

Wildlife sanctuary ecotourism in Kerala, India: An alternative source of livelihood for resident tribal families

Bill Fleming

University of New Mexico, USA

Jeanie Fleming

Freelance writer, editor and photographer, USA

The Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary in the southern Indian state of Kerala was established in 1962 as a reserve and enlarged in 1973 and 1985 to become a 285 square kilometer sanctuary with significant botanical and wildlife habitat. The setting and diversity of animals, including 268 bird species, 39 species of mammals, 61 species of reptiles, 47 species of fish, 16 species of amphibians and 124 species of butterflies, make Parambikulam a tourist destination. Due to its remote location, it has access only through Anamalai Tiger Reserve, a section of Indira Gandhi National Park in neighboring Tamil Nadu. There are no private tourist facilities nearby (unlike parks such as Corbett and Rathambore). The sanctuary itself provides lodging and meals for tourists. Over 47,500 people visited the Sanctuary in 2011-12, with a daily limit of 200 visitors. Private vehicles are limited to 30 per day. The authors visited Parambikulam in the winter of 2011-12 and found it an excellent example of making local livelihood a key component of park management. Methods of data collection included interviews, photo records and field evaluations with tribal guides.

The Sanctuary is home to four indigenous communities with a population of over a thousand. These tribal people were persuaded to sell their grazing cattle in return for alternative jobs in the Sanctuary's operation where 200 are employed. The jobs are dependent on natural resources, reinforcing the importance of conservation. One reclusive tribe participates mainly in animal census taking and wildlife protection. Visitors are required to engage the services of a tribal guide. Tribal people run the food and lodging services with Forest Department supervision. The Forest Department has established seven eco-development committees to direct ecotourism benefits to tribal communities, with activities ranging from trekking and ornithology to cultural performances

and ecosystem protection. The department also promotes natural resource education for visitors and residents. To reduce plastic refuse, plastic bottles are not permitted in the Sanctuary, and bottles of purified water are sold at the entrance with a refund when returned.

Are the conservation successes of Parambikulam transferable to other reserves in India and South Asian countries? Or does the remote location and special circumstances of access make it unique? Are there components of the management plan that could serve as models for other protected ecosystems? Tiger poaching has been a problem in other areas of the country. When asked if tigers are ever killed by poachers in the reserve, a guide was clearly shocked by the notion and replied that it does not happen there. The three dozen or so tigers are so clearly important to the current welfare of the local people that protecting them has become the job of local people who have many eyes and ears in the forest. In July 2012, a proposed tiger reserve in Tamil Nadu was protested by 4,000 tribal people who were not consulted about being moved away from their traditional homes. The government relented.

Key to the Parambikulam plan has been attention to employment of sanctuary residents in varied aspects of eco-tourism, from forest watchers and census takers to jobs involving direct contact with tourists. For example, instead of transporting tourists quickly by motorboat to the Island Nest for an overnight stay, four tribal rowers ferry guests for a quiet hour across the water. Once docked, the rowers ready the quarters then become cooks, preparing the evening meal and breakfast. A tribal guide leads a tour of the island before tourists are taken back to the boat for the return. Each of these trips provides two or three full days employment for five local men. In addition to guiding, tourist-related jobs include numerous kitchen and lodging maintenance staff, tribal musicians and dance performers. A shop at Anappady, managed by tribal people, sells local forest products such as honey and eucalyptus balm. Women as well as men are employed. Such an ambitious plan requires imagination, monitoring and constant refining, but can be effective in protecting the ecosystem, providing livelihoods for the local people, and a rich experience for visitors.

Divisional Forest Officer Sanjayan Kumar was concerned but optimistic about how the ecotourism project would affect the Sanctuary: "No forest is safe when it is opened for tourists, but if we open it in a

controlled manner, we can still achieve conservation objectives. One can't achieve an oasis of conservation in a socioeconomic desert. We have to empower the poor tribal people living in and around the sanctuary who are paying the price of conservation for people in the cities. By providing sustainable, low-intensity eco-tourism we empower the local communities and also involve them in conservation."