

Ecodevelopment in Periyar – the eco-tourism model

Periyar Tiger Reserve provides some examples of how threats to habitat can be substantially reduced if local people are directly involved in, made aware and provided economic incentives in protecting their forests. It tells us of how innovative schemes can be designed within the stringent legal strictures which govern most Protected Areas. The uniqueness of the eco-development programmes in Periyar lies in their ability to recognize site-specific concerns and evolve strategies which can address these concerns.

(1) Analysis of the threats to habitat within Periyar

Cinnamon bark (teak/rosewood/sandalwood) smuggling

The presence of the Sabarimala Temple inside the Reserve precincts – pilgrim traffic, increase in local services for pilgrim traffic like shops, hotels

Poaching

Grazing/ biotic pressures like fuelwood, NTFP

Local groups involved in cultivation of crops like pepper

(2) Mid-1990s – Policing alone not possible, local population must somehow be involved and given a stake in the process.

(3) Establishing EDCs based on locality, ethnicity, professional backgrounds and habits

The EDCs can be categorized into four functional groups depending on their mode of operation:

- Neighbourhood EDCs - families in a particular geographical or administrative area;
- Professional EDCs - organized along occupational lines;
- User Group EDCs - organized to utilize a particular physical resource; and
- Pilgrim Management EDCs - organized to provide a specific service to pilgrims.
- (Some EDC members have been employed directly by the reserve authorities to provide specific conservation services.)

(To date, 72 committees have been established, with approximately 5 540 families participating - from an overall target population of 58 000 people living within a 2-kilometre radius of the Periyar Tiger Reserve.)

* Ex-vayana bark collectors EDC – formed by ex-poachers and smugglers of vayana bark

Given training in basics of forest protection and management (Wildlife management, protection, tourist behaviour, human resource development, financial management and the modes of functioning of the eco-development committee)

Tourism-related activities – trekking, rafting, night camps, wildlife spotting

Form patrol squads; help Reserve staff in protecting the forest as they have an intimate knowledge of the forest

1998-2002

arrest of 10 sandalwood smugglers, 19 vayana bark collectors, 2 elephant tusk poachers and 7 others engaged in illegal activities

information on 6 cases of sandalwood smuggling, 2 cases of vayana bark collection and 4 cases of poaching

* Swamy Ayyappan Poonkavanam Punaruddharana (SAAP) EDCs

400 people from 25 local villages, who previously worked as casual labourers for shopkeepers on the pilgrimage route

These EDCs are allowed to open shops during the festival season (but must dismantle them after the festival) under the strict supervision of reserve authorities.

Materials used in construction of the shops are brought from outside the forest.

Reserve staff oversee waste disposal and ensure quality and reasonable prices for food sold.

Use of plastic packaging is not allowed, instead reserve staff supply alternative packing materials.

A liquid petroleum gas outlet has been established to supply villagers with an alternative fuel source, thereby removing demand for fuelwood from nearby forests.

* Tribal Trackers-cum-Guides EDCs

Indigenous tribal groups who were engaged in fishing and the collection of honey and fuelwood.

Initially 12 members, but this has expanded to 19

They take small groups of tourists on three-hour sightseeing trips, either on foot or by riding a raft.

Guides paid a daily retainer by tour operators.

Some members of the Tribal Trackers EDC work independent of tour operators and take groups on their own into the sanctuary.

Each guide receives a fixed monthly stipend from the EDC.

- (a) What is the nature of the collaboration between the Forest Department – degree of involvement/ autonomy? Where does the accountability for each of these schemes lie? Who has the final say in decision-making? What are the mechanisms of power-sharing?
- (b) Formative stages – what was the nature of collaboration? Stages of formation?
- (c) Formation of ecodevelopment committees on the basis of social, ethnic and occupational groups? Has it worked better than using traditional village institution mechanisms? How?
- (d) Even though the Periyar example of ecodevelopment seems more imaginative – partially suited to occupational practices or ethnic groups, what are the existing dynamics within these groups – intra and inter? It may be so that certain groups have more negotiating power with the FD while other traditionally marginalized groups may not reap the benefits – tribal groups like the Mannans who originally inhabited Sanctuary land, were relocated and then displaced from the land where they had been resettled. Does ecodevelopment work within such extreme contexts, to ameliorate adverse conditions of already such weakened groups?
- (e) It seems to make a lot of sense in terms of economic incentives for groups and aiding the conservationist agenda of the FD but the entire emphasis seems to be on eco-tourism. Does this imply a complete shift in livelihood patterns and if so, is that a healthy trend? What are the other livelihood practices of people who are a part of EDCs? Eco-tourism as a concept? While it might make economic sense, what impact does it have on the cultural identities of groups?
- (f) What are the conservation services that EDC members are involved in? What is the weightage of these services vis-à-vis tourism-related services?
- (g) Is work under ecodevelopment supplementary or the mainstay of family incomes? Economic returns? Satisfactory?
- (h) Statistical data – fall in poaching/smuggling/biotic pressures? – improvement in habitat?

- (i) How are fuel/fodder requirements taken care of, considering that Reserve areas were once primary sources of these for local communities?
- (j) Dispute resolution – who arbitrates?
- (k) Long-term strategies of ecodevelopment in general and the eco-tourism model
in Periyar in particular