INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW

MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

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Ecological Pioneering in India: An Inquiry into the Growth of Eco-Tourism with Emphasis on Kerala

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Abstract

As the threat of global warming and environmental degradation continues to rise, ecotourism has become increasingly popular. Ecotourism aims to promote and preserve fragile and undisturbed natural environments, connect secluded areas with mainstream tourism, reduce carbon footprints, and conserve indigenous cultural traditions. India, with its diverse and rich cultural legacy, is well positioned to capitalise on this trend. This research paper will analyse the growth of ecotourism in India, along with the challenges that the country faces in promoting such practices. It will begin with an introduction to ecotourism, its benefits, and how it differs from sustainable tourism. The paper will then delve into the evolution and development of ecotourism globally, and its recognition in India. It provides an overview of the current state of ecotourism in India, including the "jurisprudential view of ecotourism" in the country. The paper also highlights the initiatives implemented by the Kerala government in promoting responsible tourism, which led to recognition with the highest award given to government entities. However, while ecotourism has the potential, there are also challenges associated with it. The paper will highlight the impact that excessive commercialisation of ecotourism can have on the environment and indigenous people. The author will also deliberate upon the challenges that India faces in the growth of ecotourism, illuminating the shortcomings and progress that the country can make in this niche industry. Encouraging sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the local community and the environment is crucial, and ecotourism holds promise for achieving this objective.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Evolution, Jurisprudential View, Kerala, Challenges.

I. Introduction

It is well mentioned by Jochen Flashbarth that *"Tourism is like fire: you can cook your food with it, but if you are not careful, it could also burn your house down! Or to put it another way: tourism offers opportunities for economic, social and ecological development, but only if the*

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risks involved are not overlooked".

Tourism is seen as employment and income generation sector, but conventional mass tourism is often associated with numerous negative effects, which includes environmental damage, loss of traditional culture, among others. To counter this, a term has recently surfaced, that is, sustainable tourism or eco-tourism.

Ecotourism aims to promote and preserve fragile and undisturbed natural environments, connect secluded areas with mainstream tourism, reduce carbon footprints, and conserve indigenous cultural traditions. This type of tourism is exclusively based on the 'nature-based tourism', and visitors are primarily drawn to it to observe and admire the environment and the local traditional customs.[3] The definition and interpretation of the concept of ecotourism is seeing a constant revision. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), in 2015, modified the definition of ecotourism by adding one more pillar to it, that is, "interpretation", apart from "Conservation and Local Communities". It now defines it as *"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education"* [4]. By incorporating "interpretation", ecotourism has evolved to foster greater awareness and respect for the environment, the community, and their cultural traditions, while also educating visitors and employees alike. In light of India's alignment of its tourism industry development with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the Indian government has moved its focus on green tourism.[5] It aims to bring together environmental protection, local communities, and sustainable travel to promote minimal physical, social, behavioural, and psychological effects and to foster respect for and awareness of diverse cultural and environmental perspectives. It respects the rights and spiritual practices of the local indigenous population and collaborates with them to foster empowerment.

A. Ecotourism And Sustainable Tourism

People often conflate the terms 'sustainable tourism' and 'ecotourism', viewing them as interchangeable terms. Sustainable tourism can be defined as "*tourism that meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future*"[6]. Thus, it can be considered as a concept encompassing ecotourism. The *Brundtland*

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[3] *What is Ecotourism?*, PARKS AND FORESTS, DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND SCIENCE, QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT (Jul. 13, 2023), https://parks.des.qld.gov.au/management/ecotourism/about.

[4] *What is Ecotourism?*, THE INTERNATIONAL ECOTOURISM SOCIETY, https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/.

[5] Parvez Sultan, *New tourism policy aims at making India a top destination by 2030*, THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS (Jan. 11, 2022), https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2022/jan/11/new-tourism-policy-aims-at-making-india-a-top-destinationby-2030-2405501.html (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).

[6] Lucian Cernat & Julien Gourdon, *Is the Concept of Sustainable Tourism Sustainable?*, United Nations

Report (1987) by the Global Commission on Environment and Development described ecotourism as rooted in the concept of sustainable development.[7] As today's market is becoming greener and more environmentally sensitive than ever, sustainability in tourism is gradually gaining more attention in tourism industries of diverse interests, both as a stable and prosperous leisure activity, and as a means of conservation and development.

B. Benefits

Strategically planned and well-executed ecotourism can serve as a driving force for conserving the environment. This form of tourism can provide crucial financial resources to maintain national parks and other natural sites. It fosters local economic growth by generating jobs and money without harming or degrading the environment's natural and cultural resources. Ecotourism can be a potent instrument in enabling local communities to combat poverty and attain sustainable development worldwide. This form of tourism can enhance awareness and appreciation for local culture, while also shining a global spotlight on these communities, thereby generating a positive impact on the people and their locality. Boosted by its capacity to showcase a seeming win-win situation for all, it empowers locals and promotes intercultural understanding between host communities and tourists.

Currently, numerous countries are shifting towards ecotourism, including India. The Indian government, which assumed the presidency of G-20 in December 2022, has expressed its goal to establish the country as a premier travel destination. In light of India's alignment of its tourism industry development with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the Indian government has prioritized the promotion of 'green-tourism', which is a key area of focus.[8] Major reason why countries are going for eco-tourism is mainly because they see ecotourism as an important commercial niche and additionally it connects to the global conversation about environmental preservation and sustainable development. This motivates nations to take action to promote responsible travel and establish their nation as a leader in green tourism.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF ECO-TOURISM

The term 'ecotourism' was coined by Hetzer, who identified its four pillars as "reducing environmental impact, respecting host cultures, improving the benefits of local populations, and

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Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD/DITC/TNCD/2006/5 (2007), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctncd20065_en.pdf.

[7] TUĞBA KIPER, ROLE OF ECOTOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ADVANCES IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE 785 (2013).

[8] Mihir Shah, *View: Making India a green tourism destination is a step towards sustainability targets*, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (Sept. 27, 2022), https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/travel/view-making-india-a-green-tourism-destination-is-a-step-towards-sustainability-targets/articleshow/94475022.cms (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).

increasing traveller satisfaction".[9] In 1978, Miller provided another example of ecotourism while working on eco-development in Central America. The idea of ecotourism emerged in 1980s as a sustainable travel option for those seeking to explore new and exotic destinations without harming the environment.[10] Its goals include long-term sustainable development, natural resource conservation, income generation, education, and promotion of social benefits for local economic and infrastructural development.

After years of study and research, ecotourism gained recognition in the tourism industry, and in 1982, it was officially included in the Oxford English Dictionary. In the 1990s, it gained momentum as environmental conservation became a mainstream concern. The United Nations declared the year "2002" as both the "International Year of Ecotourism" and the "International Year of Mountains" to promote the cultural and natural value of ecotourism.[11] The establishment of the professional Journal of Ecotourism also occurred in the same year.[12] In 2003, the Center for Responsible Travel was established. Since then, the ecotourism industry has grown significantly, with a market share of USD 185.87 billion. According to forecasts, there is an expected growth trend that could see the industry increase at an annual average growth rate of approximately fifteen percent between 2022 and 2030.[13] This growth is primarily caused by increased awareness of the harmful impacts of tourism on the environment (such as habitat loss and air, water, and soil pollution), outdoor recreation, the popularity of immersive travel, the accessibility of low-cost flights, and rapid urbanisation, among other factors.

III. EXPLORING TOURISM PARADIGMS AND APPROACHES IN INDIA

Tourism is seen as an integral part of India's traditional and cultural system. From forests with rich biodiversity, comprising twelve percent of the world's flora species and seven percent of its animal species[14], to a good number of incredible natural heritage sites and largest tribal population, India has tremendous potential for ecotourism development. Ecotourism is

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[9] *Ecotourism: History, Types, Components, &* Importance, EARTH REMINDER, (Sept. 19, 2021), https://www.earthreminder.com/ecotourism-history-types-components-and-importance/.

[10] Kevin Bulger, *History of ecotourism — Intercultural Outreach Initiative*, INTERCULTURAL OUTREACH INITIATIVE, (Oct. 29, 2016), https://www.ioi.ngo/blog/2016/10/29/history-of-ecotourism.

[11] Atul Gupta, *Ecotourism: Principles, Importance, Guidelines and Mitigation | Tourism*, YOUR ARTICLE LIBRARY, https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/ecotourism/ecotourism-principles-importance-guidelines-and-mitigation-tourism/69053.

[12] Lishan Xu et al., *Ecotourism And Sustainable Development: A Scientometric Review Of Global Research Trends*, 25 ENVIRONMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY 2977 (2022).

[13] *Ecotourism Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Activity Type (Land, Marine), By Group (Solo, Group), By Booking Mode, By Age Group, By Region, And Segment Forecasts, 2022-2030*, GRAND VIEW RESEARCH, (2022), https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/ecotourism-market-report.

[14] P. Mallikharjuna Rao, *Sustaining Ecotourism In India – The Way Forward*, THE HANS INDIA (Sept. 26, 2022), https://www.thehansindia.com/hans/opinion/news-analysis/sustaining-ecotourism-in-india-the-way-forward-763119 (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).

becoming more and more recognised as a powerful instrument for conservation, a sustainable source of economic advantages for local people, and a facility to accommodate tourists. To understand the development of sustainable tourism in India, this section is divided into three parts:

1. Evolution of Indian Tourism: From Ignored Potential to Recognized Industry

2. Evolution of Indian Tourism Policies: From Strategic Planning to Sustainable Growth

3. Initiatives and Strategies for Incredible India

A. Evolution Of Indian Tourism: From Ignored Potential To Recognized Industry

Ever since independence India always had potential in tourism, though, it was not considered as an economic activity until the appointment of Sir John Sargeant Committee which suggested to see tourism as an economic force[15]. On the suggestions of this Committee, in 1949, the Indian government created the "Tourist Traffic Branch" under the Ministry of Transportation.[16] The Indian tourist industry received more focus in the National Five-Year Plan Agenda throughout the ensuing years. During the Second and Third Plans, special monies for improving this sector were provided, but they were not entirely made available for usage. During the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-1974), the focus was on enhancing India's tourism infrastructure to boost "destination traffic" rather than "transit traffic". The Fifth and Sixth Plans laid significant emphasis on tourism and prioritized the integrated development of specific tourist destinations such as Goa, Gulmarg, Kulu-Manali, and Kovalam. It was in the Sixth Plan (early 1980s) when the Government decided to draft a written policy on tourism. Tourism, in Seventh Plan period achieved the status of industry. However, India still lacked proper infrastructure and other facilities which were "pre-requisites" for establishing a good tourism base.

B. Evolution Of Indian Tourism Policies: From Strategic Planning To Sustainable Growth

As previously mentioned, the 1982 First National Tourism Policy was developed by the Indian government. The Manila Declaration on Global Tourism of 1980 and the economic potential of tourism served as the foundation for this approach.[17]. The government's role in the 1992 National Action Plan for Tourism was limited to strategic planning and the provision of

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[15] Amitabh Mishra, *Tourism Development in India: A Paradigm Shift in Policy and Strategy*, 7(2): 3-8, Winter 2015-16 NIET JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT (2015).
[16] Estimates Committee, Ministry of Transport Tourism, *Thirty Fourth Report (1956-57)* (Oct. 25, 1956), https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-10/ESTIMATES%20COMMITTEE%20THIRTY-FOURTH%20REPORT%201956-57.pdf.
[17] Manikanth Sharma, Deepti Dabas Hazarika, *Tourism Marketing in India: A Case Study*, 10 PACIFIC BUSINESS REVIEW INTERNATIONAL 83 (2017).

innovative incentives, with a focus on the development of tourism through private participation. In 2002, the Ministry of Tourism introduced the National Tourism Development Policy with the intention of utilizing tourism as a means of generating employment opportunities and reducing poverty while placing emphasis on preserving the environment.[18] In terms of revenue, employment, foreign exchange, and other indirect benefits, tourism was viewed as a crucial industry by the 2015 Tourism Policy. The most recent strategy is the National Tourism Policy of 2022 which is a part of the vision of New India[19]. The new strategy serves as a comprehensive framework for promoting responsible and sustainable growth of the tourism industry in India, while also fostering related businesses.

C. Initiatives And Strategies For Incredible India

Having a strong tourism base is not just about improvements in infrastructure, hotels and roads but it also demands efficient telecommunication, health care, security, bank facilities etc. Even if a region is fully developed in every aspect for tourists, it still requires marketing and promoting schemes. It can be in the form of print or digital media, among various other forms for inviting millions of tourists across the globe.

'Incredible India' initiative was the first such initiative[20] with the primary objective to showcase the unique identity of India to the world to appeal domestic as well as international tourists to travel India. *'Atithi Devo Bhavah',* which is a Sanskrit phrase profounding the significance of guests and treating them as 'God'. Sustained Cleanliness Drive at important tourist destinations was also introduced which involved schools, NGOs, industry associations and other agencies. Financial assistance was provided by the centre to set up way-side amenities for sustainable services. The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) focused on creating awareness and making requisite facilities available. The need of eliminating poverty was highlighted by accepting a 'poor centric' tourism approach. Since impoverished people sometimes lack the knowledge necessary to take advantage of opportunities in tourism, the plan placed a strong emphasis on capacity building and training programmes as a key technique for improving non-economic rewards for them.

The recent Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023, Gujarat Tourism Policy 2021-2025, Punjab Adventure Tourism Policy 2023, Punjab Water Tourism Policy, Uttarakhand Tourism Policy

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[18] Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism & Culture, Government of India, *National Tourism Policy*, 3 (2002), https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-11/National_tourism_Policy_2002.pdf.
[19] Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, *Draft National Tourism Policy*, 9 (Jul. 12, 2022, https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-09/Draft%20National%20Tourism%20Policy%202022%20Final%20July%2012.pdf).
[20] Manikanth Sharma & Deepti Dabas Hazarika, *supra* note 15.

2030, National Strategy and Roadmap for Medical and Wellness Tourism, are just few policies and schemes that collectively aim to unlock the marvels of India's rich heritage by fostering sustainable and diverse tourism opportunities across the country.

The Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023, for instance, emphasis on the development of eco-tourism by capitalizing on unique selling points. These include the establishment of eco-lodges that exemplify best practices in managing renewable resources and offering experiential learning opportunities. To ensure smooth collaboration between the forest and tourism departments for promoting eco-tourism, an institutional mechanism will be put in place. Furthermore, the plan involves the creation of health, wellness, and traditional healing centres, which will add to the overall appeal of the eco-tourism brand.[21]

IV. LEGAL JURISPRUDENTIAL VIEW OF ECO-TOURISM IN INDIA

It was once said by Leo Tolstoy that *"One of the first conditions of happiness is that link between man and nature should not be broken",* he thus very beautifully highlighted the fundamental importance of maintaining a healthy relationship between man and nature which is very critical for preservation of nature and well-being of human. Time and again, it is evident to see commercialisation of tourism at the cost of protecting environment, cultural heritage sites and local communities. Tourism should not be viewed solely as a 'revenue-generating sector', but as a form of 'sustainable tourism' promoting long-term benefits and sustainability to the area, people associated with such areas, and environment as a whole.

Eco-tourism in India is supported by various legal and juridical frameworks with the active role of judiciary in preventing the damage caused to the sustainability of environment. One such instance is the case of *Rakshit Joshi v. State of Uttarakhand & Ors.*[22] wherein the Uttarakhand High Court emphasised upon the need of determining the "carrying capacity" of tourist destinations that lie in a "biodiversity sensitive zone" by an expert committee and thereby restricting the number of tourists allowed to visit at any given time to avoid any congregation in an eco-sensitive area.

Protecting, improving and safeguarding the environment is one of the Directive Principles[23] of the State Government that is enshrined in the Fourth Part of the Constitution, while Part IV-A sets out the duty of the citizens to not only "protect and improve the natural environment", but

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[21] Meghalaya Tourism, *Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023*, 23 (Mar. 13, 2023), Meghalaya-Tourism-Policy-2023.pdf (investindia.gov.in).
[22] Rakshit Joshi v. State of Uttarakhand & Ors., WP PIL No. 74/2019 (India).
[23] INDIA CONST., art. 48(A).

also to have "compassion for the living creatures"[24]. It was remarked by the Hon'ble Court[25] that central government should identify, monitor and develop strategies for areas that possess abundant biological resources and such areas should be recognised as "Biodiversity Heritage Sites", under Section 37 of the Biodiversity Act[26]. The Court opined that attempt of enticing tourists should be balanced, which can be achieved by moving towards responsible and sustainable tourism.

The inadequate scientific handling of waste that is generated by tourism ultimately causes damage to the ecologically fragile regions. Tourism in Himalayan region was found to be generating some eight million tonnes of waste, annually[27]. This aspect was discussed by the National Green Tribunal in 2022[28] when it took the matter in light of a media report published by *The Hindu* titled "*Tourism has brought economic prosperity to the Himalayan region, but the environmental cost has been catastrophic*"[29]. The Tribunal instructed the G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment, Almora to prepare a report studying the Himalayan regions (consisting of 12 states) which was to be referred by the Secretary of the Environment for The Indian Government and the Chief Secretaries of 12 states concerned to prepare an effective action plan for addressing the negative effects of tourism on the environment when it is not managed properly.

The inadequate and uncomprehensive planning and attempt to grow tourism sector in the name of 'economic growth' has repeatedly been proven to be negative. The growth of tourism in areas where tribals are inhibited; the infrastructural construction activities of Andaman Island[30]; construction of the new airport in the Mopa plateau of Goa[31], which is a forested area with diverse ecosystem that provides a habitat for several endangered species; illegal construction activities, a similar aspect of which was discussed in the case of *Manoj Misra & Anr. v. Union of India & Ors.*[32], among other instances are raising deep concerns about the exploitation of biodiversity and disruption of the traditional practices due to attempts to commercialise local

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[24] INDIA CONST., art. 51-A(g).
[25] Rakshit Joshi v. State of Uttarakhand & Ors., WP PIL No. 74/2019 (India).
[26] The Biological Diversity Act, 2002, § 37, No. 18, Acts of Parliament, 2003.
[27] P. Krishna Gopinath & Aman Sharma, *Tourism has brought economic prosperity to the Himalayan region, but the environmental cost has been catastrophic,* THE HINDU (Feb. 25, 2022), https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/tourism-has-brought-economic-prosperity-to-the-himalayan-region-but-the-environmental-cost-has-been-catastrophic/article65070497.ece (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).
[28] News item published, In re, (2022) SCC OnLine NGT 87 (India).
[29] Gopinath & Sharma, *supra* note 23.
[30] Aathira Perinchery, *Proposed Megaproject in Great Nicobar Island Could Spell Trouble for Its People, Wildlife,* THE WIRE (Jul. 12, 2022), https://thewire.in/environment/ictt-infrastructure-project-great-nicobar-island (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).
[31] Hanuman Laxman Aroskar v. Union of India, (2020) 12 SCC 1 (India).
[32] Manoj Misra v. Union of India, (2015) SCC OnLine NGT 840 (India).

culture for 'tourist consumption'. Such growth of influx of outsiders into the tribal areas can cause a sense of losing the control over their areas.

Ecotourism is a solution to this which promotes tourism by respecting the rights and spiritual practices of the local indigenous population. Rethinking the tourism success is critical for achieving sustainable growth in the tourism industry. Substantiating this view, the government is now shifting more towards sustainable and ecotourism, which is discussed in the paper ahead.

V. NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ECO-TOURISM IN INDIA-2022

In April 2022, the Ministry of Tourism launched a 'National Strategy for Eco-Tourism' aimed at positioning India as a leading global ecotourism destination. The strategy outlined seven key pillars for promoting and developing ecotourism in the country, including "state assessment and ranking, state ecotourism strategy, capacity building and certification, marketing and promotion, destination and product development, public-private partnerships, and governance and institutional framework"[33]. This strategy was developed taking into account the National Strategy on Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism guidelines in and around protected areas 2021 by MoFECC, and National Strategy on Rural Tourism.

VI. NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN INDIA-2022

The Ministry of Tourism, in partnership with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the Responsible Tourism Society of India (RTSOI) [34], organized a national conference in June 2022 to address the development of sustainable and ethical tourist destinations. At the summit, the Ministry of Tourism introduced the National Plan for Sustainable Tourism and the Responsible Traveller Campaign, which centered on six strategic pillars: "promoting environmental sustainability, protecting biodiversity, promoting economic sustainability, implementing a scheme for sustainable tourism certification, providing Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) and capacity building, promoting socio-cultural sustainability, and enhancing governance" [35].

The Ministry of Tourism has launched an upgraded version of *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*[36] (a theme

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[33] Ministry of Tourism, *National Strategy for Eco-Tourism*, 6 (Apr. 29, 2022), https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-05/National%20Strategy%20for%20Eco%20Tourism.pdf.

[34] Krishna Priya Pallavi, *Tourism ministry launches national strategy for sustainable tourism, responsible traveller campaign*, HINDUSTAN TIMES (Jun. 5, 2022), https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/travel/tourism-ministry-launches-national-strategy-for-sustainable-tourism-responsible-traveller-campaign-101654414238313.html (Last visited on July. 14, 2023).

[35] *Id.* at 7.

[36] Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism has revamped Swadesh Darshan 2.0 for development of sustainable and responsible destinations with tourist and destination centric approach: Shri G Kishan Reddy, PIB Delhi, (Jul. 21, 2022, 5:16 PM), https://pib.go\in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1843505.

to expand "theme-based tourist circuits"[37]), with the aim of promoting sustainable and responsible travel through a holistic approach that prioritizes both the tourist and the destination. The initiative focuses on implementing sustainable tourism principles, including economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability. To support the new domestic tourism program in India, the government has identified fifteen states for promotion, with the first phase scheduled to begin in January 2023. The program is designed to shift the focus of tourism from theme-based circuits to destination tourism, with a 'Vocal for Local' approach that emphasizes the maximization of India's potential as a travel destination and the achievement of "*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*" (which translates to "self-reliant India").

VII. INDIA'S G-20 PRESIDENCY AND ECO-TOURISM (2023)

As part of India's G20 presidency, the Ministry of Tourism has announced that 2023 will be designated as 'Visit India Year'[38], with the objective of stimulating global interest in travel to India. Green initiatives and sustainable tourism are being promoted to encourage responsible tourism and to create opportunities for local businesses in the country. The government also wants to ensure small businesses have the funding they need to make green investments.

The Indian government has set its sights on cruise, ecotourism, and adventure tourism as key areas for growth, with a goal of generating USD 56 billion in foreign exchange and creating approximately 140 million new jobs in the tourism industry by 2030. Additionally, the government has launched *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, a program that prioritizes responsible and sustainable development of tourist attractions.[39]

VIII. GUIDE TO KERALA'S AWARD-WINNING RESPONSIBLE TOURISM PROJECT

Kerala has been awarded the prestigious "UNWTO Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance" by the United Nations, thus making it the first Indian state to receive this recognition. This award recognizes Kerala's pioneering efforts in promoting environmentally sustainable tourism through innovative initiatives. The State is known for its picturesque backwaters, tea plantations, pristine beaches, cultural richness, and traditional

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[37] *Swadesh Darshan*, INDIA.GOV.IN, NATIONAL PORTAL OF INDIA, https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/swadesh-darshan.

[38] P. Krishna Kumar, *Leveraging G20, ministry of tourism to declare 2023 as 'Visit India' year*, ETHOSPITALITYWORLD (Jan. 4, 2023), https://hospitality.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/travel/leveraging-g20-ministry-of-tourism-to-declare-2023-as-visit-india-year/96727088#:~:text="Using%20the%20backdrop%20of%20India's%20G20%20presidency,%20the,India%20as%20a%20preferred%20tourist%20destination%20in%20Asia (Last visited on Mar. 14, 2023).

[39] Ministry of Tourism, *G-20 presidency: Indian Tourism Sector to Contribute USD 56bn forex to GDP and Generate 140 Mn Jobs*, PIB Delhi, (Jan. 19, 2023, 6:26 PM), https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1892267.

medical practices. In the village of Kumarakom, a project called "Responsible Tourism"[40] (RT) has proven to be a successful model for linking the local community, hospitality industry, and government sector. It aimed to promote local empowerment and development while preserving eco-friendly tourism practices and it effectively connected the local community with the hospitality and governmental sectors. The project relied on a three-pronged strategy, which included:

A. **Economic Sustainability:** Through this strategy, the stakeholders received an equitable share of the financial gains from tourism. For the unbroken supply of veggies, a link was made between regional farmers and hotels. RT Cell was enabled to prevent the impending worries by ensuring a continuous dialogue between the parties involved.

B. **Social Responsibility:** An attempt was made to comprehensively explore the culture and art of Kumarakom. The RT Cell collaborated with women and children to establish cultural organizations that showcased their talents in hotels and resorts. In addition, they introduced creative Village Life Experience (VLI) packages, which allowed tourists to spend a day with farmers, a day with fishermen, and explore the backwaters, providing an authentic experience. These packages showed visitors the rural life and helped to preserve the traditional occupation.

C. **Environmental Responsibility:** The RT Cell partnered with the Local Gram Panchayat to introduce an initiative called "Zero Waste Kumarakom", with the goal of promoting efficient waste management and treatment practices in the area. The program included training sessions aimed at educating the locals on waste disposal methods. Additionally, a vermicomposting program was organized to teach residents about the benefits of composting. To restore the mangrove ecosystem, mangrove regeneration programs were also introduced. Furthermore, the resort owners were provided with seeds to plant mangroves in the backwaters as part of the initiative.

Kerala implemented a sustainable tourism model that emphasized community-based ecotourism and highlighted the cultural aspects of the region. This approach proved successful in promoting sustainable tourism and allowed Kerala to manage both the quantity and quality of visitors. The model ensured that tourists were culturally sensitive, environmentally conscious, and economically beneficial to the local community.

IX. CHALLENGES TO PROMOTE ECO-TOURISM IN INDIA

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[40] Indranil Bose & Subho Chattopadhyay, *Glimpses of Sustainable Tourism in India: Cases and Discussions*, 9 IPE JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT 27 (2019).

India is one of the select few nations that possesses the perfect combination of all the vital resources required to elevate a nation to a shining star on the global tourism map. Despite still, barely around one and a half percent of tourists worldwide visit India[41]. This is due to the fact that mass tourist products still control a sizable amount of the domestic market. The Ministry of Tourism in India has adopted the "Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria" (GSTC) as a framework to establish "Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India" (STCI)[42]. However, despite significant efforts, minimal advancement has been achieved. This is because adopting such concepts requires a significant financial expenditure. Also, the planners began pushing tourism in the nation when the infrastructure was unprepared to live up to the demands and standards of Western tourists[43]. Without sufficient planning, attempts to increase ecotourism to produce economic benefits may result in unsustainable growth for the nation. Increased input and localization costs, inadequate infrastructure, the need for public participation, a lack of well-trained tour guides, a lack of effective marketing strategies, a lack of basic amenities, etc. are obstacles preventing the development of ecotourism in India. Before admitting ecotourists in any area, ensuring that they are not beyond the 'carrying capacity' of that area is advisable since it can be detrimental to natural areas and thus be strictly prohibited to avid any adverse effect to the nature. Such 'carrying capacity' can be physical, social and economic.

A. Tourism v. Conservation

Due to excessive commercialisation brought on by the significant economic benefits that ecotourism offers, laws and regulations intended to safeguard the environment and the rights of indigenous people have been disregarded and violated. The constant flow of tourists has disturbed the animals. Such mismanagement sites more harm than good that ecotourism can potentially bring. The tension between tourism and conservation lies at the heart of the ecotourism concept. Ecotourism should not prioritize meeting the rising demand for eco-friendly travel by sacrificing forests or displacing local communities to make way for hotels and resorts. This problem gained significant attention in 2012 when the Apex Court, that is, the Supreme Court of India prohibited tiger tourism in response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that an NGO had brought before it.[44] Such tourism encroached on the habitat of tigers which ultimately affected their very existence. Subsequently, in the same year, the Supreme Court

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[41] *Unlock the Marvels of Incredible India*, INVEST INDIA, NATIONAL INVESTMENT PROMOTION AND FACILITATION AGENCY, (Jan. 5, 2023, 11:26 AM), https://www.investindia.gov.in/sector/tourism-hospitality.

[42] P Krishna Kumar, *Ten years on, Ministry of Tourism swears by sustainable tourism certification*, ET TRAVEL WORLD (Nov. 11, 2021), https://travel.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/ministry/ten-years-on-ministry-of-tourism-swears-by-sustainable-tourism-certification/87645216 (Last visited on Feb 7, 2023).

[43] RAVISHANKAR KUMAR SINGH, ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (2003).

[44] Ajay Dubey v. National Tiger Conservation Authority, (24.07.2012 - SC).

lifted the ban partially, permitting the opening of twenty percent of the core tiger habitat to tourists. This decision was made after the statutory authority created guidelines for the core zones of tiger reserves. However, the Court did not allow any new tourist facilities to be constructed within the tiger reserve area.[45]

However, these shortcomings can be resolved by adhering to the aspirational objectives of ecotourism and providing the necessary policy backing.

X. CONCLUSION

Rising environmental awareness and a growing interest in exploring natural areas before they vanish, as well as a desire to learn more about traditional tourist destinations and their cultures and products, have all contributed to the promotion of ecotourism. India is widely recognized as having significant potential to become a major destination for both domestic and international ecotourism. Despite boasting one of the most diverse tourism profiles in Asia, India attracts a relatively small percentage of foreign tourists in proportion to its vast population. In order to reduce the adverse impacts on the environment and local communities, it is necessary to raise travellers' knowledge of the true purpose of ecotourism, change current policies, and conduct more thorough analyses of current practises. If more initiatives like the "Responsible Tourism" Project in the Keralan village of Kumarakom are introduced and successfully carried out, they can not only result in significant financial gains for the nation but also create millions of jobs and income-generating opportunities without endangering nature, culture, or heritage.

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[45] Dhananjay Mahapatra, *Supreme Court lifts ban on tourism in core areas of tiger reserves,* THE TIMES OF INDIA (Oct. 17, 2012), https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/supreme-court-lifts-ban-on-tourism-in-core-areas-of-tiger-reserves/articleshow/16843911.cms?from=mdr#:~:text=The%20court%20said%20since%20the,these%20areas%20must%20be%20vacated (Last visited on Feb 7, 2023).