

GUIDELINES FOR ARRANGING VISITOR SAFETY IN ECOTOURISM LOCATIONS OF KERALA FOREST DEPARTMENT

Introduction

Community based ecotourism is implemented and practiced in the State as part of Participatory Forest Management (PFM). Detailed guidelines have been issued in 2002. As per the guidelines, the Community will be responsible for keeping the forest environment clean. For this purpose the PFM institutions, namely, VSS and EDC are permitted to collect fee from the visitors as "pollution fine". This fee is constituted in to a community owned fund called River/ Forest Protection Fund (RFPF). Forest Development Agency is the manager of the fund. The community is responsible for

1. Keeping the locality free form pollution
2. Arranging environmental education
3. Arranging basic facilities for visitors
4. Arranging security for visitors.

It is a fact that visit to forest areas is always accompanied by the risk of accidents. This is more so in wildlife areas.

Location specific attractions in ecotourism centres include

1. Rivers and lakes-boating, bathing, swimming etc.
2. Water falls
3. Trekking to grassy mountain tops
4. Visit to elephant camps
5. Visit to view points-high elevation points
6. Trekking and camping in interior forests.

Usual accidents reported from ecotourism locations include

1. Drowning in water
2. Attack by wild animals especially wild elephants
3. Boat accidents.
4. Fall from high elevation points

Recent such incidents include death of a couple from Gujarath in Gavi on 21st January 2015. Death of NCC students at Malayattoor in 2012 was another accident which caught national attention eventually leading to closing down of Mulankuzhy ecotourism location. Immediately after reopening the location in August 2014, another person drowned in December 2014 leading to closing down the location again. The boat tragedy at Thekkady in 2009 also is still fresh in our memory.

Types of Ecotourism locations

Ecotourism practiced in the State are generally an extension of general tourism or mass tourism. Locations of scenic beauty in forests used to be thronged by the public. The visitors face the risk of harassment form antisocial elements and accidents. Such locations were taken up for managed tourism by VSS and EDC under the principles of PFM. In such locations principles of carrying capacity is rarely met. On holidays and festival seasons, unmanageable crowds are experienced in such locations. Athirappally waterfall, Palaruvi waterfall, Kuruva islands, Ponmudy, Soochippara waterfall, Thusharagiri etc are examples.

In some other locations, the visitors are taken in department/community run vehicles or boats inside the forests. In such locations the visitor load is determined by the trips of vehicles or boats. Neyyar, Thekkady, Eravikulam, Parambukulam etc are examples of such locations.

Safety Tips.

The following are the general safety tips for all locations.

1. Sufficient number of trained guides should be provided in each location. In general tourism locations, general guide service should be provided. In trekking like programmes, depending of duration of treks, the following number of guides should be provided.
 - (i). Soft trek-half day-one guide for 20 persons.
 - (ii). One day trek without camping-one guide for 10 visitors.
 - (iii). Two days trek with nigh camp-One guide for 5 visitors.
 - (iv). Treks of longer duration- One guide for 3 visitors.
 - (v). One armed forest personnel should accompany treks of two days or longer duration.
2. Familiarisation Zone.
 - In every ecotourism location, there should be a familiarisation zone, a room with audio-visual aids where instructions to the visitors are provided. A trained guard should demonstrate the general features of the location, dos and donts while in the outdoor, dress code, safety equipments, hidden risks, general wildlife in the area, etc.
3. The entry ticket should have on its reverse the dos and donts conspicuously printed. A disclaimer that the visit is accompanied by risk and the location management is not responsible for accidents caused to the visitor should also be printed. In the case of visitors taken for trekking programmes, separate undertaking is to be signed by each visitor. General format of disclaimer and undertaking are given below.

Disclaimer:

"Visit to forest areas carry the risk of accidents due to wild animals, drowning in water, accidental fall from elevated places, vehicles, boats, rafts etc meeting with accidents etc. The management strive their best to provide safety to the visitors. However it is notified to the visitor that they are undertaking the visit at their own risk".

Undertaking:

" I..... residing at
.....hereby undertake that I understand the risk accompanying the visit to forest areas.

- (1). I am undertaking the visit own my own and am fully responsible for all the unforeseen risks on my life.
- (2). I will obey the instructions of the accompanying guide throughout the visit and will not take any detour
- (3). I will not hold the management responsible for any risk on my life due to undertaking this visit

Signature

Name and address:

Date:

Signed on this theday of(month).....(year) before me

Signature

Name and designation of the forest official.

4. Facility for First Aid.

First aid facilities and stretcher, wheel chair etc should be provided at the reception. Vehicles and boats should carry first aid boxes. The guide accompanying the team should carry first aid materials. Moreover, the guides should be given preliminary training in first aid.

5. Emergency vehicle and Hospital Tie Up:

Each location should have one vehicle kept for emergency trips to hospitals. The vehicle should have minimum facilities like stretcher, first aid box etc. Each location should have tie-up with a nearby hospital for emergency medical assistance.

5 (a): Fitness of vehicles used in ecotourism locations

- (1) All vehicles should have fitness certificate and insurance cover.
- (2) Drivers engaged in the vehicle should have proper driving license.
- (3) Since the vehicles are continuously used in the location, the same should be subjected to general check up atleast once in two weeks. Servicing of the vehicle should be done as per the schedule.

6. Responsible Forest Official.

A forest officer not below the rank of a Section Forest Officer should be designated as Ecotourism Officer and his mobile contact should be available with all guides and other staff/ VSS or EDC member posted in the location.

Location Specific Safety Tips.

1. Boating:

- (i). The boat should have proper fitness certificate.
- (ii). All new boats should conform to IRS specifications and should comply with the Kerala Inland Vessels Rules 2010.
- (iii). The driver should have proper license.
- (iv). Licensed *syrange* should be posted to all boats.
- (v). One trained life guard should be there for every 25 passengers.
- (vi). Every passenger including children should be provided with life jacket having MMD specifications
- (vii). One Life Buoy for every four passengers should be provided in the boat.
- (viii). A rescue boat should be provided at every location providing boating service.

- (ix). The boat should be provided with video and audio aids to demonstrate safety requirements. Standard safety instructions in video and audio should be provided in the boat.
- (x). The boat should have fire extinguisher and first aid facilities.
- (xi). No person over and above the seating capacity should be allowed in the boat.
- (xii). The life guard should ensure that all passengers wear life jacket before the boat starts the journey
- (xiii). The guidelines issued in G.O (MS). No. 240/09/ Tourism dated 16-10-2010 should be strictly complied with in all ecotourism locations.

2. Rafting:

- (i). Safety of the raft should be certified by a competent authority- an official from Ports Directorate.
- (ii). The guide in charge of the raft should know swimming.
- (iii). The visitors should invariably wear life jacket of specified make.
- (iv). An undertaking should be obtained from each visitor.
- (v). Raft should be operated in shallow waters only.

3. Coracle ride.

The same specifications as in the case of rafting should be followed.

4. Waterfalls;

- (i). Visitors should not be permitted in the fall area as the depth of water is generally high in such location
- (ii). Barricade of sufficient strength should be provided to demarcate visitor entry limit.
- (iii). Male and female guides are to be posted in every waterfall location.
- (iv). The guides posted at waterfall area should know swimming.
- (v). Minimum five numbers of life buoys should be provided at every waterfall location.
- (vi). Separate safe locations should be provided downstream the waterfall area for bathing for men and women.
- (vii). Women guides should be posted in women bathing areas. Children should be allowed only in the women bathing areas.
- (viii). Conspicuous sign boards should be exhibited in the area giving vital instructions to the visitors.
- (ix). Death toll of previous years, if any , should be prominently displayed in the location.
- (x). The trek path to the waterfall areas are generally steep. Strong handrails are to be provided along the trek path.

5. Elephant camps;

- (i). Visitors should be allowed to view elephants only from a safe distance. This is to be ensured by the mahout.
- (ii). No visitor should be allowed to feed elephants.
- (iii). Strong barricade should be erected between the elephant feeding area and visitor viewing area and sufficient distance should be provided between the elephant and visitors.
- (iv). Mahout should provide special protection to the visitors who are permitted to bathe the elephant in reservoirs and lakes.

- (v). Safe ride should be provided on elephant back while taking visitors on ride. Mahout should invariably accompany the visitors on elephant back while riding.
- (vi). Safe pavilion should be provided for mounting the elephant back for riding.
- (vii). Elephant in *must* and other disabilities should not be used for riding and exhibiting.
- (viii). Sufficient sign board instruction should be provided in the elephant camp.

6. Viewpoints in High Elevation areas.

- (i). Strong barricades should be provided in all suicide points and sufficient warning sign boards should be erected in such areas.
- (ii). Strong barricades should be provided in all uphill trekking routes to view points, wherever necessary.
- (iii). Rock area should be avoided as far as possible for viewing.
- (iv). Since wind velocity is very high in high elevation view points, visitors should be warned against wearing loose clothes.
- (v). Proper safety sign boards should be erected in all view points.
- (vi). Intermittently, instructions may be given through handheld mega phones in high risk areas.

7. Trekking in Wildlife Areas.

- (i). Visitors should be invariably accompanied by trained guides.
- (ii). Trekking routes are to be well laid in advance and the visitors should be taken along approved routes only.
- (iii). While sighting wild animals, especially elephants, the guide should control the visitors from going nearer to the animal for taking photograph etc. Minimum safe distance of 100 meters should be maintained.
- (iv). The visitors should not wear colourful dress while trekking in forests. Trekking shoes should be invariably worn.
- (v). The guide should keep the visitors not moving till animal or herds move to safe distance.
- (vi). The visitors should not be allowed to make noise causing disturbance to the wild animals.
- (vii). If visitors are taken in safari vehicle, they should not be allowed to get out of the vehicle while sighting wild animals.
- (viii). The safari vehicle should not deviate from the approved route under any circumstances.
- (ix). Personal undertaking from individual visitor should be taken before undertaking trekking in wildlife areas.

Safety Audit:

Kerala Safety Council has been contacted from E&TW wing for conducting safety audit of all ecotourism locations. However, all DFOs and WVs should undertake safety audit based on these guidelines constituting a team of officials consisting of Forest Officer not below the rank of Range Forest officer, an Officer from Tourism Department, an Officer from PWD and a Medical Officer from the nearby Hospital. The audit team may be constituted by the Chief Executive Officer.



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