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A Study on Factors Influencing the Visitor Experience on Eco Tourism Activities at Parambikulam Tiger Reserve

Sivakami V. *, Bindu V. T.**

Abstract *Eco tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of tourism industry. Its potential for growth is virtually unlimited. Any tourism program which is: nature - based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is a major concept and where local people are benefited can be called ecotourism. The Western Ghats of Kerala, with its tropical forest ecosystem, provides a natural advantage for development of Ecotourism and can be projected as an Ecotourism Zone in the true sense. It is commonly perceived that ecotourism in protected areas can bring incentives necessary for their management and has minimal physical and social impact on the visited area. They also demonstrate the commitment of the present generation to the future generation. Protected areas are the cornerstone of most national biodiversity conservation strategies. The research study revealed the features, facilities and experience of tourists on ecotourism activities at Parambikulam Tiger Reserve. The study identifies the factors that influences the visitors to undertake tourism activities at Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, and suggested measures to increase the satisfaction level of visitors by improving the facilities at the Tiger Reserve for a sustainable tourism development in the region.*

Keywords: *Eco Tourism, Protected Area, Sustainable Development*

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of eco tourism arose in the 1970's from the general global environmental movement, and by the 1990's was one of the fastest growing tourism sectors. Eco tourism appeared as an environmentally benign and responsible travel to areas of outstanding beauty and exceptionally pristine places with identity of their own. Eco tourism which interchangeably known as nature based tourism is a fraction of International Tourism. It is the fastest growing segment of the global tourism industry that promotes less or non-destructive and no consumptive use of nature. Eco tourism was globally identified as a means of achieving twin goals of bio diversity conservation and sustainable development and is a win-win development strategy especially designed for underdeveloped rural areas. The key considerations of eco tourism value the natural environment, respect of host culture and the local quality of life. The challenge to eco tourism in any country or region is to develop its tourism capacity and the quality of its products without negatively affecting the environment that maintains and take care of it.

In the recent years it has been assessed that there is a growing trend towards travel to eco-tourism destinations like National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. Eco Tourism in National Park tries to contribute for environmental protection, socio-cultural protection and employment opportunities to the local people. Perception of visitors on eco-tourism practice is an essential precedent of sustainable development that helps the stake holders in planning and management of facilities and services offered for the sustainable development of the National Park.

* Research Scholar, Department of Tourism Management, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: sivakamivelmurugan@gmail.com
** Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism Management, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. Email:vtnair.bindu@gmail.com

The ecological diversity of India is arguably the most varied in the world. India has numerous rare and endangered species in its surroundings. The declaration of several wildlife areas and national parks has encouraged the growth of the wildlife resources. Today, India has many wildlife sanctuaries and protection laws. Ecotourism is an attempt for sustainable ecological development. A fundamental requirement for ecotourism to be practiced is to have a control on access to the area. Various hill stations or beaches therefore do not get categorized as ecotourism destinations because it is impossible to control access to them. National parks and wildlife sanctuaries are on the other hand most amenable to regulate access and thus most suitable as eco-tourist destinations. The Protected Area Network in the country therefore becomes the most logical starting point for development of ecotourism.

Protected Area Network in India

The protected area (PA) network in India has helped to conserve a significant part of the country's biodiversity. The network of PAs currently covers an area of 8.1 million ha, encompassing about 14 percent of the country's forest area and 4.61 percent of its land mass. Most PAs in India have a core zone with national park status and a peripheral buffer zone, which can be either a wildlife sanctuary or a reserve forest. Resource use has been restricted to the buffer zones, where it has been regulated, while core areas are completely closed. A 1991 amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act specifies that, in wildlife sanctuaries, the chief wildlife warden must certify that any manipulation does not harm wildlife, and that the manipulation be approved by the state government. Presently, about one tenth of the world's land surface is under some form of protected area network. A key challenge for protected areas is ensuring that the tourism is sustainable. It is essential that protected areas are managed effectively for tourism, while ensuring their natural values - the assets that attract tourists - are protected for future generations.

Categories of PA as given in Wildlife Protection Act, 1972

Category IA: Strict Nature Reserve

Category IA are strictly protected areas set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/geomorphologic features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values. Such protected areas can serve as indispensable reference areas for scientific research and monitoring.

Category IB: Wilderness Area

Category IB protected areas are usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, which are protected and managed so as to preserve their natural condition.

Category II: National Park

Category II protected areas are large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.

Category III: Natural Monument or Feature

Category III protected areas are set aside to protect a specific natural monument, which can be a landform, sea mount, submarine cavern, geological feature such as a cave or even a living feature such as an ancient grove. They are generally quite small protected areas and often have high visitor value.

Category IV: Habitat/Species Management Area

Category IV protected areas aim to protect particular species or habitats and management reflects this priority. Many category IV protected areas will need regular, active interventions to address the requirements of particular species or to maintain habitats, but this is not a requirement of the category.

Category V: Protected Landscape/Seascape

A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values.

Category VI: Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

Category VI protected areas conserve ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems. They are generally large, with most of the area in a natural condition, where a proportion is under sustainable natural resource management and where low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area.

The state of Kerala, forming part of the Western Ghats, contains a protected area of 2,324 sq.km in two National Parks and 12 Wildlife Sanctuaries. The Western Ghats of Kerala, with its tropical forest ecosystem, provides a natural advantage for development of Eco tourism. Researchers have undertaken a study at Parambikulam Tiger Reserve which is a well-protected ecological portion in the Nelliampathy - Anamalai landscape of the southern Western Ghats in India. It was declared as Tiger Reserve during 2009 with total area

of 643.66 sq.km, which includes core area of 390.89 and 252.77 sq.km buffer area.

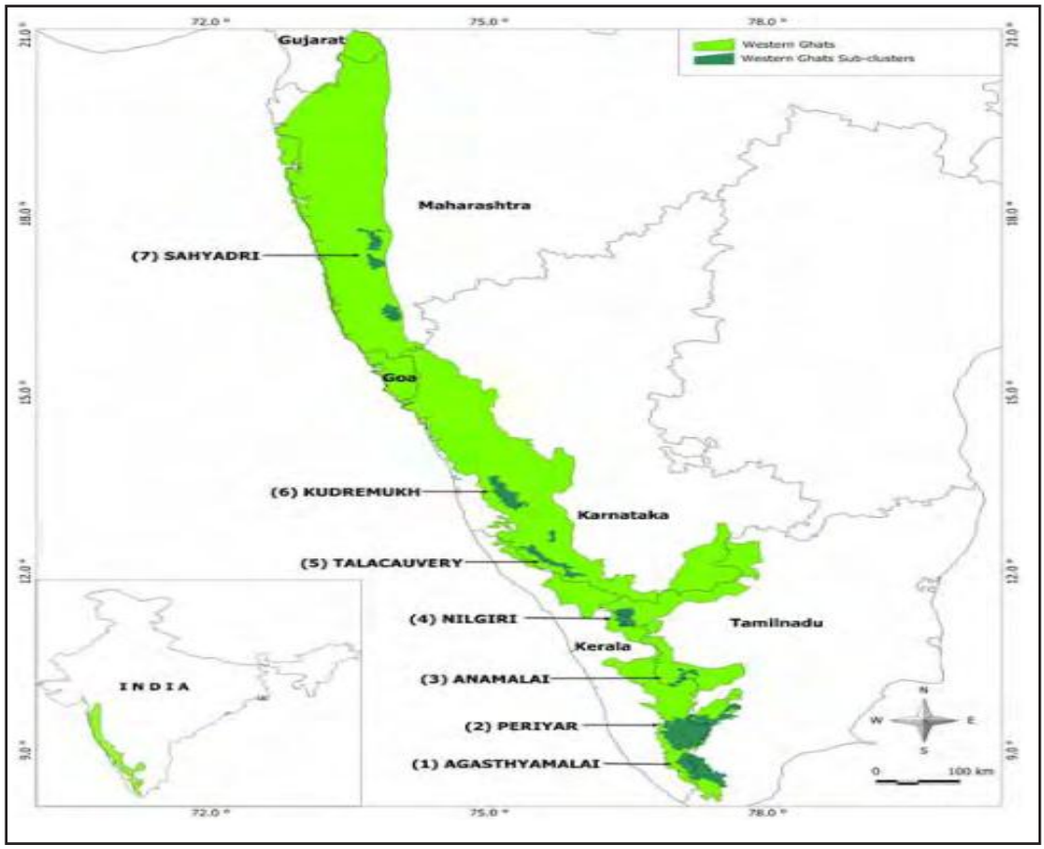
The sanctuary includes 36 species of mammals, 16 species of amphibians, 268 species of birds, 61 species of reptiles, 47 species of fish, 124 species of butterflies and more than a thousand species of insects. There are about 285 rare endemic and endangered species of flora found in the Sanctuary. The rare species include Tiger, Lion-tailed Macaque, Mouse Deer, Nilgiri Tahr, Nilgiri Marten, Great Pied Hornbill, Peninsular Bay Owl, King Cobra, Cane Turtle, etc.

People oriented tribal community based ecotourism is the hall mark of Parambikulam Tiger Reserve. The Ecotourism programs are organized by the local tribals of eco development committee for their empowerment and livelihood. Some of the activities in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve includes trekking to dolmens, the Thoovanam waterfalls, and camping activity in Vasyappara etc. Parambikulam Tiger Reserve hosts many eco tourism programs and the details are given below (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: Ecotourism Programs in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve

Trekking	Night Halt Package	Jungle Camp	Day Package	Nature Education
Cochin state Forest Tram way trekking	Full Moon Census	Tented Niche	Bamboo rafting	Hornbill watching
Forester's Dwelling	Treetop Experience	Wilderness camp	Parambikulam Boating	Paid nature camp
Pugmark Trail	Machan World	Veetikkunnu Island Nest	Kannimara safari	
High Range Hiking	Peep through watch tower	Eco Meditation	Tribal symphony	
Karianshola trail	Thellikkal Nights	Dolmen Trial	Parambi Cruise	
Elephant song trail	-	-	Parambikulam Safari	
Dolmen Trail				

Source: A Vinodan et al., (July 2011)



Source: Natural Heritage Properties. UNESCO World Heritage List

Fig. 2: Image Showing Seven Sub Clusters of Western Ghats

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Weaver (1999) defined Eco tourism as a form of alternative tourism which mostly attracts nature and wildlife lovers from the urban, industrial and cosmopolitan centers. Mostly, the industrialized and developed countries have earmarked on special budgetary financial packages for eco tourism projects. People of those industrialized countries are more motivated to visit the eco tourism places as the lives in big cities become restless and stressful. There can be several types such as soft or hard, consumptive or non-consumptive, natural and unnatural and exploitive, passive & active. Seema and Jojo (2006) in their study identified that eco tourism in the Indian context has significant implications for nature and culture conservation, rural livelihoods and conservation education. Existing documents on eco tourism policy are briefly reviewed to draw insights for the Indian context.

Andrew Lepp (2008) explains that role of tourists, perception of risk associated with travel to particular regions of the world, and international travel experience were investigated in relation to sensation seeking and gender. The findings provide empirical support for the proposition that personality traits may influence travel styles and destination choices. Saurabh Kumar Dixit (2010) reports that ecotourism potentially provides a sustainable approach to tourism development in India. However, to realize this potential the adverse effects of visitor activity and associated infrastructure on the natural environment and the tourism experience must be identified to guide management actions and thus to sustain the resources on which ecotourism ultimately depends. The study, was conducted in Madhav National Park in Shivpuri, M.P., India, and reported one of the first efforts to identify the impacts of ecotourism in India from the perspective of visitors. Environmental conditions of greatest influence on visitors' experiences included litter and biophysical conditions such as soil erosion and vegetation damage. These conditions were of greater concern to visitors than social conditions, such as the number of people. LaleBerköz (2012) in their study measured place related satisfaction of the national park visitors, with the aim of providing a perceptual evaluation at the end. In order to measure the demographic characteristics of the national park visitors, their thoughts and evaluations on the national parks, their leisure management attributes, and their perception, satisfaction related with the national parks are measured. Zurlinia (2006) describes that people using protected areas can differ in many ways, including their personal characteristics and perception about the recreation environment. The research addressed the general problem of tourist perception in a marine protected area (MPA), focusing on tourists' awareness of being in a MPA, tourists' opinion on management activities, the importance of natural attractiveness components, tourists' satisfaction with recreational experience and willingness to come back, and on tourists' awareness of their environmental impacts. The findings of the research put in evidence that a different perception can be due to environmental and park related attitudes, but also to the profile of visitors who frequent protected areas. In this respect, the researchers stressed on the importance of a better identification of visitors' profile, for a better management of tourism development in MPA.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study area was confined to nature-based tourism destination and focuses primarily on the factors that motivates the visitors to undertake the tourism activities and attitude towards Eco Tourism in Protected areas with the features and facilities provided. The study evaluates the satisfaction of visitors which helps the protected area management authorities in better management of the Tiger Reserve for a sustainable growth in future.

- To study the Eco tourism activities, facilities and services provided in the Tiger Reserve.
- To find out the factors that motivates the visitors in undertaking the tourism activity in the region.
- To identify the factors that influences the visitors experience and satisfaction at the tiger reserve.
- To provide suggestions for better satisfaction of tourists on services provided at the Tiger Reserve.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Western Ghats is one of the biodiversity hotspot in the world supporting diverse habitat types and endemism. Parambikulam Tiger Reserve is one of the most attractive places in the entire stretch of Western Ghats. Considering its biological richness, abundance of wildlife and landscape beauty attracts visitor from various parts of the country. Along with the Features and facilities of the Tiger Reserve, there are certain demographical factors that influence their visit to Tiger Reserve. Hence, there is a need for the study to analyze the influential factors and evaluate the overall satisfaction of visitors that helps the stake holders in planning and management of facilities and services offered for the sustainable development of the National Park.

METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of the study, visitors to the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, Kerala were selected as population. Those who were willing to contribute and be a part of the survey were only approached. Convenience sampling is used for the present study. The sample size of the study was 300 tourists; the data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the months of December 2017 to March 2018. Data collected were

analysed using SPSS (statistical package for social science) version 23.0 with descriptive statistics, ANOVA and Z-Test is used to find, mean score and relationship with demographic factors and different attributes.

FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Findings

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Visitors

Demographic Factors	Constructs	Percent
Gender	Male	66.3
	Female	33.7
Age	Less than 18 years	7.3
	18-24	45.3
	25-35	25.0
	35-49	16.0
	50-64	6.3
Type of Visitor	Foreign	35.7
	Domestic	64.3
Level of Education	School	5.0
	Secondary	17.7
	Diploma	14.3
	Graduation	38.3
	Post-graduation	20.0
	Others	4.7
Occupation	Self-employment	28.3
	Government	15.3
	Private	33.7
	Business	13.3
	Retired	6.3
	Housewife	3.0
Annual Income	Below 50,000	24.0
	50,000-1,00,000	38.7
	1,00,000-2,00,000	11.3
	3,00,000-5,00,000	17.0
	5,00,000 and above	9.0
Marital Status	Single	56.7
	Married	43.3

From the demographic profile of visitors as shown in Table 1 it is found that 66.3 percent of the respondents are male and 33.7 percent of the respondents are female,7.3 percentage of the respondents belongs to the age group of less than 18 years, 45.3 percent of the respondents belongs to the age group of 18-24 years and are majority, 25.0 percent of the respondents belongs to the age group of 25-35 years, 16.0 percent of the respondents belongs to the age group of 35-49 years and 6.3 percent of the respondents are under the age group of 50-64 years. Majority of the respondents visiting the national park are domestic tourists with 64.3 percent and only 34.7 percent of the visitors are foreigners. Among the visitors, 5.0 percent have completed School education, 17.7 have completed higher secondary, 14.3 percent are diploma holders, 38.3 percent of the respondents are graduates, 20.0 percent are Post graduate's and 4.7 percent of the respondents are others. Among the visitor's 28.3 percent are self-employed, 15.3 percent are government employees, 33.7 percent are private employees, 13.3 percent are doing business, 6.3 percent are retired and 3.0 percent are homemakers while 24.0 percent earn below Rs. 50,000, 38.7 percent between Rs. 50,000 - 1,00,000, 11.3 percent earn between Rs. 1,00,000 - 2,00,000, 17.0 percent earn between Rs. 3,00,000 - 5,00,000 and 9.0 percent earn 5,00,000 and above. 56.7 percent respondents are single and 43.3 percent are married.

Table 2: Frequency

Factors	Scales	Percent
First Visit	Yes	78.3
	No	21.7
Number of Visit	2-3 times	8.0
	3-5 times	10.0
	More than 5times	3.7
Travel Companion	None	7.0
	Spouse	25.7
	Family &children	29.3
	Friends& colleagues	38.0
Source of Information	Brochures	14.7
	Tour Operator	27.3
	Hotel	19.0
	KTDC	3.0
	Friends & Relatives	21.7
	Website / blog	7.7
	News paper	6.7
Mode of Transport	4-wheeler	32.3
	Govt. bus	16.3
	Tourist bus	31.6
	Luxury taxi	18.0
	Shared taxi	1.7

From the frequency table (Table 2), it is inferred that majority of the respondents 78.3 percent are first time visitors, 21.7 percent of the respondents have visited few times before. Friends and colleagues a travel companion 38.0 percent is one of the factor that have motivated to visit Tiger reserve followed by 29.3 percent with Family and children and 25.7 percent with spouse. Source of Information is the other factor that influences the visit to Tiger Reserve and inferred that majority, 27.3 percent of the respondents avail the

information through Tour operators, 14.7 percent of through brochures, 19.0 percent through Hotels, 3.0 percent through KTDC, 21.7 percent through friends and relatives and 7.7 percent through website/blog. Mode of transport to the destination plays a major role in visiting the Tiger Reserve and it is inferred that 27.3 percent of the respondents arrived at the national park by 4-wheeler, 16.3 percent of the respondents by government bus, 26.3 percent of the respondents by tourist bus, 18.0 percent of the respondents by luxury taxi, 1.7 percent of the respondents by shared taxi and 10.3 percent of the respondents by flight.

Table 3: Tourism Activities

Tourism Activities	N	Mean
Jungle safari	300	4.0500
Trekking	300	3.8633
Rafting	300	3.9533
Bear path trekking	300	3.8233
Bamboo rafting	300	3.8167
Camping	300	4.0167
Jungle camp	300	4.1400
Pugmark trekking	300	3.5467
Shopping	300	3.5867
Nature walk	300	3.7300
Elephant safari	300	4.1533
Valid N (list wise)	300	

From the Table 3 it is inferred that among the tourism activities in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, majority of the tourists preferred Elephant safari as the most favoured activity with highest mean value 4.1533 and pugmark trekking the lowest with mean score of 3.5467. Almost all other values are closer to 4 which means the tourists feel that all these activities are important for ecotourism practices of the Tiger reserve.

Table 4: Features of Tiger Reserve

Features of Tiger Reserve	N	Mean
Reasonable Entry fees	300	3.9667
Convenient Ticket counters	300	4.0233
Peacefulness	300	4.1567
Binoculars are provided	300	3.4567
Exhibitions of arts crafts	300	4.0133
Valid N (list wise)	300	

From the Table 4 it is inferred that among the facilities of Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, majority of the tourists are satisfied on peacefulness in tiger reserve with 4.1567 and least satisfied on provision of Binoculars with mean score of 3.4567. Here also the visitors are satisfied with the facilities offered in the tiger reserve.

Table 5: Transportation Facilities of Tiger Reserve

Transportation Facilities of Tiger Reserve	N	Mean
Adequate vehicles for safari	300	3.2567
Buses are clean and hygiene	300	3.4533
Battery vehicles provided	300	3.5633
Frequently vehicles available	300	2.7333
Separate parking lots	300	3.6667
Proper traffic maintenance	300	4.0667
Over flow parking lots	300	3.4833
Valid N (list wise)	300	

From the Table 5 it is inferred that among the transportation facilities of Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, majority of the tourists are satisfied on proper traffic maintenance with 4.0667 and least satisfied on frequency of vehicles to the Tiger Reserve with 2.7333. Hence from the above table it is clear that traffic facilities of the park needs some improvement.

Table 6

Factors	Tourism Activities		Facilities of Tiger Reserve		Transport Facilities of Tiger Reserve	
	F value	Sig	F value	Sig	F value	Sig
Education	9.599	.000	1.516	.197	2.176	.072
Occupation	2.496	.031	3.027	.011	4.946	.000
Income	7.075	**.000**	2.292	.046	1.942	.087
Travel Companion	.955	386	4.919	**.008**	8.033	.000
Source of Information	8.384	.000	1.906	.129	4.075	.007
Mode of Transportation	4.717	.000	6.214	.000	7.611	.000

From the above Table 6 it is inferred that there is a significant difference between tourism activities and education, Occupation, Income, Source of Information and Mode of transport to the Tiger Reserve. Hence, it is inferred that Education, Occupation, Income, Source of Information and mode of transport influence the visitors in undertaking the tourism activities at Tiger Reserve.

Occupation, Travel companion and Mode of transport are the common factors that influences the visitors experience and satisfaction on the features and facilities of the Tiger Reserve.

Whereas visitors Income influences the experience and satisfaction on the features of Tiger Reserve and source of Information on the facilities at the Tiger Reserve.

Table 7

Factors	Marital Status		Number of Visits	
	Df	Sig.	Df	Sig.
Facilities of Tiger Reserve	298 292.861	.272	298 108.277	.636
Transport facilities of Tiger Reserve	298 294.207	.001	298 92.530	.038
Tourism Activities	298 245.566	.055	298 109.554	.282

From the Table 7 it is inferred that marital status of the visitor influences the Tourism activities undertaken and their experience and satisfaction on facilities at the Tiger Reserve.

It is also inferred that experience and satisfaction of Visitors on Facilities has significant relationship with the number of visits to the Tiger Reserve.

Suggestions

Visitor experience and satisfaction motivates the visitors to revisit the Tiger Reserve, which helps in the socio economic and environmentally sustainable development of the Tiger Reserve. Visitor experience and satisfaction can be improved by providing information on the features and significance of eco tourism development in the region through websites/ blogs, newspapers and KTDC. Information on the features and significance of eco tourism development in the region helps in better understanding on the facilities provided to satisfy the visitors, without damaging the eco fragile areas.

Visitor education can be provided through visitor education centers, Information on Usage conditions and Promoting appropriate behaviour.

New Ecotourism programs with minimal entry free can be introduced for lower income groups that motivate different categories of travel companion like family and children to visit the protected area, which inturn brings awareness on the significance of ecotourism development in the region to the future younger generation.

Frequency of Public transportation services may be increased to attract lower income groups.

Ecotourism activities can be improved for better satisfaction. Binoculars can be provided for all visitors during their visit to Tiger Reserve. More vehicles for safari can be facilitated so that waiting time for day visitors can be reduced since there is limited public transport facility to commute to the area.

CONCLUSION

Protected areas are locations which receive protection because of their recognized natural ecological and cultural values. Protected areas are essential for biodiversity conservation. The research was carried out in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve which is well known for the conservation of tiger and other endangered animals like Indian Bear, Indian Elephant, Nilgiri Tahr and Lion tailed monkey. The research study revealed that factors like level of education, Type of Occupation, Level of Income, Source of Information about the destination and mode of transport selected to reach the Tiger Reserve influence the ecotourism activities undertaken by the visitors. The study analysed the factors like Occupation, Travel companion and Mode of transport, Income and Source of Information which influences the visitor experience and satisfaction on facilities and features of the Tiger Reserve. From the analysis, the study suggested in bringing awareness among tourists by websites/ blogs, news papers on the importance of Eco tourism in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve. Also suggested measures like minimizing the entry fees for eco tourism activities and programs, facilitating public transportation and safari vehicles, provision of binoculars to attain better perception of tourists on their experience during visit and sustainable development of the national park, which helps the national park authorities in conservation and management of the nature and wildlife.

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