



# Ecotourism, The Opportunities For Women Entrepreneurs In The Forest Areas Of Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - Women through self-help groups (SHGs) and special purpose vehicles viz., Ecodevelopment Committees (EDC) and Ecotourism Management Committees (ETMC) have created multitude of opportunities not only for themselves but the community at large in about twenty-five landscapes of Tamil Nadu (TN). The TN Forest Department (TN FD) has created a multitude of opportunities for forest-fringe communities to evolve themselves with livelihood options and create work opportunities that will help the communities for the present and the future. The entrepreneurial ventures that the women brought about for themselves has ensured qualitative earning and in a few landscapes the failures are in the process of being documented for qualitative resurrection of the projects and Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs). The real-time research has also dived into the policy paralysis that occurred on account of the pandemic and the difficult times the SPVs had to go through. There was confusion, if not chaos as most of the Enterprises and Entrepreneurs was left with nothing on account of the Lockdowns that were announced in 2020. Despite the unlock that happened, the Forest-fringe operations were never opened considering the fact the Covid-19 was linked to animals. Hence, the factor of fear ensured the enterprises remained shut even till May 2021, when a slow progress was made to reopen the Ecotourism destination with care. As has been said, the 'green-shoots' of tourism are slow but steadily coming around, so too the successful landscapes of the EDC/ETMC genre in TN. The ones that have/had failed, remain dysfunctional and await a phoenix like operation to help them come back to normalcy. In a few of the landscapes, the women are keen to start the work and ensure their entrepreneurial skills are put to good use leading them to qualitative livelihood options are not wasted.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research is real-time and a work in progress study. The Researchers are working in tandem with the community, conducting focus-group discussions (FGDs) and ensuring considering the success/failures pre-Covid, during Covid and post-Covid. The primary data was collated using a bilingual (English and Tamil) questionnaire, which helped in assuaging the dynamics of each EDC/ETMC. Over a period of three-years, including the Covid period, the Research team has either been visiting or been in contact over digital means (during lockdowns with the managers of the SPVs and the FD officers) to ensure a success.

**Findings** – The findings so far, considering, the Research has been a real-time work in progress, with changes being brought about as the months and quarters progress; has seen a multitude of changes in the functioning to management of the EDC/ETMC and during Covid times the closure of the SPVs as well at times for six quarters in tandem. This resulted in the women suddenly being left out of options of the trained vocations they had and wanting to move away completely because no governmental support is coming simply because the pandemic brought about a standstill in the lives. Besides, the Closures of Protected Areas (PA) and the forest-fringes resulted utter chaos as the SHGs/EDCs/ETMCs had no other options but to look out for survival in other areas of work, which was not forthcoming. Some of the SPVs have failed miserably on account of the apathy not only of the community at large but, because of the way in which the whole SPV operated and managed. Sometimes it was not conflict of Ecotourism interests and the wild flora and fauna, but the human conflicts in the community that lead to the failure of the SPVs.

**Originality/value** – The Research Study undertaken has been on since 2019 on the basis of the permission provided by the TN FD who wanted to create a real-time base line on the impacts of the interventions, both at the financial and FD support level, and how one would assess the continuation of the schemes/SPVs for the future. The Impacts are being studied in the Environmental, Social, Cultural and Economic and have been nomenclatured as Cumulative Impact Assessments (CIA); for based on the impact analysis the SPVs will move forward, the success of the Women entrepreneurs will be the success of the SPVs in most of the cases as has been seen and already the Research Studies and the best practices have been shared to other SPVs not only in TN, but also in other states in India, where similar SPVs are in vogue.

**Keywords** Ecotourism, Entrepreneurship, Self-help groups, SPVs, EDC, ETMC.

**Paper type** Real Time study with permission from the State Government of TN for documentation of the successes and failures through the understanding of Cumulative Impacts Assessments which will help in the survival or disengagement of the SPVs. The Current Research is a work in progress, that is expected to go on for another three quarters.

## Ecotourism, the opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in the forest areas of Tamil Nadu

### Introduction

Forests in India as per the 2019 assessment is 7,12,249 sq km which is 21.67% of the total geographic area of the Nation. Considering the canopy density three forest classes emerge under the facet of total forest cover. Table 1 specifies the detailing and opportunities that exist across the country to promote, wherever feasible and if opportunities are provided, tourism in general, ecotourism in particular (Forest Survey of India, 2019).

	Forest Class	Area (sq km)	% of geographical area
1	Very Dense Forest (VDF)	99,278	3.02
2	Moderately Dense Forest (MDF)	3,08,472	9.39
3	Open Forest (OF)	3,04,499	9.26
Total Forest Cover		7,12,249	21.67

**Table 1:** Forest Cover of India

### The Forest, the Forest Services and the Management

Managing the forests of India and ensuring its conservation and preservation has been given to the Indian Forest Service (IFS) which is similar to the All-India Services of Indian Administrative Services (IAS) and Indian Police Services (IPS) who are deputed to the State Governments and the States have their own Cadre of Forest Officers who constitute the State Forest Service (SFS) with designations of Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), Range Forest Officer (RFO), Deputy RFO, and others who constitute a bulk of the service. The Forest Service was constituted in the year 1966 under the All-India Services Act, 1951, by the Government of India. The legacy of the IFS is that, the Imperial Forest Service was constituted by the British Government in 1867, which operated under the Federal Government and in 1935 with the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, the responsibility of managing the forests was transferred to the provincial administration by placing forest in the provincial list.

The Forest Service thereby implements the National Forest Policy (NFP) in order to ensure ecological stability of the nation through various interventions of conservation, protection, preservation and participatory sustainable management of natural resources. The Forest service manages the forest areas designated as Tiger Reserves (TR), Wildlife Sanctuaries (WLS), National Parks (NP) and other Protected Areas (PA). Hannam (2000), has very beautifully articulated the fact that the IFS is an elite organization and there are no comparable environmental services in the world. The IFS bring in the facet of preservation and conservation of flora and fauna of a given area, a state and make the best of efforts to ensure the same. With a unique moto “The Forest is Earth’s delight,” (Sanskrit: अरण्यः ते पृथ्वी स्योनमस्तु) the IFS and the SFS do march forward to ensure the best for the nation and along with the support of the communities they work with, and have been observed by many as the, “lesser-known Khaki,” GQ-India (2021); a reference to the Forest officers of RFO and below ranks, who wear Khaki as in the case of the police service officers who also don the Khaki, as a uniform.

### Tamil Nadu, the Forests, the Communities, Ecotourism and ETMC

With a forest cover that is almost near to the country numbers, the state of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department (TNFD) have created phenomenal benchmarks and best practices that are worth noting, understanding and emulating in the larger spectrum of forest in India, its management, conservation and preservation.

	Geographical Area (GA)	2019 Assessment				% of GA
		VDF	MDF	OF	Total Forest Cover	
Tamil Nadu	1,30,060	3,605	11,030	11,729	26,364	20.27

**Table 2:** Forest Cover of Tamil Nadu

To help with a better understanding of the forest area of Tamil Nadu, one needs to understand that the state has a total of nine forest grouping viz., Tropical Wet evergreen, Tropical semi evergreen, Tropical moist deciduous, Littoral and swamp, Tropical dry deciduous, Tropical thorn, Tropical dry evergreen, Sub-Tropical broad-leaved hill and Montane wet temperate (TNFD, 2016). Based on the variety of Forest area, the state has, the TNFD has categorised two types of Ecotourism Management Committees (ETMC) that are spread over the following areas and destinations:

#### A: Wildlife Sanctuary Protected Area (PA) ETMC:

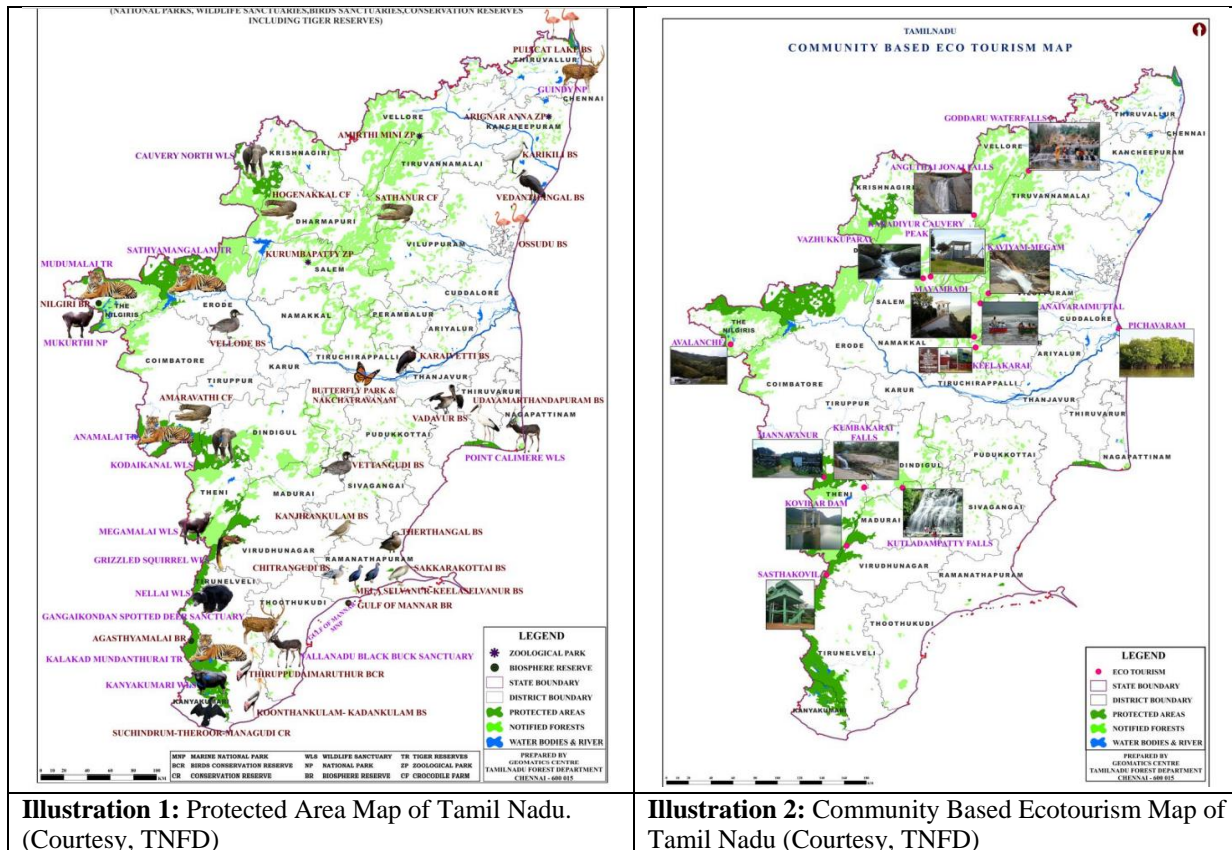
	Name of Site/Destination	Protected Area (PA)
1	Sasthakovil	Srivilliputhur Wildlife Sanctuary
2	Kovilar Dam	
3	Kumbakarai Falls	Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary
4	Mannavanur	
5	Kodiakarai Village in Vedaranyam	Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary
6	Kalikesam	Kanniyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary
7	Zero-point Pechiparai	
8	Chinna Suruli-Megamalai Range	Megamalai Wildlife Sanctuary
9	Mudumalai Tiger Reserve	Mudumalai Tiger Reserve

**Table 3:** ETMCs in Wildlife Sanctuary unit of TNFD

#### B: Reserve Forest Area (Territorial Division) ETMC:

	Name of Site/Destination	Reserve Forest Area (RFA)
1	Pitchavaram	Cuddalore Forest Division
2	Theni (Top Station)	Theni Forest Division
3	Keelakarai, Panchamalai Hills	Tiruchirapalli Forest Division
4	Anguthai Jonai	Tirupattur Forest Division
5	Mayambadi	Attur Forest Division
6	Anaivari Muttal	
7	Vazhukkuparai	Salem Forest Division
8	Karadiyur Cauveri Peak	
9	Goddaru Water Falls Amirthi	Vellore Forest Division
10	Kutladampatty Falls	Madurai Forest Division

11	Agaya Gangai Water Falls	Namakkal Forest Division
12	Beeman Falls	Tiruvanamalai Forest Division
13	Aiyur	Hosur Forest Division
14	Kotagiri Range	Nilgiris Forest Division
15	Cairn Hill	
16	Avalanchi	
17	Kaviyam-Megam	Kallakurichi Forest Division

**Table 4:** ETMCs in Reserve Forest Area unit of TNFD

The current research study/paper has taken up three destinations: Sasthakovil Site, Point Calimere (Kodiakarai Village) and the Kovilar Dam sites to elaborate on the opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in the forest areas of Tamil Nadu through the ETMC mechanism.

### The methodology

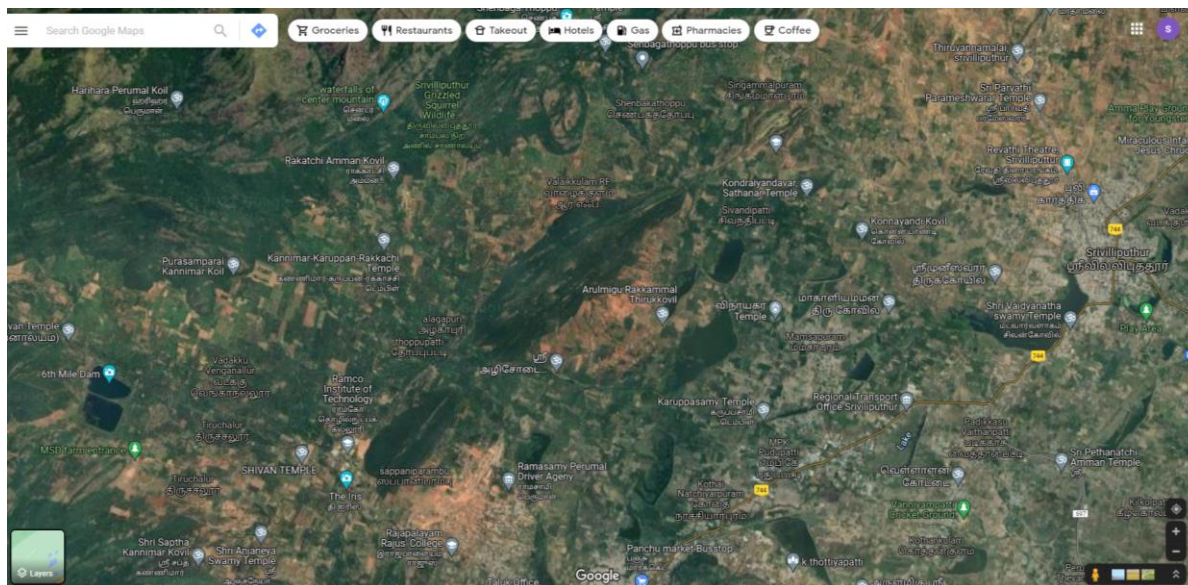
The research team has been visiting the ETMC destinations from 2018 on a regular and discussing with the ETMC members and the TNFD officers on the field to understand how the ETMCs can be bettered to ensure preservation and conservation.

Focused-group Discussions (FGD) are a regular affair when on the field and the discussion that emanate have led to lot of thinking and thought processes that have ensured, success for the ETMC. True the paper will also discuss an ETMC that has failed in its entrepreneurial venture. The Research team also looks into the data that is generated through the books of accounts and discussions with all the members in an open forum, where the aspects are discussed thread bare. Pandemic struck badly on all the ETMCs as the TNFD and the Government of Tamil Nadu ordered closure of all destinations. One learning that the research team had, as we were in constant connect with the ETMC stakeholders was that, besides, CBE, the community should have other business opportunities to risk-mitigate the pandemic and similar scenario that would occur. The Community too is aware of the same, and do look forward to other opportunities, but their interest in CBE is steadfast. The current leaders would surely encourage their children to take up other vocations and opportunities.

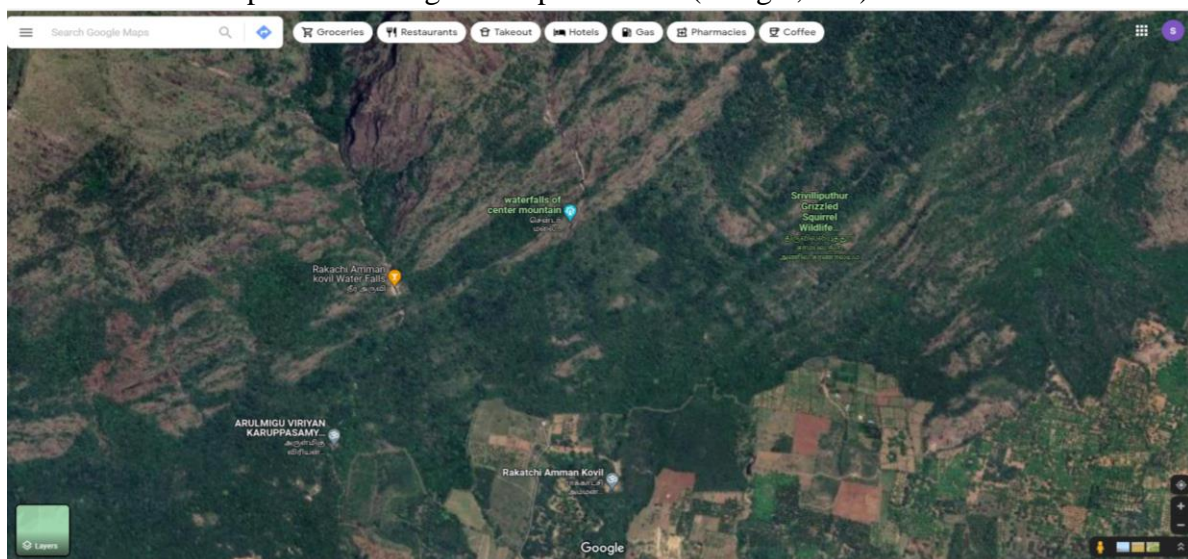


### Case Study of Sasthakovil Site, the river, the waterfall (Srivilliputhur Wildlife Sanctuary) (9° 21' to 9° 48' N and 77°21' to 77°46' E)

Located twenty-four km from Rajapalayam town (in Virudhunagar District) which is the nearest bus and railway station points as well and with Madurai (96 km) being the nearest airport; the site is inside the Srivilliputhur Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) (also known as Grizzled Squirrel Wildlife Sanctuary-GSWS). Spread over an area of 485.2 km<sup>2</sup> SWS was established in 1988 to protect threatened Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*). The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has approved the location as the fifth Tiger Reserve of Tamil Nadu, which will encompass the Meghamalai and Srivilliputhur Grizzled Squirrel Wildlife Sanctuaries (Rajaguru, 2021) and has been rechristened as Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve (SMTR) (Fathima, 2021). Located in the lap of Western Ghats which falls in the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, it is bordered on the southwest by the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) and has been considered as one of the best-preserved forests south of the Palghat Gap. the tourist spot is located on the River Nagariyar, and the place where the water falls has been identified as the Sasthakovil Falls. The forest cover falls under various categories (TBGP, n.d.) viz., deciduous forest at the lower elevation, river line forest, tropical evergreen forests and semi-evergreen forest at the higher elevations. In a few areas grasslands can also be seen (Rajaguru, 2021), making it a nature's paradise and providing an opportunity for promoting Ecotourism and with the destination considered a place for sighting Elephants and Tigers besides the lion tailed macaques (LTM), gaur, leopard, Nilgiri Langur, Nilgiri Tahr, bonnet macaque, common langur, palm civets, slender loris, sambhar, spotted deer, tree shrews, great pied hornbill, Nilgiri pipit, wild cats and boars, it sure becomes a point of attraction, besides the local populous wanting to go not only to the river and the falls, but also visit the Images of Lord Ayyappa in an open space, who is considered to be the family deity by the local people. With such flora and fauna and the declaration of the area being a Tiger Reserve, the area comes under the Wildlife division of the TNFD.

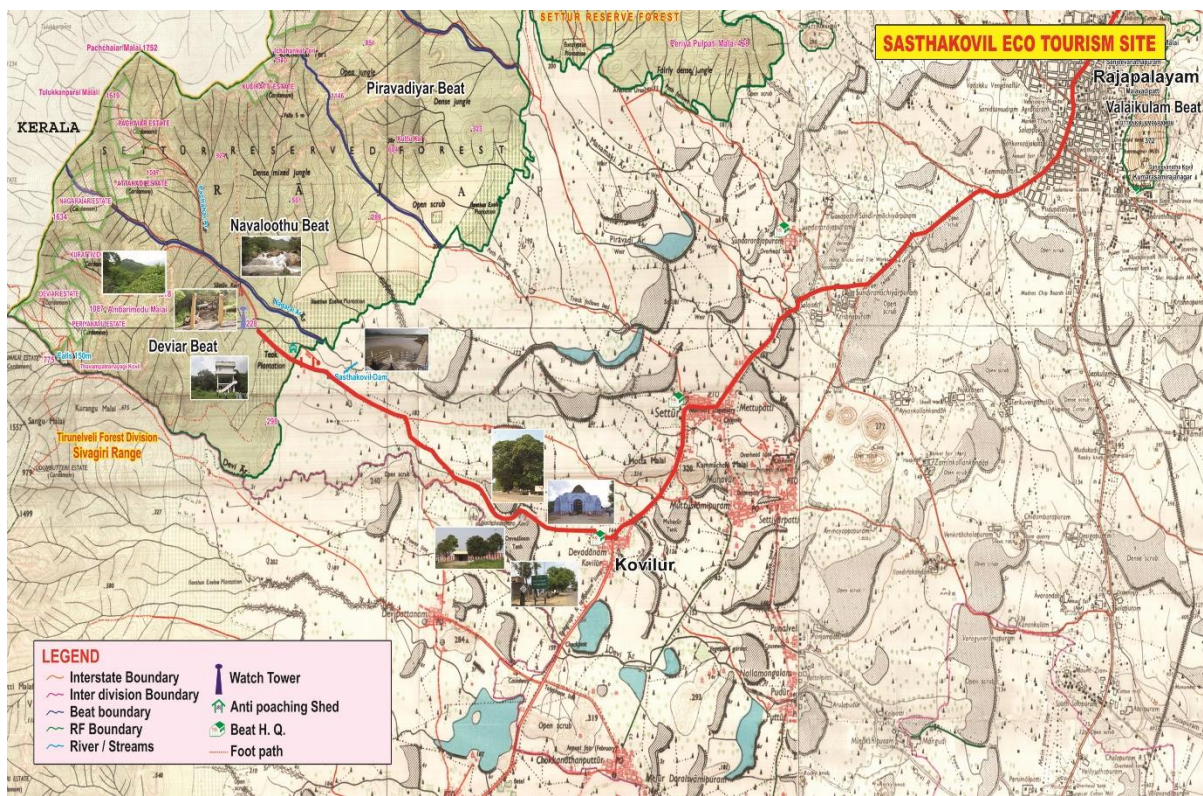


**Illustration 3:** Map area showing Srivilliputhur area (Google, n.d.)



**Illustration 3a:** Map area showing close up of Srivilliputhur area (Google, n.d.)





**Illustration 3b:** Map of the Sasthakovil Ecotourism Site (provided by the Biologist of Srivilliputhur Wildlife Sanctuary)

One aspect that we as academia and practitioners of ecotourism should note is that, locations such as, Sasthakovil, have ancient temples, which the locals have been visiting from times immemorial which are within the forest area. The foresters speak of at times on full-moon and new-moon, there would be 5000 to 10000 devotees who would want to visit the temples, which would create a major human-wildlife conflict (HWC) in the area.

The elevation ranges from 100 metres (330 ft) in the plains and rises to the highest peak, Kottamala, at 2,010 metres (6,590 ft). Average annual rainfall 849.1 millimetres (33.43 in) varies between 800 millimetres (31 in) - 2,300 millimetres (91 in) in different areas of the sanctuary; which leads to flash-floods, wherein the upper reaches of the Western Ghats that dominate the area, receive rains, that water immediately flows into the rivers (besides, Nagariyar, the other rivers are: Periyar, Pachaiar, Mangar, Kovilar and Pairakudralar) and rivulets, leading to people being washed away. Besides the rivers the two dams that feed the water sources to the region are the Kallar and Mullaperiyar. Hence, the best way to manage is to ensure the first line of protection, prevention, conservation and preservation of the destination is given to the local community, who are in the know of the place well, as they have been seeing the place for generations. The ETMC program which evolved out of the earlier Ecodevelopment Committee (EDC) program has been time tested and one that ensures for the community and the needs and requirements of the Forest Department was formed in September 2013 and registered in November of 2013.





**Illustration 3c:** The Sasthakovil environs and the Women members of the ETMC and TNFD officers

It can therefore be seen that to manage a huge area of this kind that is found here, the support provided by the local population in the forest-fringes will become crucial. Under Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project (TBGP) an Ecotourism Management Committee (ETMC) at Kovilar village for Sasthakovil (TNFD, 2016a) site has generated income of Rs. 7.01 lakhs in 2014-15 and Rs. 9.57 lakhs in 2015-16 totally Rs. 16.58 lakhs, which enable engaging 2 women members for checking and ticketing and 4 men members for guiding visitors, fire watchers and driver wages etc. Further 6 women Self-help Groups (SHGs) have been provided loan of Rs. 5.80 in 2014-15 and Rs. 8.80 lakhs in 2015-16, totally Rs. 16.60 lakhs including 'revolving funds' for alternate income generation programs (IGP). The revolving funds and the IGPs that were created by the TNFD in agreement with the local community has ensured a forward growth for the forest-fringe village.

The research team whilst interacting found that the community members from the forest-fringe village have joined and support the efforts of the FD in a multitude of ways. It is notable to mention here that the women of the village took lead in ensuring participation and some of them became President, and Vice President of the ETMC along with the Forester of the TNFD acting as the Secretary to the ETMC. When asked by the researchers, as to why they felt like joining the ETMC, the women folk mentioned that, instead of going far away to work and even settle down in different towns, leading to an increase in expenses, it is better to adopt to a way of life that they have known for a long time and support the FD and also add value to their lives. The President, a woman, mentioned that at times the families participate in the ETMC and it is this participation that brings about the success to the sustainable model of ecotourism.

The community participation helped in regulation of visitors, regulation of activities like removal of litter, prohibiting liquor and cigar, cooking, use of shampoo etc., and reduced the burden of Forest officials. The ETMC becomes not only watchful members of the destination, but also guide the visitors who come to a place that otherwise appears naïve, but having lot of dangers that would be lurking; hence, if under the watchful eyes of the ETMC members the visitors are able to enjoy the place, as mentioned by a Forester, "the experience is memorable." The same Forester also mentioned that, "they keep a watchful eye on the ETMC members such that if they require any support and guidance, they are always available." The Forest Range Officer (FRO) too made a mention in our discussion, that, "it is the women folk of the village community who have led from the front to bring about success of the project...they have even ensured the men play a role as required, which brings in peace to the community and the families. With reasonable

incomes and ‘revolving funds’ that are provided for IGPs, the community is happy to manage the issues themselves and they manage it well.”

One needs to note that, it is the entrepreneurial ability of the women from the community of Sasthakovil that they are able to establish a sustainable model for bettering not only their lives, but supporting the FD in a manner required.

Under the TBGP scheme the Sasthakovil ETMC has been provided with a twenty-seven-seater van wherein when groups come to the destination from various parts of Tamil Nadu and other states, the visitors are picked up at the Rajapalayam Railway Station for a day trip to Sasthakovil and are dropped back to the station for a cost of INR 2500. This apart, the ETMC charges INR 10 per head for entry at the forest check post. All these collections go to the joint savings bank account managed by the Community members of the ETMC and the Forester who is the Secretary. It is from this account that ‘revolving funds’ are provided to the community for various entrepreneurial opportunities that get created. To the surprise of the researchers, it was found, when the books of account, very efficiently managed by the ETMC members were looked at to understand, the loan returns were 100% and this clearly ensured confidence. One aspect to mention was that most of the IGPs were run by women, clearly demonstrating the entrepreneurial leadership that the women provided to the Community and the sustainable model that had been adopted.

One facet that is worth noting is that, when day-travellers reach the destination, they are provided with a welcome drink, most often a medicinal tea, which is also provided prior to departure from the destination. The payments for the same by the visitors go into the ETMC account. Considering the fact that the destination is located deep in the forest, availability of food can be questioned. Here too, the women entrepreneurs within the ETMC have set up a SHG, which provides for Lunch at a cost of INR 60 for each visitor; the money paid by the visitors goes to the SHG, and this is the income that is derived directly. The ETMC members have ensured that they have functioned qualified tour operators and managed the visitors from 0800 to 1715 at the destination, and all under the watchful eyes of the FD, who will be managing along with other administrative, development, preservation and conservation functions as well. The ETMC also organizes a trek from Sasthakovil to Mamarathukeni for those who are interested and when the numbers are there, at a cost of INR 250 per visitor.

The Research team has visited the Wild Life destination of Sasthakovil along with the Biologist from the Wildlife Office at Rajapalayam and got to interact on a multitude of issues and the way forward. During our discussion which was before the pandemic set in; the ETMC members had resolved to:

- i) buy a mini-bus that would help in getting more visitors to the destination from the savings of the ETMC and the incomes earned in the form of interest on the ‘revolving funds’
- ii) they even planned to have place of stay at the entry point of the destination, which would help them to increase revenue and also have opportunities to provide employment to manage the facility to others in the forest-fringe village. Another interesting aspect that we heard from the ETMC team, was that they get repeat visitors, who bring in their friends and family and this is what keeps the destination.

### **Participation of the Village Community**

One aspect that the researchers would like to specify is that, only one village in the vicinity has participated in the ETMC, whereas all other villages, they are in proximity to the destination have been kept bereft. Besides, the local panchayat in the area too is not very involved. Would all these create a rift is a question, that we pondered over. Considering that the panchayats now have a robust Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) that is up and running with funds coming directly from the Federal Government for various development activities. The question is would the GPDP mechanism juxtaposed with the ETMC framework bring better results, it is a question that remained unanswered.

All in all, it can be seen that the Community Based Ecotourism (CBE) model was being successfully run to the various frameworks that the sustainable tourism would specify and frameworks of women and their ability to bring in entrepreneurial way of life is a proof in itself at Sasthakovil. The pandemic however, has brought a standstill to tourism activities, which earlier had a large visitor base and even the ‘revolving funds’ have been stopped leading to a stop in tourism and other related activities. The researchers and the NGO with whom they work with are focussing on the aspects of mitigating such events in the future; and



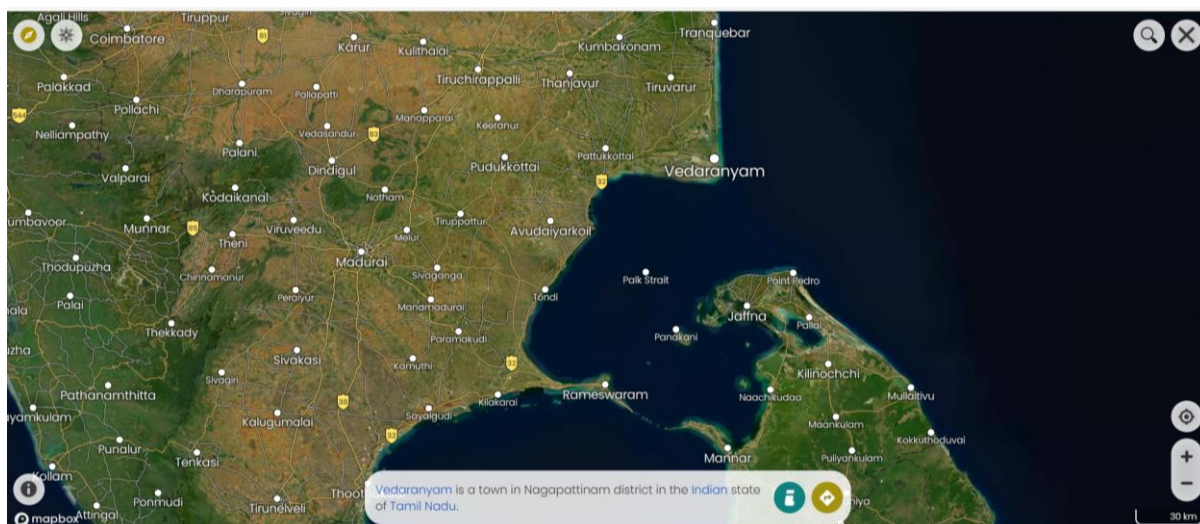
of the suggestions that has come about is 'alternative job' opportunities to be suggested to at least some members of the families and the village communities ensuring a reduction in exposure to the scenarios that we have faced on account of the black-swan event.

### **The women of Sasthakovil and the way forward**

The ETMC of Sasthakovil led by the Women and the TNFD has marched ahead. Covid-19 no doubt placed a multitude of barriers with the stoppage of visitations by the tourists. The FD in fact shut down the place in its entirety, resulting in the women entrepreneurs and the ETMC members focussing on other job opportunities to eke out a living. The research team in its deliberations too realized that the ETMC members in general and the women folk attached to the ETMC in particular had made tourism a dependent business opportunity, which at times of crisis, clearly ushers in a stoppage of visitors and thereby killing the very business the locals were dependent upon. Successive notifications of the Government ensured no tourist movement as in the case of other ETMCs across the state. Though in some ETMCs tourism was allowed, but other Income Generation programmes (IGP) and the funds for the same were not provided for.

**Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary, Kodiakarai Village in Vedaranyam** (Vedaranyam Range, Nagapattinam Wildlife Division, Tiruchirappalli Circle) (10°17'16.08" N 79°51'54.36" E)

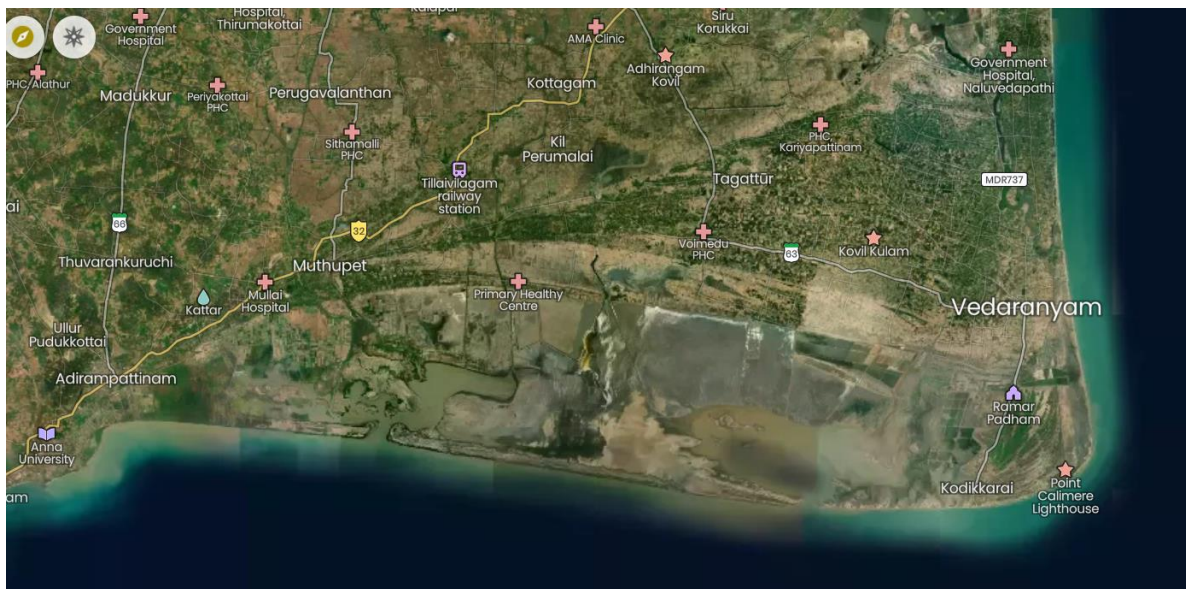
The Kodiakarai village appears to be non-descript and beyond the reach of visitors; but it opens a mosaic of Ecotourism opportunities, which bring in variety to the CBE Model through the ETMC, SPV in Tamil Nadu, and thereby becomes a role model, a best practice bench mark for the forest administrator and the community. The ETMC was established in 2014. A Birders Paradise, Point Calimere is a wetland complex that has been given the Ramsar Site Status in 2002. It plays host to thousands of migratory birds that come from far flung areas, and the Greater Flamingos too are important and unique visitors. Geographically, the sanctuary is a site of mudflats, mangroves. The wildlife sanctuary was set up on 17.26 sq. km. of swamp land in 1967 for the conservation of Blackbuck, and endangered and endemic species and the Government of Tamil Nadu has expanded Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary by adding 12,407.27 hectares of the Great Vedaranyam Swamp in Tiruvarur, Nagapattinam and Thanjavur districts (Mariappan, 2013). With a need to protect and develop the fauna and flora of the area, the TNFD has brought the reserve forests of Muthupet, Thuraikadu, Vadakadu, Maravakadu, Thamarankottai, Palanjur in Pattukottai and Thiruthuraipoondi taluks and Kodiakadu of Vedaranyam taluk, under the new wildlife sanctuary.



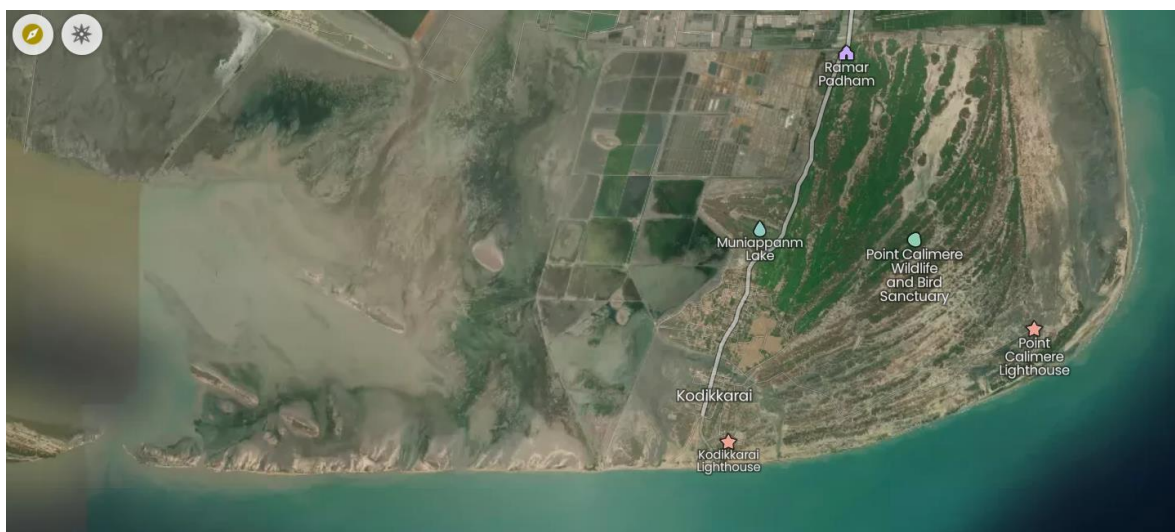
**Illustration 4:** Map of Vedaranyam (Mapcarta, n.d.)



**Illustration 4a:** Map of Vedaranyam (Closer look) (Mapcarta, n.d.)

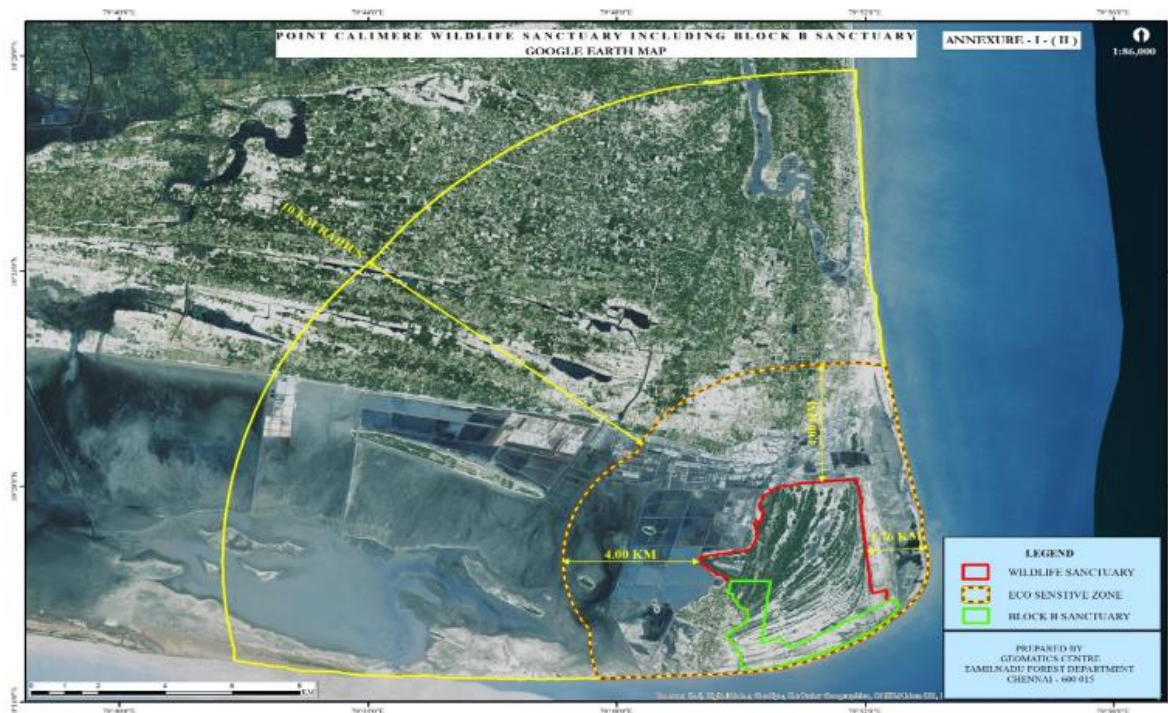


**Illustration 4b:** Map of Vedaranyam (Closer look) (Mapcarta, n.d.)



**Illustration 4c:** Map of Vedaranyam (Closer look) (Mapcarta, n.d.)





**Illustration 4d:** Map of Eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary (MoEFCC, 2018)

Ornithologists say the site has registered the largest congregation of migratory birds, exceeding four lakhs. As many as 236 species were spotted after the onset of the north-east monsoon. Species like painted stork, spoonbill, spoonbill sandpiper, spot-billed pelican, black-necked stork, spotted greenshank, white ibis and Asian dowitcher can be spotted here. Thirunaranan KVRK of Nature Trust has referred to the destination as a, “....bird paradise. Point Calimere wetland complex is the only one in south India given Ramsar Site status in 2002 because of the significant role it plays in attracting thousands of migratory birds even from Siberia, especially Greater Flamingos....” (Mariappan, 2013).

The Ecotourism landscape of Point Calimere has the following products that the visitors get to see and be part of:

1. Black buck sighting by vehicle or trekking for a distance of 5 km between Gate No. 3 and the Chola Light House.
2. Bird watching on the mud flats in the sanctuary and in the Mangrove/Salt swamp areas
3. Turtle watch (Seasonal: December to March)
4. Ramarpadam
5. Muniappan Kovil
6. Shervarayan Temple
7. Chola Light House
8. Trekking in dry Evergreen Forest between Ramarpadam Modimandapam for a distance of 0.5 Km
9. Beach Walk/Trek for 7 Km from Chola Lighthouse to Kodiakarai Jetty

The ETMC at Point Calimere is a convert from the EDC model and is in the process of galvanising itself. Considering the off-beat factor of the Ecotourism destination, “the ETMC is evolving” as mentioned by the Deputy Forest Range Officer. “A lot of work has to be done to attract tourists to the Ecotourism Destination,” says the President of the ETMC. As mentioned, the ETMC is evolving, with the ETMC members collecting the following amounts for various services and service offerings:

	Services (Domestic Tourists)	Amount Charged by ETMC		Services (International Tourists)	Amount Charged by ETMC
1	Children above 5 years	20.00	12	Children Above 5 years	200.00
2	Government School Children	05.00	13	Adults	300.00
3	Private School Children	20.00	14	Car (upto 7 persons)	500.00
4	Adult	30.00	15	Van/Heavy Vehicle	1000.00
5	ETMC Maintenance	05.00	16	Still Camera	500.00
6	Car (upto 7 persons)	50.00	17	Handy Camera	3000.00
7	Van/Heavy vehicle	100.00	18	Films Handy/Video	20000.00
8	Still Camera	50.00	19	Film Shooting	100000.00
9	Handy Camera	300.00			
10	Films Handy/Video	5000.00			
11	Film Shooting	25000.00			

**Table 5:** The Service offerings at Point Calimere, Kodiakarai

There are three guest houses in Point Calimere, Kodiakarai.

	Name of Guest House	Number	Amount charged for 24 Hours
1	Thambusamy Illam	2 Suites	INR 950/suite/night
2	Poonarai Illam	4 Suites	INR 950/suite/night
3	Vellimaan Illam	14 Rooms	INR 700/room/night

**Table 5a:** The cost of accommodation at Point Calimere, Kodiakarai

The President of the ETMC confirmed that for every booking the ETMC gets INR 200/- that is deposited into the account of the ETMC. However, the number of overnight stayers is limited, and bookings are not done in advance. Hence, the ETMC is not able to get to the best of tourism operations though the accommodation is of a good standard. This apart the destination has not been marketed well, leading to the non-utility of a good accommodation infrastructure. It can therefore be seen that, though the day (30 to 40 per day) visitors are good in number, the overnight visitors are rare, in fact most of the time, the accommodation facilities are never occupied for long periods.

The ETMC also has control on a 26-seater Swaraj Mazda and a 7-seater Air-Conditioned TATA Venture; which will help those who come through public transport to see the Ecotourism destination of Kodiakarai. The Point Calimere, Kodiakarai ETMC is a highly evolved one and one can see that, the setting is bright for this ETMC to grow leaps and bounds, with good marketing and creation of awareness of the unique Ecotourism destination.

### **The EDC – ETMC continuum at Point Calimere (Kodiakarai Village)**

Prior to the ETMC being established in Kodiakarai, the TNFD had run multiple EDCs to bring about community connect and create opportunities of livelihood generation. There exists EDCs that empowers women to form SHG's (Self-help groups), that uses the Government schemes like the *Magalir Thittam* and *Pudhu Vazhvu* Twitter, essentially aimed at employment and economic activity. This apart the EDCs also use funds from with the groups savings to fulfil their immediate needs. This is called internal revolving funds. The external funds are sought from banks and micro finance institutions to start new business and group businesses. This set up, is very essential in the dry and barren Kodiakarai village as, the options of any other form of employment is bleak. Since the primary occupation of the village is fishing and related activities. It employs a good portion of the population. But the income is very meagre and not sufficient to make ends meet. Hence, on establishing the ETMC for Kodiakarai; the focus was on Point Calimere area and the tourism opportunities that could be created.

### **Point Calimere (Kodiakarai Village) ETMC, the way forward**

The ETMC members realize that greater the number of visitors, the better it is for the tourism system of Kodiakarai Village. The income generation opportunities though came from ticket collection and the interpretation centre, the number of women involved was three. But they were able to make a living out of the same, and also look to investment through their family members in other aspects of business. The representatives of the ETMC and the women even provided an opportunity for a person to work as a driver



of the tourist vehicles that proceed into the tourism zone in the area. Pandemic too havoc with the ETMC at Kodiakarai, as the whole of 2020-21 was a washout. Though towards the end of 2021 there was some traction, but the number of visitors coming to the destination was less than 15 per day. The ETMC members when last spoken to in November 2021, had decided to continue with the struggle and ensure the ETMC moves ahead.

### **Kovilar Dam (9°41' north latitude and 77°23' east longitude) ETMC, a failed entity**

Located 32 km from Srivilliputhur town and 15 km from Watrap Town and 76 km from Madurai, the Kovilar dam is located in Virudhunagar district. The dam site of Kovilar is located inside the Wildlife Sanctuary is known for sightings of elephants in the morning and evening, which happens because of the presence of the deciduous forest and the river line that led to the dam. The dam comes under the Pilavakkal Irrigation System consisting of twin reservoirs, Periyar and Kovilar; built on the rivers Periyar and Kovilar, which are situated five kilometers apart. Both are earthen dams that were built in the early 1970's.

From a tourism product perspective, the ETMC was created in September 2013 and registered in November of 2013 with an intent to promote adventure tourism in the area. A trekking route starting from the dam site to the anti-poaching shed at Athiyadikidai atop the hill was identified. Besides, the trek the Saduragiri Sundaramahalingam temple is located five kilometers from Thaniparai entrance. The locals do visit the temple in large number for full moon and new moon. To ensure the adventure activity, there is a watch tower near the dam and a trekking shed that was built in 2015-16. To help the visitors understand the local flora and fauna an Interpretation centre was set up at Thaniparai. To ensure quality adventure activity, the TNFD also provided for a 27-seater van that was budgeted through the TBGP scheme to be utilized to usher in visitors from Srivilliputhur to dam at a cost of INR 2,500 per trip. A SHG at Kilanvanakoil was also started to provide for food at the rate of INR 60 per head. The TNFD team even created an itinerary that would help in ushering in visitors for an experience of nature.

Sl. No.	Time	Place (activity)
1	0800	Srivilluputhur Bus Stand/Railway Station Pick up
2	0900	Thaniparai Tribal Village
3	0930 to 1130	Thaniparai Interpretation Centre and Medicinal Plant visit
4	1300	Kovilar Dam
5	1330	Lunch (SHG to supply food via the ETMC)
6	1400 to 1600	Trekking and Kovilar Dam visit
7	1600 to 1630	Short halt at the trekking shed (Tea to be provided for a cost by SHG/ETMC)
8	1715	Departure to Srivilliputhur

**Table 6:** The Itinerary envisaged for visitors at Kovilar Dam ETMC

From the above it is clear that the Government of Tamil Nadu through TNFD has provided for an opportunity for a community in an area to make a living out of a dam and tourism products that surround the dam. When the researchers visited the destination, it was realized that, the destination is one of the best with all the facets present for destination development.







**Illustration 3:** The Kovilar Dam and its environs



**Illustration 3a:** The Women of Kovilar ETMC in discussion with the Researchers and the TNFD

The Village folk are predominantly from the Muslim community who came as labourers for the Dam construction. They stayed on after the dam was completed. What is sad and alarming is that despite the number of years of settling in the place, they have no identify as locals. It was mentioned to the research team, that they do not have identity cards of any kind. They appear undocumented in every aspect; and are on the lookout for Government support of any kind. They have means for monthly supplies of rations from the Government fair price shops. They have no access to any welfare scheme as well. They are subject to no or less employment opportunities. They depend on sundry jobs and are not too forthcoming to the tourism opportunities.

The ETMC is a very miniscule relief as very few are appointed as staff thus becoming direct beneficiaries of tourism income. The TNFD does not consider revolving funds and micro finance institutions do not come forward to offer them small and medium loans for Income Generation Programmes (IGP). Banks required proper documents under the Know you customer (KYC) regime for loan approvals or even confirmation from the authorities, in this case the TNFD, but there too the community faces obstacles.

The situation of complete apathy befell and the researchers retreated the place with burdened mind and a heavy heart. The also sad to see the infrastructure facilities in the village is in shambles as there are no toilets and open defecation creating an environmental hazard. The local self-government was contacted by the research team and a few others who wanted support the community, but nothing was forthcoming. Interventions for this community should be made with the Government to give them the basic rights over being documented to begin with and then the provision of providing land on which that they are living in for years. The research team, tried to connect with local social workers and politicians, but to no optimistic reason.



With a good opportunity to become a destination for adventure tourism, and if properly attended to, the Kovilar ETMC can be one of the success stories; but apathy of the powers to be; and the local population has brought them to a grinding halt, and there appears to be no opportunities for development. The women folks who came to attend the meeting with the TNFD and the researchers, mentioned that they are willing to take up any opportunity that the Government and the system would provide. Having seen success stories of various hues, the ETMC at Kovilar demonstrated one that had failed, despite having all ingredients of success within reach of the village. The research team is in touch with the concerned authorities and a few women who want to lead, and it is a wait and watch scenario for each one of us.

### **Kovilar Dam ETMC, a story to rewrite**

The researchers in all their capacities did make efforts along with the foresters to bring about a sense in the minds of the ETMC members. But with basic necessities not being made available to the community members, it appears, they are in constant condition of despair. As observed by a Forester, who did not want to be named, and who had worked in the area for close to two decades, “without basic amenities viz., toilets, homes, water, the community does not know its future, some of the young have moved out, or just visit the area to meet with family and friends. Though the FD has made the best of efforts by augmenting infrastructure for ecotourism activities, adventure tourism, and even a vehicle to ferry the visitors, not much is happening.” Going forward, the womenfolk have shown consistency and interest in making snacks and other condiments for tourist consumption. This can be furthered with financial help and be made an entrepreneurial venture. Again, the issue of hygiene and cleanliness is a concern. The tourism product of Kovilar dam and its environs can and will surely become a good destination to visit. The situation of community involvement requires dedicated efforts by the community, civil society and off course the TNFD, who have always stood for conservation and preservation. Since the tourism product is within the protection of the forest Department, private intervention will be minimal. With service level training, and concerted push a comprehensive tourism development model is achievable in the Kovilar area.

### **Conclusion**

CBE provides for the maximum opportunity to address the various goals pronounced in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The ETMC framework has imbibed within itself the nuances of conservation and preservation as the primary goal along with community involvement and support, leading to the benefits that the communities can augment for themselves and the environment. In many of the ETMCs with whom the research team has been working, it is clear that issues have been addressed directly and head on. Goals 1/No poverty; 2/Zero hunger; 3/good health and well-being; 4/Quality education; 5/Gender Equity; 8/Decent work and economic growth; 9/Industry innovation and infrastructure; 10/Reduced inequalities; 13/Climate Action; 14/Life below water; 15/Life on Land have clearly been achieved. Needless to say, with COP26 and the net-zero norms, too can be worked out well in the ETMC framework, which should rekindle and reworked once some kind of normality is reached following the pandemic. It will be the entrepreneurial activities of the communities who manage the ETMCs along with the forest force, that will ensure for all the stakeholders.

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