

Changing Trends: A Case Study On Perceptions Towards Alternative Livelihood Opportunities Through Ecotourism

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Abstract: The livelihood opportunities and conservation are among issues among policy makers and tribal communities who reside inside protected areas. Forest ecosystem is getting fragile and vulnerable due to anthropogenic threats and global warming. The issues of livelihood and conservation are still at conceptual and empirical research. Tribal communities are in the verge of losing traditional lands and thereby their livelihood which indirectly threatens their rich knowledge, culture and heritage. The study investigates the socio-economic status of tribal communities of Wayanad and their perceptions about choosing ecotourism as alternative livelihood opportunity. Comparative analysis along with perceptions helps us to understand the magnitude of vulnerability livelihoods and also the potential capacity to host CBET as an alternative livelihood is evident from the research. The results reflect on how local communities may benefit in economic terms as well as create a long-term commitment for conservation and sustainable development through traditional stewardship role. Further, the perceptions from the study forms one critical dimension of a series of interrelated, overlapping, interdependent livelihood and conservation arrangements through frameworks within the destination region.

Keywords: Local communities; Livelihoods; Sustainability; Attitude; Ecotourism; Perception; Knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities across the world are deeply rooted in the fact that they depend on forests for livelihoods and the forest resources perform a vital ecological role, essential for growth and sustenance of human activities. Conservation thus, becomes supreme concern while managing forest resources; people's livelihood becomes subservient to this basic societal objective. It may be echoed that the dual objectives of conservation and people's livelihood are not necessarily conflicting and is still debatable. In the Southern parts of India lies Wayanad, forests and farming were the major sources of income for the ethnic communities living in the forests, but

conservation policies of the government and urbanization has brought in a threat for their living and is prompting them to seek alternative livelihoods (Nair, Vinod & Menon 2007; Shylajan & Mythili, 2012). So far, the tribal communities of the study sites in Wayanad are living inside the protected areas and the natural resources of forests plays a key role in their life sustenance. However, the protection and conservation of the forests are highly desirable, but implementing them at the cost of sacrificing the livelihoods of the associated communities has various constraints (Adeel & Safriel, 2008). Currently, livelihoods of these tribal communities are at stake, in order to sustain their livelihood and overcome vulnerability, alternative livelihood opportunities are required (Sebele, 2010;

Little, 2013). Hence, a sustainable livelihood assessment is required to understand the capacity of the local community through community participation is essential to overcome the risk due to loss of livelihood due to conservation governance in the region. An alternative livelihood opportunity through community participation has to be identified in order to create a synergy mutually between the two objectives, people's livelihood and forest conservation by providing rights and responsibilities. Extensive research and reviews on conceptual frameworks to address the current issues resulted in identifying Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) as a tested and proven successful model for the study region.

A. COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION

Tourism accounts for more than 10% of global employment and 11% of global GDP ranks as world's largest industry. It acts as a stimulant of economic growth and it is given prime importance in the developing countries (TIES, 2005; Su, Wen and Lin, 2014). In the past decade (2001-2012), the developing countries increased their relative share of international tourist arrivals from 25% to 42%. This rate of growth is five times more rapid than that in more established destination markets such as Europe and North America (Fyall and Morgan, 2009). There has been a greater focus on the vulnerability and management of mountain ecosystems and as a result, new policies and strategies have emerged in the recent past. The traditional stewardship roles of local communities, as opposed to external and distant control, appear promising to this context (Stronza, 2007). However, most tourism activities that remain largely unregulated at present are causing huge environmental degradation (Xie et al., 2012).

Community based Ecotourism (CBET) emerged as a platform to establish partnerships and to jointly guide the path of the tourists seeking to experience and learn about natural areas and diverse cultures. CBET concept has evolved over the last 20 years which is generally small scale and involves closer interactions between visitor and host community, particularly suited to rural and regional areas. It is commonly understood to be administered and owned by the community, for the community. It is a form of 'local' tourism, favoring local service providers and suppliers and focused on understanding and communicating the local culture and environment (Graddy, 2013). CBET has been popular as a means of supporting biodiversity conservation particularly in APEC (Asia -Pacific Economic Co-operation) developing countries and linking livelihoods with preserving biodiversity whilst reducing rural poverty and achieving both objectives sustainably (Moli, 2007; Graddy, 2013). Apart from local control and local concerns, they also represent a means to strengthen traditional stewardship roles of communities.

Perhaps, by carefully creating ecotourism including the community-oriented practitioners and policy makers [Shen et al., 2010; Schilcher, 2007] from inside or outside the community, would provide the opportunity to ensure traditional stewardship roles such as preserving diverse natural gene banks and conservation of watersheds inside forests. Similar community based conservation practices are successfully implemented among the tribal communities like

Irula in Nilgiri Biosphere reserve (Pradheeps & Poyyamoli, 2013) cited as examples in capacity development initiative. Hence, there is a gap to explore the capacity and potentials of these tribal communities in Wayanad. Therefore, this study focused to assess the perception and attitude of the tribal communities towards implementing CBET as an alternative livelihood opportunity in Wayanad region, Kerala, India.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Wayanad (Figure.1) is located at a distance of 76 kms from the seashores of Kozhikode, lies at an elevation of 700-2100 m. above sea level, on the Northeastern part of Kerala between 11°36'18" N latitude and 76°45'58.79" E longitude enjoys a salubrious climate in the Western Ghats. Countless remnants of New Stone Age civilization can still be seen on the hills of Wayanad. It is home for seven of the native adivasis in our country, considered as the aboriginal tribes namely Kattunaikans, Kurumas, Kurichiyas, Paniyas, Adiyas Ooralis and Kadars (Chandran, 2003). Tribal communities form 36% of the tribal population in the state and 17.4 per cent of the total population of the district (ICSSR report, 2008). We selected two distinct tribal communities (Kattunaikans and Kurichiyas) based on the culture, traditional heritage and areas which has vulnerable livelihoods for the present study. Kattunaikans the traditional hunter-gatherer community living in Pookuzhy and Chukalikuni settlements and the Kurichiya, a native agrarian hill tribe who are known for archery skills from Churilee and Pookotil settlements were selected for the study.

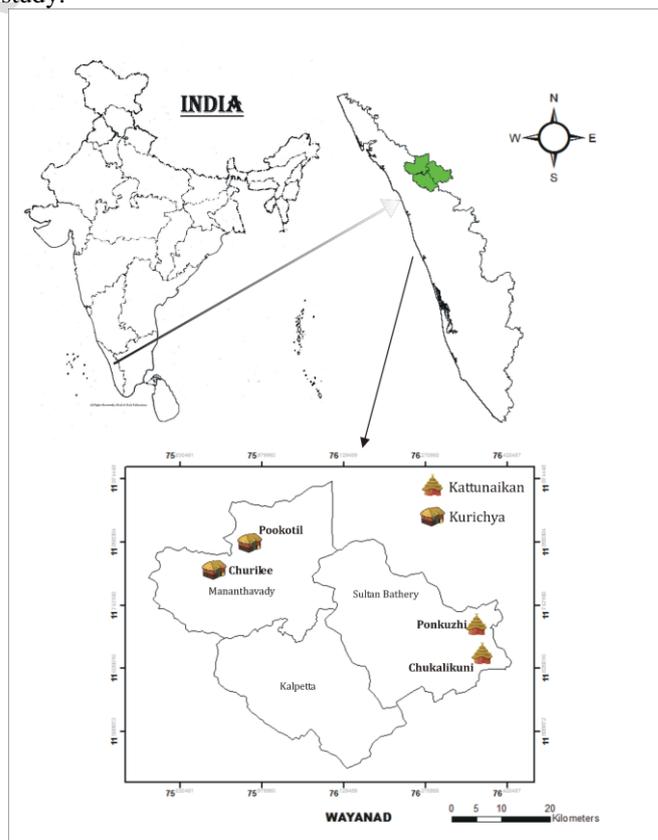


Figure 1: Location of the study sites in Wayanad district, Kerala, India

A. DATA COLLECTION

Perceptions and intentions over participation of CBET were elicited by adopting ethnographic approach (Chamber, 1994; Vodouhe et al. 2010; Ruiz, 2011). Semi structured questionnaire was used for personal interviews at household level in the selected study sites. Perception of the local community on 6 major factors related to the development of tourism in the area was documented. The responses fell into one of the following four categories of Likert scale; i.e., '1'= strongly disagree, '2'= disagree, '3'= agree and '4'= strongly agree. Comparative analysis was used to analyze the similarities of each site on their capacity to adopt CBET as alternative livelihood where commonalities are found. The advantages and disadvantages of study sites based on potentials for ecotourism were critically analyzed. The research demands the researcher to spend time at these sites (Plate 1) and interact with the stakeholders in order to get a first-hand outlook of the situation. Situation analysis is required to interpret and explore the meanings of the common people's perceptions, attitudes and perspective.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. COMPARISON OF ANALOGOUS POTENTIALS FOR CBET BETWEEN THE STUDY SITES

Study sites are located in the forest area with outstanding natural environment possessing one or more unique geographical or natural features such as wildlife, natural forests, wetland cultivation or archaeological sites. Strategic position of study sites is common for all sites that display a strong point, which is an important product of ecotourism with reference to connectivity. Likely, all the selected sites except one village, are connected by means of public transportation to the nearest location which enables one to experience a walk for about 2-4Kms through meadows and homesteads. In fact, this is the key criteria for choosing ecotourism site as only dedicated ecotourists will reach the destinations which is lacking in the study site of Churlee where there is a non-availability of direct transportation services only allowing us to trek for approximately 4kms through beautiful valley and streams (Figure.2b). Besides, it could help in developing CBET as an enterprise and an economic opportunity for development/betterment of the community livelihood.

The distinct culture and heritage elements across the natural landscape are considered as key attractions for tourists. Archery stands as a common cultural element syncing both the tribes. Archery expertise (Figure.3a) were portrayed by the participation of Kurichyas during warfare in the past and regional competitions in the present. Respondents acclaimed to initiate archery as a sport and also welcomes a sports complex in the region to encourage the tribal youth to take their traditional expertise among the world diaspora by participating in championship events. Besides, their traditional dances, folk music, cuisines could serve as entertaining cultural attractions offering the opportunity to the tourists to stay and spend more time in the villages, providing them chance to experience tribal lifestyle by living with these ethnic

tribal groups. Wildlife tourism another bigger potential in the study area could provide the tourists to view the flagship/charismatic-species such as tigers, elephants, leopards along with lot of endemic species such as Malabar giant squirrel and the insectivorous plant species. Tribal heads of these communities are willing to allow the tourists to spiel, recreate and perform the traditional folk instruments and dressing materials. Festivals and events in the study sites provides chance for experiencing ethnicity of tribal communities. During the off-season, a minimal agricultural wetland (Figure.3b) could be converted to perform mud paddling (Ouma et al. 2014) in the knee-deep soil as a cultural sport similar to those festivals performed in Korea and Japan (Park et al. 2009, Choi et al. 2012).



Figure 2. Illustrative potentials of the study sites potentials as ecotourism destinations
(a) Agricultural fields (Vayal nadu) in the midst of the valley (own photograph)
(b) Path leading to the tribal settlement via stream, Churlee site (own photograph)



Figure 3. Kurichiya tribe's archery exhibit during 'Thulapathu' festival
(a) Kurichiya tribe's art of archery Thulapathu festival (Source: retrieved from http://www.kerala.com/news_kerala_Hamid_Ansari_to_8_3703.html) g
(B) Wet land farming as a ecotourism component for mud paddling (own photograph)



Figure 4a. Non-timber forest products processed and marketed through Ecoshops (own photograph)

Figure 2, 3 & 4: CBET potentials of the study area

Kattunaika tribal community by their very nature has their innate ability are good in participating in conservation activities such as community fire watchers, anti-poaching team members through their explicit knowledge about forests and wildlife. Meanwhile, the Kurichiya community known for their traditional seed stocks of paddy contributes to the conservation of native wild varieties. Additionally, the government helps in development of tribal women through Self Help Group initiatives (SHGs) such as Kudumbashree (NGO), thereby encourage technology oriented farming activities in order to support their livelihoods. To account, at present about 30 SHGs are actively functioning in our study sites.

Most importantly the unique characteristics of the study sites (location, environment, communities along with their biocultural heritage, conservation efforts and site protection status) are in par with a regular tourism destination in any part

of the world. Perhaps, the small-scale operations (Acka, 2006) including collection of natural non timber forest products (Figure.4a) by the local community could enjoy the benefits by proper marketing to tourists (Boonzaaier, 2012; Reimer & Walter, 2013). The traditional methods of extraction of the non-timber forest products could be portrayed not only as a livelihood opportunity but also as cultural conservation opportunity by exhibiting the sustainable harvesting processes.

B. ATTITUDE TOWARDS CBET BASED ACTIVITIES

The interviews and focused group discussions helped us to understand the attitude of tribal communities on implementing community based ecotourism in their locality. The results were ascertained using Likert score on different scales (Figure.5) which shows majority of community residents were aware that conservation of ecosystem is important over an alternative livelihood opportunity and believe that through CBET the awareness on conservation of ecosystem and resources could be achieved. Both the communities believe that CBET could improve the eco development activities in their villages (average likert score of 3). However, Kurichyas are very stubborn and strongly agreed to enactment of stricter laws for CBET related activities in comparison with Kattunaikans. 50-60% of people were very cautious for introducing CBET (score = 4) as they felt it could be subjected to stricter laws and could be jointly planned/ implemented/ governed by the tribal association (for instance Adivasi Vana-Samrikshana Samiti-Malayalam vern for “Tribal council for Forest Conservation”) with the Government. Though, they are conscious about the ill-effects of tourism such as chances of increased littering and generation of solid wastes but believe in stricter laws of eco-friendly concepts. Both community people agrees to the chance of community development (score= 3.5) through implementing CBET, only when there is an assurance for the protection of pristine natural habitats. Most of the community responded positively and believed that ecotourism would attract more quality conscious tourists and their region would be known widely and provide more income opportunities to youth/women/artists as suggested by Clark and Chabrel (2007).

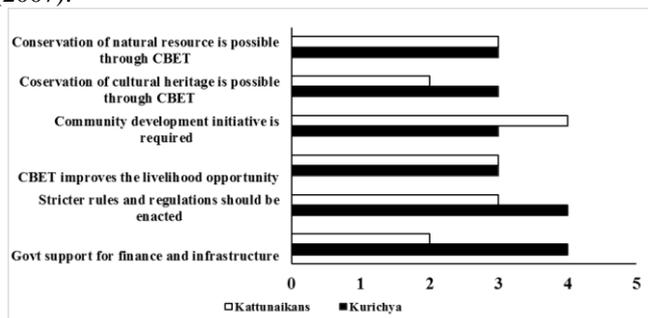


Figure 5: Community attitude towards CBET implementation

Respondents understood and supported the importance of communication skills (Chengcai et al. 2012) and ecotourism infrastructure in developing the consensus between the stakeholders as equally important to promote CBET. The perception of local residents shows that the social benefits of ecotourism would also bring infrastructure development, educational facilities as they would get trained with

communicational skills along with the employment opportunities. However, most of them accepts that livelihood failures and migration are a potential threat for the erosion of cultural identity and rich indigenous knowledge about the forests. 20-40% of the people were ignorant across the study sites about the marketing local products and overcrowding due to tourism. This exhibits, that both communities aware about the consequences of mass tourism in other regions of the district. Tribe’s view insists the urgent need for integrating livelihood with conservation through sustainable development and environmental education via regulated CBET.

C. COMMUNITY NEEDS BY ADAPTING CBET

The community needs of the respondents are depicted in Figure.6. Primitive societal status plays a bigger role in the views of tribal communities. In general, both communities aware of the influence of natural resources in their livelihood. Farmers explains the reason behind rich soil fertility as follows “the natural biomass from the forests supplies rich humus and supports the nutrient cycling and thereby keeping the natural soil wealth in tandem in the agricultural fields”. Kurichyas respondents indicated the need for better infrastructure (80%) and believes that education will improve the participation of their community. However, they are exceptional in emphasizing the importance of sanitation and hygiene (72%) compared to other settlements. The opinion of the respondents over waste generation due to tourist arrival could become a health and environmental concern on the long run and hence they strongly agreed to the importance of sanitation and hygiene as a component in CBET. Earlier studies, suggests that natural area of ecotourism forms a direct link between conservation and economic development for the local community, creating an incentive for the community to preserve their natural areas (Stone and Wall, 2004).

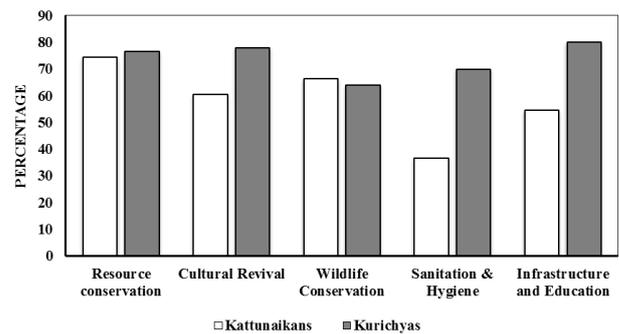


Figure 6: Community perception towards development activities through CBET

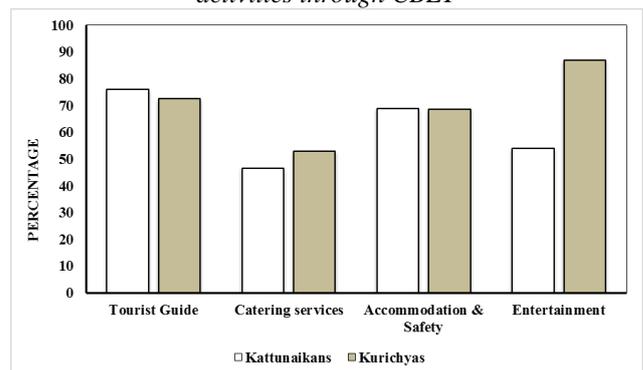


Figure 7: Expected opportunities and interests towards community participation through CBET

D. STANDPOINTS OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION

Both communities are having positive attitude and interest towards the initiative of CBET are (Figure.7). Safety arrangement for the tourists and exhibiting entertainment through their traditional art and culture were identified as priorities by the Kurichiya community. The Kattunaikan respondent's (75%) preference surges towards serving as tourist guides. The possibility for tourist entertainment is higher across Kurichya (90%) tradition which includes tribal performance- folk music and dancing could be the reason for their priority in participating in entertainment sector compared with Kattunaika people. Male respondents across both the communities were opted as tourist guides due to their rich knowledge about the ecosystem and wildlife. Besides, accommodation and safety arrangement (70%) was seen as an ideal opportunity sought after tourist guide.

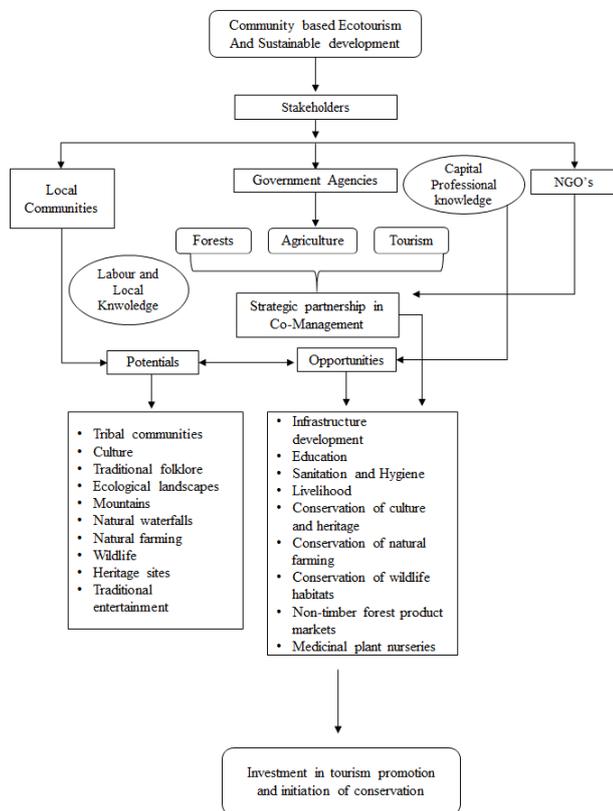


Figure 8: Sustainable Community based Ecotourism Model (CBETM) developed towards implementation in the selected villages

Traditional food preparation and catering services were preferred, in particular by the Kurichya women respondents (53%) and would like to exhibit their traditional culinary skills ('Naadan chicken'-smoked chicken with gravy, 'Kappameen'- boiled tapioca with fish curry, 'puthari paayasam'-sweetened milk served as dessert, 'kal nandu'-fried rock crabs, 'Chammathy'-smoked fish curry, 'Karakundappam'- rice pan

cake and 'Kallu puttu'- variety of rice pan cake served with coconut milk, 'chemmeen'-dried prawn curry). The development of positive relationships between people, resources and tourism is very unlikely to occur without implementation of effective policies, management strategies, and involvement of a wide range of organizations, including NGOs and, in developing areas, conservation and development assistance agencies. Results indicates the interest and willingness to participate in alternative livelihood opportunities generated through the CBET model (Fig. 8). Since the local people are hardworking, friendly and have a strong village institution under tribal chieftain, it is possible to initiate CBET after intensive training and capacity building programmes.

E. COST-BENEFIT ESTIMATES

From the views of respondents, the need for an active participation of government funding, preferential taxation and economic stimulus policies in order to increase the input of technological knowledge through co-management strategies in ecotourism in the region is evident. In addition, Kurichiya community demands, through government policy and financial guidance, tribal council has to be enacted and permit to mobilize social funds through different channels to increase the input of infrastructure, capacity building and tourist flow as a part of CBET development in the region.

Also, the respondents believe in reducing the overall energy consumption and increase the value addition and processing of agricultural products through CBET. Moreover, they expect an establishment of local business opportunity Centre to improve their livelihoods. As suggested by earlier researchers an active community participation in CBET can be encouraged through the participatory approaches preferred by the local communities in many developing countries such as in Belize (Haddle, 2005), Kenya (Ondicho, 2012) and in South Africa (Boonzaaier, 2012). The marketing strategies of ecotourism should accelerate the organizational and operation innovation and build an operating network for both non-timber forest products and agricultural products to promote the construction of modern circulation networks in the neighboring areas to attract tourist flow.

F. PERCEPTION OF POLICY MAKERS

The interviews with key personnel from the tourism department, forest department and government planners of Wayanad indicates that due to the poor awareness about ecotourism among local communities, they were unable to participate in the planning process. Government officials (70%) believed the reluctance of community members in planning and development is due to lack of awareness and infrastructure in the study sites. Results show that the residents and the local government officials and the community members had different perceptions about introduction of ecotourism. However, the perceptions on conservation of forests and cultural heritage are supported by both community members and government officials. Response from the government officials are in tune with the supportive statements of community members with the positive

perceptions in introducing community based ecotourism. Tourism department and forest department officials shared their ideas of establishing infrastructure development in the study area Churilee targeting the existence of lake and wildlife in the location. Agricultural department officials showed optimistic vision on introducing agro-ecotourism in the study sites with special reference to the traditional agricultural practices of Kurichya and Kuruma tribes.

G. PERCEPTION OF GRASS ROOT LEVEL ORGANIZATIONS

For a successful CBET initiative, the role of governmental, non-governmental organizations and private sectors plays a vital role in the current scenario. NGOs help in gathering the ideas of different elements ecotourism into a single bowl. The interviews with NGOs operating in the study regions overthrows light on the existing CBET actions, issues of policy making and certification. Wayanad Ecotourism Organization (WETO) is a non-profit organization formed by several group of resorts in Wayanad in order to initiate the conservation ideas of environment and ecosystem for the incoming tourists. Kabani association (NGO) operating from Wayanad is working on the ecotourism establishment and community development. According to the respondents the introduction of ecotourism in Wayanad is still in its initial stages and needs more emphasize from local government. In addition, they believe that ecotourism would promote community development, biocultural heritage conservation and income generation in the tribal areas. NGO's views and the government officials opined similarly regarding the awareness among the tribal communities with respect to ecotourism. Further, the respondents spoken from marketing point of view, showed more interest in involving the local community in Ecotourism initiative. In addition, they are eager to adapt the income generation opportunities through ecotourism initiative for the tribal communities. Respondents answered positive when questioned about the impacts of existing pseudo-ecotourism plans and mass tourism. A well-planned and implemented CBET offers the possibility of greater control and participation (Moli, 2011) and it suits the views of NGOs in Wayanad. They believed it is due to lack of awareness about the philosophy of ecotourism and conservation capabilities through CBET. They acknowledge that there is a hidden opportunity for a healthy cultural exchange without harming the local sentiments and culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ecotourism can effectively be used as a tool to achieve economic development and this could bring a connected benefit of environmental conservation. Based on the study, it can be concluded that Kurichya community are interested in implementing CBET with financial support from the Government. However, the comparative analysis and assessment on potentials and capacities, the different sites has different factors that contribute to the successes of the site and participation process. We categorize them in each site markets and different products that could be categorized as ecotourism

products. Similarly, each site has their own advantage over others and is able to create their own market that contributes to as a successful venture. Further, these two factors are taken as positive indicators for implementing CBET.

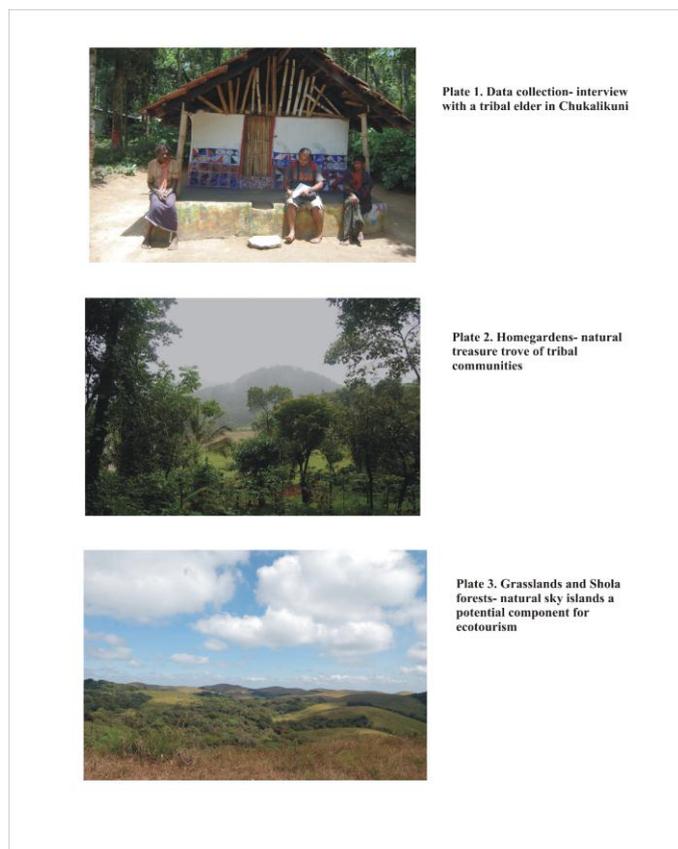
Research on ecotourism shows that, it is a sector which can increase the income of villagers (Lindberg, 1994) by two-fold if suitable entrepreneurial initiations can be made Wunder, 1999; Egbali et al. 2010). Both communities believe that the site characteristics, culture and their heritage will attract the tourists who look for attractive agriculture landscapes with spectacular forests in the backdrop and even opined to improvise them into Agro-tourism as a part of CBET. However, both communities are conscious towards need for improved physical and social infrastructure as it will help in communicating heritage values to the visitors. Natural resources, tradition, culture, pristine landscapes, undisturbed ecosystems are rich attributes and gives greater importance for community tourism development. Local communities are optimistic about the alternative livelihood approach as it may play an important role in revival of the socio-economic and heritage/cultural heritage in the selected regions.

Livelihood assessment results clearly indicates the need for alternative livelihood, since all of them falls under the marginal farmers' under an annual income ranged between INR 10000 to 25000. This is a major threat to natural farming practices in the region among kurichya community. Socio-economic vulnerability is exposed and became a threat to the traditional farming practices which forces them to take up conventional farming with the usage of agrochemicals. There is a hidden linkage between agriculture, creative cultural industries and natural resource management among the tribal lifestyle and livelihood. For the development and conservation such a linkage can be strengthened through community based planning for ecotourism activities, so that the symbiotic relationships between tourism and the environment can be strengthened for long term sustainable development. Successful case studies from other regions exploring the opportunity of cultural dimensions have been proven to be significant attractions in rural destinations for CBET (Wang et al. 2010; Lo et al. 2012).

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SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURE SHOWING THE AUTHOR WITH TRIBAL RESPONDENT AND THE HABITAT AROUND THE STUDY AREA



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