

# Transforming Tourism through Sustainability and Responsibility: Lessons from Thenmala and Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission

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## Abstract

Tourism in Kerala has evolved from a purely economic activity into a transformative model of sustainable and responsible development. This paper examines how two pioneering initiatives — the Thenmala Ecotourism Project and the Kerala Responsible Tourism (RT) Mission — demonstrate the integration of sustainability, community participation, and inclusive tourism growth. Thenmala, India's first planned ecotourism destination, represents the principle of "conservation through participation," promoting environmental protection alongside local livelihood enhancement. The Responsible Tourism Mission extends these principles at the policy level by institutionalising community linkages, women's empowerment, and local sourcing within a statewide framework. This study explained how both initiatives contribute to sustainable value creation and align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5). The comparative analysis reveals that while Thenmala focuses on ecological sustainability and destination-level management, the RT Mission emphasises socio-economic inclusivity and governance-driven transformation. Together, they reflect Kerala's strategic vision for embedding sustainability and responsibility into its tourism model. The paper concludes that integrating both approaches can lead to a resilient, community-driven, and globally replicable model for sustainable tourism development.

**Keywords:** Kerala RT Mission, Thenmala, SDG 5, Women Empowerment

## Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide, contributing significantly to employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development (Circular Ecology, n.d.). It has

resulted in environmental degradation, inequalities, and cultural commodification (Responsible Tourism Partnership, n.d.). To balance economic growth with social equity and environmental protection, new models of tourism have evolved – sustainable and responsible tourism (Spice Tree Munnar, n.d.). Kerala is a pioneering state in India that integrates these policies into practice. The state has become a benchmark for sustainable tourism (Kerala Tourism Department, 2024). Thenmala Ecotourism Project and the Responsible Tourism Mission are two milestones in Kerala Tourism's evolution. The conservation of natural resources and their sustainable use is the focus of Thenmala (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Responsible tourism in Kerala institutionalises sustainability principles in various destinations (Kumar, 2025). Both have received international recognition, including the UNWTO Ulysses Award (2013) and the Global Responsible Tourism Award (2023) (Onmanorama, 2023). Study compares the operational and governance models of Thenmala and the RT Mission, exploring their combined potential as a transformative model for sustainable tourism in developing economies. The study tries to answer three questions: first, how have Kerala's tourism initiatives evolved from sustainability to responsibility? Second, what role does gender inclusivity play in community-based tourism development? And third, why has Thenmala lagged in integrating RT initiatives?

## **Background of the Study**

The state has initiated several programs in the tourism industry as part of its sustainable and responsible tourism practices to give the community and the tourism sector an opportunity to benefit from the industry's growth (Kumar, 2025). They also give importance to gender inclusive programs focusing on the development of women entrepreneurs through the tourism sector by joining together with the UN (Kerala Tourism Department, 2023).

## **Objective of the Study**

- To understand the evolution and functioning of Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission as a model for inclusive and sustainable tourism development.
- To identify the role of gender inclusivity in the development of women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector.
- To understand the hindrances in implementing RT Mission programs in Thenmala.

## **Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on the sustainable and responsible tourism practices implemented in Kerala, specifically examining the Thenmala Ecotourism Project and the Responsible Tourism Mission. It covers the conceptual foundations, governance mechanisms, community participation, and gender

inclusion aspects of both initiatives. The findings are based on primary and secondary data obtained from interviews and from government publications, academic studies, and official reports associated with these projects (Kumar, 2025).

## **Review of Literature**

Dr Arunesh Parashar, Dr Umakant Indolia, and Mr. Pankaj Singh Chandel (2023) study emphasizes that tourists share responsibility for respecting local communities while practicing sustainable tourism. They propose visitor guidelines such as trip planning, local resource use, and awareness measures to ensure responsible travel (Parashar et al., 2023).

Sreerekha. M (2020) study analyses the economic and ecological aspects of Thenmala Ecotourism, highlighting both its benefits and challenges. It recommends improving access for marginalised communities and promoting inclusive participation in tourism (Sreerekha, 2020).

Angel Roy, Aparna M., and S. Girish's (2020) study examines the role of responsible tourism in Thenmala, focusing on resident participation and associated challenges. It calls for stronger government involvement, responsible tourist behaviour, and enhanced resource protection measures (Roy et al., 2020).

Manoj P.K. (2017) highlights the potential of ecotourism in Thenmala for employment and economic growth. The study suggests strategic measures to ensure the sustainable development of ecotourism in India (Manoj, 2017).

## **Thenmala**

Thenmala is one of South Kerala's finest ecotourism sites. It is a tourist destination situated in the foothills of the Western Ghats in the Kollam District of Kerala (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). It is located where the Trivandrum-Shencottah Road and the Kollam-Shencottah Road converge and covers the hill ranges of the Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, and Kollam districts. Also, Thenmala is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Kollam District Administration, n.d.). "Thenmala" is known as "Honey Hill" in Malayalam. There is a lot of demand for the honey obtained from here, so good-quality honey is exported from here to other parts of the world. Thenmala is rich in dense forests. The place is rich in forests, rubber plantations, and timber plantations, which add to its specialities. The timber from here is also in demand in our country (Apni Sanskriti, n.d.).

India's first planned ecotourism destination is Thenmala (Times of India, 2024). This destination has three major zones, viz. Culture Zone, Leisure Zone, and Adventure Zone, which satisfy all categories of tourists visiting the place. There are 10 special ecotourism destinations in Thenmala, like boat rides, leisure walks, adventure events, trekking, entertainment programmes, boating, etc

(Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Thenmala Dam is a popular spot that includes a hanging bridge, sculptures, a leisure zone, broad walks, and attracts tourists. The people visiting the place can enjoy the calm and peaceful environment with lush greenery, the scenic beauty of nature, the local food, etc. It is a part of the Shenduruney Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a hotspot for a wide variety of flora and fauna. People visiting Thenmala can also visit nearby Palaruvi waterfalls, which are a prime attraction, Deer Park, Ottakkal Vier, Aryankavu Railway Bridge built with 13 arches, Pandavan Para, Rosemala, etc. Thenmala is a perfect spot for reconnecting with nature, provides an opportunity to spend quality time, and promises an unforgettable experience (Kerala Tourism, n.d.).

## **Sustainable Tourism**

Sustainability is the ability to use the resources responsibly to fulfil present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainability can be achieved by maintaining a balance between economic, social, and environmental factors (Circular Ecology, n.d.). Sustainable development is a pathway to sustainability. An essential component of sustainable development is sustainable tourism. In sustainable tourism, sustainable development is a crucial factor that has garnered the attention of both the private and public sectors, as well as the government. The tourism industry is a fast-growing industry that provides economic benefits to a nation. Although it is one of the main sources of income generation, it is also creating negative impacts like pollution, over-crowding, depletion of natural resources, waste management issues, etc. (Circular Ecology, n.d.). To reduce these impacts in tourism, the government adopted sustainable practices in the tourism sector (Responsible Tourism Partnership, n.d.). Sustainable tourism practices are adopted in all tourism forms. The focus of those practices is to reduce all the negative impacts and also to provide employment opportunities to the local communities. The definition for sustainable tourism is given by the UN Environment Program and UN World Tourism Organisation as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (United Nations, n.d.).

In India, Thenmala is the first planned ecotourism destination. It is a benchmark for sustainable tourism activities in India. Thenmala Eco Tourism Promotion Society manages the Thenmala ecotourism project. Thenmala is committed to eco-friendly tourism. It has eco-friendly infrastructure, effective waste management practices, involves local communities by providing employment opportunities, and community participation in their conservation practices (Sreerekha, 2020).

## **Responsible Tourism**

Sustainable tourism gives importance to sustainable practices in the tourism industry to minimise the negative impacts, whereas the focus of responsible tourism is on encouraging individuals rather than the industry to reduce the impacts and benefit the local community (Goodwin, n.d.). Responsible Tourism is about “making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit.” This definition was established during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Cape Town in 2002, and this “Cape Town Declaration” is now widely accepted (Goodwin, n.d.). RT requires the participation and effort from the government, the local community, the tour operators, and the tourists to make tourism sustainable.

## **Sustainable Development Goal 5:**

The General Assembly of the United Nations has adopted 17 goals as the Agenda for Sustainable Development. Of those goals, the fifth goal, SDG 5, is related to gender equality, which focuses on reducing the gender gap and ensuring equal opportunity for all. Sustainable development requires gender equality and the empowerment of all women. The goals are to: End all forms of discrimination against women and girls; End all forms of violence against women and girls and harmful practices; Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work; Ensure effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels for women; Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights; Implement reforms to grant women equal rights to economic resources; Improve the use of technology to empower women; and Adopt and strengthen laws and policies at all levels to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, n.d.).

## **Methodology**

For the study, primary data have been collected using interviews and observation methods from Responsible Tourism Mission Officials, local vendors, and Thenmala Panchayath. Secondary data were collected from RT Mission reports, government documents, and published studies. The study is categorised under sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, RT Mission Society, women empowerment, policy, and institutional support. Findings and interpretations are based on the examinations done on the data collected, maintaining the relevance of the objectives.

## **Results and Analysis**

### **Conceptualisation**

In Kerala, the Responsible Tourism activities are running successfully. In the year 2007, Kerala initiated Responsible Tourism in February 2007. In its pilot phase, 2008 – 2010, it was implemented

in four destinations, namely, Kovalam, Kumarakom, Thekkady, and Wayanad, where Kumarakom became successful. The State was able to mark it as a milestone in the first phase itself in the tourism sector. The initiative was first started through Kudumbashree units (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). In the Second Phase, 2011 – 2017, three more destinations were added. With its successful performance, more destinations were selected in this phase. For expanding RT activities all over the State, the Government decided to form the Responsible Tourism Mission (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). In the Third Phase, the State has formed a nodal agency called “Responsible Tourism (RT) Mission” to spread and implement the Responsible Tourism ideologies and initiatives all over the State. On 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017, it was launched in the State (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). It has three responsibilities termed as “triple bottom-line” – economic, social, and environmental responsibility (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). The RT Mission aimed to develop local communities, eradicate poverty, and empowerment of women. Many programs were started by the mission like, training residents, support to do business in the tourism sector, etc. (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission has won many national and international awards, demonstrating the model's applicability around the world by combining sustainability, innovation, and participatory development (Kerala Tourism, n.d.).

Table 1, shown below, indicates the list of national and international awards achieved by Kerala Responsible Tourism initiatives continuously from 2007 to 2024 in various categories.

**Table 1.** - List of Awards Achieved by the Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Award</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Recipient</b>
1	2007–08	National Tourism Award	Best Responsible Tourism Project	Better Together - Responsible Tourism initiatives from the Department of Tourism, Kerala
2	2008–09	National Tourism Award	Best Responsible Tourism Project	Responsible Tourism initiative, Kerala
3	2011	PATA Grand Award	Environment	Destination Kumarakom Kerala Tourism
4	2011–12	National Tourism Award	Best Rural Tourism Project	Rural Tourism Project at Kumarakom, Kerala
5	2012–13	National Tourism Award	Best Civic Management of a Tourist Destination (Category City)	Kumarakom Grama Panchayat, Kerala
6	2013	UNWTO Ulysses Award	Innovation in Public Policy and Governance	Responsible Tourism Project at Kumarakom, Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala
7	2014	PATA Gold Award	Corporate Social Responsibility	Kumarakom Responsible Tourism, Kerala Tourism

8	2013– 14	National Tourism Award	Best Responsible Tourism Project	Thekkady Responsible Tourism Initiative, Kerala
9	2015	PATA CEO Challenge Award	Second-Tier and Third-Tier Towns/Cities	Thekkady
10	2014– 15	National Tourism Award	Responsible Tourism initiative	Wayanad Responsible Tourism, Kerala Tourism
11	2015– 16	National Tourism Award	Best Responsible Tourism initiative in 'niche' category	Kumarakom Responsible Tourism, Kerala Tourism
12	2017	World Travel Market Responsible Tourism Award	WTM Highly Commended Award	Kumarakom Responsible Tourism Project, RT Mission
13	2018	Outstanding Achievement Award	Indian Responsible Tourism Awards	Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission
14		National Tourism Award	Responsible Tourism Project	Wayanad

15	World Travel Market Gold Award	Best in Responsible Tourism	Kerala Responsible Mission	Tourism, Tourism
16	World Travel Market Gold Award	Best for Managing Success category Gold Award	Responsible Tourism, Kumarakom	
17	Indian Responsible Tourism Awards 2021	Best Future Forward State	Kerala Tourism Mission	Responsible
18	World Travel Market Award 2022	Indian Responsible Tourism One to Watch Award	Aymanam Responsible Village Project	Model Tourism
19	Global Vision Award 2022	For experiential, sustainable & environment-friendly Tourism	Kerala Tourism Mission	Responsible
20	International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) Indian Sub-Continent Awards	Top honours in plastic waste elimination, water conservation (under the Water STREET Project), diversification in the tourism sector and revival of post-COVID tourism.	Kerala Tourism Mission	Responsible

21		Global award at the World Travel Market (WTM) in London	Conserving Water and Improving Water Security and Supply for Neighbours	STREET Project, Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission
22	2024	National Tourism Award	Best Agri Tourism Village	Kumarakom
23	2024	National Tourism Award	Best RT Village	Kadalundi
		Global Responsible Tourism Award -2023	Best for Local Sourcing – Craft and Food	State Responsible Tourism Mission

(Source: <https://www.keralatourism.org/responsible-tourism/awards>, (Kerala Tourism, n.d.)

<https://www.onmanorama.com/travel/travel-news/2023/11/04/kerala-wins-global-responsible-tourism-award-2023.html> (Onmanorama, 2023)).

What started as a revolutionary trial initiative in Kumarakom in 2008 has now grown into a statewide movement led by the Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society (KRTMS). The Kerala Responsible Mission has now formed as a KRTM Society. In Kerala, RT Mission is the first government-owned Society to train, market, and assist local communities in starting businesses in the tourism sector (Kerala Tourism Department, 2023).

Various RT Projects are initiated and completed by the RT Mission from Village Life Experience Packages, PEPPER, STREET, Women Friendly Tourism Initiative, Interest Subvention Project, to Sustainable / Survival Tourism Destinations. These projects focus on certain activities or units like cottages, mud houses, ethnic cuisine, etc.

**Table 2.** – List of units that come under the mission

<b>Cottages</b>	<b>Homestays</b>	<b>Serviced Villa</b>
A Frame Cottages	RT Restaurants	Handicraft/Souvenir Shop
Food Truck	Kayaking Unit	Electrified She Taxi
Farm Tourism Unit	Cloth Bag Unit	Paper Bag Unit
Eco-friendly Products Unit	Candle Making Unit	Catering Unit
Tent Camping Sites	Mud Houses	Cultural Group Equipment
Local Farm Products Sale Shop	Shikkara Boats/Motor Boats/Speed Boats	Tour Operation/Travel Agent Company Officer
Startup Companies with Innovative Technology Proposals	Experience Ethnic Cuisine Unit	Value Added Production Units from Fruits & Vegetables

(Source: Interest Subvention Project Report)

The wide range of activities or units like food services, handicrafts, adventure activities, and start-ups, that are supported by KRTM, are shown in Table 2 above.

One of the highlight projects of RT Mission is the women-inclusive tourism initiatives that promote the upliftment of women entrepreneurs into the tourism industry. By giving opportunities to women through an inclusive tourism initiative, our tourism department and government are supporting and contributing to the achievement of SDG 5. In 2015, UN Member States created a blueprint to achieve the vision of Sustainable Development by the year 2030 – “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. This is an action plan for people, planet, and prosperity. 17 Goals were framed to attain sustainable development, called Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 5 is the 5th Goal aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (United Nations, 2015). The women-friendly RT activities started in October 2022. Kerala’s commitment to gender

inclusion in tourism can be understood from the number of women-led or women-owned units. 70% of the units registered under the Kerala RT Mission Society are owned by women, either run by them or owned by them. (Source: Interest Subvention Project Report).

Although Thenmala is the first sustainable tourism destination, according to the responses collected from officials, the RT projects were not fully implemented there. There are resorts, small tea shops, and other vendors providing services to tourists visiting there. The activities of the RT Mission are implemented with the help of the Panchayath offices. They are informed about the activities, projects, plans, programs, etc., organised by the RT Mission, which are passed on to the community by the respective Panchayath. Even though this information is being provided, the participation from the Thenmala Ecotourism is lacking. The local community is not responding to these initiatives. One of the reasons the officers point out is the lack of involvement from the Panchayaths. While considering the responses from the Thenmala Panchayath, the cooperation and involvement from the Responsible Tourism Mission are lacking in the implementation activities. As an effort of the Panchayath, there had been some programs initiated for the women entrepreneurs in this locality with the help of Kudumbashree units, like the Take a Break project, snack shops, etc, which later on were discontinued. They state that only through proper coordination and communication between the Panchayath and the RT officials, and the involvement of the local community, a successful implementation of the projects is possible. The areas where these initiatives have been implemented, like Kumarakom, Thekkady, Wayanad, etc., have shown us success stories and the development that those areas have achieved over the years (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Here, people are not aware of these programs provided by the government for the upliftment of the community, especially Women. Once implemented, we can see the changes that may bring to these areas and the local community and their standard of living. A large number of tourists visit this particular destination in a year. By proper use of the available facilities and support from the Government, this area has the potential for the development of society there and to become a popular tourism destination. There are new projects that provide financial support to women entrepreneurs to enter the tourism sector. Out of the total budgeted amount set aside for the activities for the year 2025-26, 50% is reserved for the women-empowered programs. The Interest Subvention Project is one such program aimed at developing and promoting units operated by women who are registered in the KRTMS (Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society). According to the scheme, 4% interest will be provided as a subsidy for the loan taken by the registered women entrepreneurs to start a new initiative. (Source: Interest Subvention Project Report)

There is another initiative proposed for women called “Sustainable / Survival Tourism Destinations”. This proposal includes:

- Souvenir shop & feeding centre.
- Women-friendly tourism project – Declaration Boards in almost 30 destinations.

- Sanitary napkin incinerator machine in 30 destinations – this includes Thenmala also.
- Gender inclusive training in 30 centres – here also, Thenmala is included in the list.
- Security cameras in the main RT women-friendly destinations.
- Award for the best women entrepreneurs in the women-friendly tourism project
- Women Bloggers Meet, Competition and Award Distribution
- Destination promotion travel – with women tour operators, women bloggers, etc.
- Aaranmula women-friendly RT Tour Package formation.

For the first time, Thenmala is included in the KRTMS's program as a first initiative. From the above list, we can see that there are many opportunities provided to women for their development. For Thenmala, this opportunity should be utilised properly and should be a starting point to enter the mission.

**Fig. 1.** - A chart showing the district-wise number of units registered under KRTM by women (*Source: Kerala RT Mission Office, TVM*)

Figure 1 shows the district-wise number of units registered under KRTM by women. The maximum number of registrations is from the Kottayam district, 2462 units, and the least is at Pathanamthitta, only 95 units. Here, Kollam has 327 units registered. From this chart, we can also understand how many women entrepreneurs have registered their units and entered the tourism sector through the Kerala RT Mission.

**Table 3.** – Comparative Table of Thenmala Ecotourism and Kerala RT Mission

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Thenmala Ecotourism</b>	<b>Kerala RT Mission</b>
<b>Year of Start</b>	1996	2007 (Mission 2017)
<b>Focus</b>	Environmental conservation	Community empowerment
<b>Governance</b>	Eco Tourism Promotion Society	RT Mission Society
<b>Gender inclusion</b>	Minimal	70% women-led units
<b>Awards</b>	None recent	Multiple national/global
<b>Community linkage</b>	Limited	Institutionalized

(Source: Secondary data)

Table 3 shows the comparison made between the Thenmala Ecotourism and the Kerala RT Mission. It briefly summarises the two pioneering initiatives.

## **Implications and Directions for Future Research**

Based on the findings from this study, in Thenmala, strong institutional integration is required between the Tourism Department and Responsible Tourism Mission programs to enhance community participation and inclusive development. Several RT initiatives are introduced, which also include Thenmala; their effectiveness depends on structured coordination and a clear implementation mechanism. Women entrepreneurship initiatives under the RT Mission contribute to the achievement of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by tourism-led livelihood generation. The study further indicates that Panchayath-level involvement is necessary for the successful implementation. They have direct contact with the community, which facilitates awareness generation, program monitoring and feedback for improvement. The RT Mission should ensure that the information is properly communicated in the community. Merely providing the information is not enough; it should be effectively executed with a timely evaluation and a proper follow-up system to ensure measurable outcomes. Involving residents, who are willing to help as volunteers in the programs, helps in the efficient working and success of the projects. Effective communication, coordination, and involvement of the Panchayath, community members, and the RT Mission are crucial for the

development of the destination, women's empowerment, and tourism growth. Sustainability and responsibility are complementary pillars that, together, contribute to a resilient tourism system.

There is a scope for future studies to explore the socio-economic impact of women-led RT units through quantitative impact assessment. A comparison of various Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission destinations to identify the variations in community participation and governance efficiency, focused research is also possible.

## Conclusion

Kerala's tourism evolution demonstrates that sustainability and responsibility are not parallel concepts but complementary pillars of a resilient tourism system (Kumar, 2025). By empowering local communities, particularly women, and ensuring equitable benefit distribution, Kerala has successfully aligned its tourism policies with the global sustainable development agenda (United Nations, 2015). The State has taken the initiative for the development of the tourism industry along with the upliftment of women. In almost all the districts, it has shown its capabilities in achieving its aim, for which they are formed. The government should focus on encouraging the destinations that are least interested in these projects. They should implement a proper marketing strategy to distribute the information to the communities. The panchayath level involvement should be made more effective for attaining success like other benefited destinations. The successful destinations should be made as a reference for bringing more and more destinations to become a part of the initiatives, so that more women entrepreneurs get an opportunity for their development. It will make women independent, which will, in turn, result in revenue generation, better living, self-respect, and identity in society. Financially independent women help to build a better society. This study contributes to understanding how institutional transitions shape sustainable tourism in developing contexts.

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