Chapter 1
Public on Conserving an Urban Wetland: A Case from Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines responses of the public to a proposed ecotourism program. Several individuals were randomly contacted in Kerala, India, to elicit their observations and responses to the proposed program, including residents, local travelers and workers. Though a large share of the sample population supported the project, anticipating that it would accelerate the development of the city and increase their annual earnings, many were unaware of the ecological importance of the mangrove wetland. Only 5% of the total sampled populations were aware of the importance of conserving wetland ecosystems in a growing city. This exemplifies the cheerless state of the environmental consciousness of the public in Kerala, despite that the city is among the most literate, socially advanced and environmentally cognizant populations in India. This study highlights the need for development of much deeper scientific consciousness among the public at large.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation of biodiversity, by prioritizing and managing important areas has become one of the major issues in several countries (Pimbert & Pretty 1997). It is obvious that many such ecologically and environmentally important areas are found closely attached with people’s livelihood. In general, success of an ecosystem conservation programs directly depends on the public’s attitudes, their process of evaluation and understanding of the programs and how closely they can associate themselves with programs and its benefits. Direct opinion poll can be an effective tool to find out
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the reach of any conservation programs/projects to the public. People’s opinion is a reflection of various issues they confront in their day to day life and also the flow of relevant information to them and a range of other forces working in the rear. Studies conducted by Silori (2007), Bajracharya et al. (2006), and Christopoulou and Tsachalidis (2004) highlights the importance of assessing the people’s perception for different conservation programs elsewhere.

Ecotourism provides an avenue for nature conservation with the participation of the local inhabitants. It is often considered as an effective means for promoting conservation of endangered species and habitat (Bookbinder et al., 1998) in the developing countries, despite many social and cultural changes of negative consequences it is likely to bring in unless properly taken care off. After the start of new millennia eco tourism has become one of the globally important business ventures (Xue-mei, 2004). Benefits from different ecosystems to the society such as ecological services, biodiversity and ethical, cultural and bequest values can be exchanged in the market and transformed in terms of currency through ecotourism (Walpole et al., 2001).

Wetlands are rich in several aspects such as biodiversity and ecological good and services it offer. Wetlands are also one of the most threatened ecosystems of the world (Turner, 1991). Wetlands located in the urban centers are under going constant degradation due to different levels of anthropogenic pressures/activities like urban development, encroachment, flow of domestic sewage, pesticides, fertilizers and industrial effluents, over fishing, boating, infestation with aquatic weeds and eutrophication, disturbances from excessive recreational activities and tourism, and diversion of water from irrigation, domestic use or industrial uses (Verma, 2001). Over all, social prejudice of wetlands as ‘wastelands’ apparently accelerate the pace of transformation either in to built up area or abandoned waste lands. In last few decades wetland conservation is getting world wide attention since it protect the society from different kind of vagaries including water scarcity, flood, environmental pollution, and micro climatic changes. Many of the modern wetland management programs have become more holistic in approach by expanding the issue of conservation to the surrounding local communities, such as in the case of ecotourism, to ensure the ecological balance (Christopoulou & Tsachalidis, 2004). Urban wetlands are important in maintaining urban landscape by acting as the basic ecological infrastructure for the growing cities. The urban wetlands directly or indirectly influence the health, economy, and social set up of a city. Since urban wetland systems are under tremendous pressure of urbanization, the highly consumer centric life style of city population will directly effect the sustainability of these wetlands. The correct valuation of the ecological goods and services derivable or derived from wetlands do not actually get reflected in decision making during city planning and development. The market forces that decide land uses changes during urbanization have not started valuing wetlands appropriately. Payments for ecological services are largely getting disregarded by the market forces.

The unique location of Kerala in the lap of Western Ghats endorses a vast area of forested lands. In addition, the topography with undulating terrain having subdued hills and steep scarp slopes with a wide range of altitude (from below mean sea level to 2,694 meters above mean sea level) provide the state a vast area of wetlands (Nayar & Nayar, 1997) compared to other Indian states. There are a network of wild life sanctuaries and National Parks in the state for conserving the natural areas as well as its valuable wild life. Population explosion (The population density of the state is 819 persons per Square Kilometer); coupled with urbanization and infrastructure development are the main threat for these protected areas. The neo-rich utilitarian attitude of the