



A mangrove forest's tourism potential remains untapped

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Pichavaram has not found the place it deserves on the tourism map of India, mainly owing to the lack of facilities

The Pichavaram mangrove forest in the coastal Cuddalore district, considered the second largest in the country after West Bengal's Sundarbans, is a storehouse of biodiversity.

Straddling the Vellar and Coleroon rivers, which flow into the Bay of Bengal, the verdant mangrove region, a unique ecosystem spread over 1,000 hectares, is undeniably one of Tamil Nadu's hidden gems.

However, Pichavaram has not found the place it deserves on the tourism map of India, mainly owing to the lack of basic tourism facilities and initiatives to promote community-based tourism.

The tourism potential of the place has not been fully tapped. At most, visitors are taken on a boat ride through the numerous creeks in the ecosystem.

At present, Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) operates a boat house. While tourist footfall is high during the peak season between April and June, infrastructure is woefully inadequate.

Sources in the Forest Department said that the region had eco-friendly cottages and dormitories that were damaged during the 2004 tsunami. There are no efforts to develop the cottages.

The boats are run by the Eco Development Committee comprising eight persons from Thalapathy Nagar, a village located in the forest area.

While 20% of the revenue from each trip goes to the members of the Irular community, the rest is spent on the welfare of tribal families in traditional settlements in the area.

"Years ago, the annual Summer Festival was a huge draw. The festival generated revenue, besides helping to improve forest management through community-based tourism. But the district administration has not taken any initiative over the years," an official said.

The mangroves were also abundant in the region and they offered natural protection to the backwaters and the coast, but their gradual destruction has led to erosion and environmental issues, say conservationists.

"The biggest threat is the proliferation of shrimp farms which have been illegally drawing water from the natural creeks in the mangrove ecosystem. Irresponsible visitors littering sensitive areas are also a cause for concern," pointed out A. Elayaraja, secretary of Aalamaram, a non-governmental organisation.

"Shrimp farms are also illegal as they violate the Coastal Regulation Zone norms. A number of farms are located within 300 metres of the mangrove forests. The government should reclaim the land and plant mangrove species, besides involving local communities, to conserve and protect these important ecosystems," he said.

According to S. Killai Ravindran, vice-chairman of the Killai Town Panchayat (of which jurisdiction Pichavaram is located), Tourism Minister M. Mathiventhan and other officials visited the mangrove forests recently and prepared a master plan for the development of Pichavaram with help from locals.

"The proposal included development of eco-friendly stays for visitors and other service infrastructure. We have submitted three models to the government. The idea is to involve the local communities in the activities and generate revenue for them," he said.

T. Arul Selvam, an environmentalist, felt the government should lay stress on promoting sustainable community-based tourism. The entire region has great potential for tourism development.

“The local communities (*Irulars*) and their knowledge of the ecosystem and its biodiversity is a great asset. They should be involved in the process. It will also help improve their economic condition and they could also benefit from sustainable tourism,” he said.

Mangroves are the first line of defence for coastal communities and play a major role in minimizing the impact of natural disasters like tsunami, floods and cyclones.

The government should establish a learning centre at Pichavaram for all things related to mangroves, especially for researchers, Mr. Selvam added.

Source:<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/a-mangrove-forests-tourism-potential-remains-untapped/article65341283.ece>