on the limited natural resources.

Ecotourism's greatest contribution to conservation is the degree by which it can change individual oriented unsustainable practices perceived as threats to opportunities for development of communities and conservation of ecosystem.

Ecotourism in Pichavaram will promote conservation only when local communities clearly reap benefits out of this initiative and when they comprehend and are able to link their improved living conditions to the continued existence of healthy and sustainable mangrove forests. An atmosphere of trust needs to be built between the forest department and the local communities dependent on the mangrove ecosystem through ecotourism initiative with the forest department, playing largely a facilitators role.

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