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Sustainable Tourism in Kerala, India: Potentials and Pitfalls

Bærekraftig turisme i Kerala, India: potensialer og
fallgruver

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Master's Program in Nature Based Tourism

Acknowledgment

With this master's thesis in Nature-based tourism, I finish my two-year education at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences at the Faculty of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resource Management. I am proud to say that this thesis makes me the first-generation master's graduate in my family.

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Abstract

Tourism is vital to the global economy, especially in developing countries, but the sector faces obstacles in reaching the UN's 17 sustainability goals. Developing countries, such as India, are dependent on tourism as a foreign exchange earner, and despite the industry's potential to bring benefits in environmental protection and sociocultural conservation, other alternatives for earning foreign currency are limited. Kerala, located on the Malabar Coast in southwest India, is marketed as "God's own country" and is known for its eco-tourism, backwaters, and unique culture. The state announced "industry status" for tourism in 1986, becoming one of the earliest states in India to recognize its potential. Kerala also developed a Responsible Tourism Mission framework to prioritize economic, social, and environmental responsibility.

Thus, this master's thesis has investigated the challenges concerning sustainable development within the backwater tourism business operators in the Alappuzha district in Kerala. To answer the research questions for this thesis, it was essential to get an understanding of the already existing sustainable practices implemented within the backwater tourism in Alappuzha. The methods used for this research were qualitative semi-structured interviews within three business types: houseboats-, resorts-, and homestays.

The main findings from this research are that sustainability means a lot of different things to the businesses. Besides mentioning some challenges related to environmental and economic sustainability, terms such as resilience and survival, are mentioned. It also seems that there are different understandings between the business categories and that larger and probably more professional businesses more often align with established definitions and goals. Houseboats are less familiar with sustainability, while resorts tie it to operational survival and being nature-friendly. Homestays vary in their familiarity but prioritize sociocultural sustainability and business stability. As for the sustainability challenges, they all mentioned infrastructure as the biggest challenge.

Regarding certification, there is much focus on government approval (certification), especially on pollution. However, other private or public-private certification systems are known and partly used by some businesses. Nevertheless, there is little interest in

more/new/eco-certifications, which may be due to the intense focus on government approval. However, interview challenges related to language barriers might have led to misunderstanding and a lack of follow-up questions on this part.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, India, Backwater Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Kerala, Alappuzha

Sammendrag

Turisme er avgjørende for den globale økonomien, spesielt i utviklingsland, men sektoren står overfor hindringer for å nå FNs 17 bærekraftsmål. Utviklingsland, som India, er avhengige av turisme som valutainntekter, og til tross for industriens potensial til å gi fordeler innen miljøvern og sosiokulturell bevaring, er andre alternativer for å tjene utenlandsk valuta begrenset. Kerala, som ligger på Malabarkysten sørvest i India, markedsføres som «Guds eget land» og er kjent for sin øko-turisme, bakvann og unike kultur. Staten kunngjorde «industristatus» for turisme i 1986, og ble en av de tidligste statene i India som anerkjente potensialet. Kerala utviklet også et rammeverk for ansvarlig turisme for å prioritere økonomisk, sosialt og miljømessig ansvar.

Dermed har denne masteroppgaven undersøkt utfordringene knyttet til bærekraftig utvikling innenfor bakvannsturismebedrifter i Alappuzha-distriktet i Kerala. For å svare på forskningsspørsmålene for denne oppgaven, var det viktig å få en forståelse av den allerede eksisterende bærekraftige praksisen implementert innenfor bakvannsturismen i Alappuzha. Metodene som ble brukt for denne forskningen var kvalitative semistrukturerte intervjuer innenfor tre virksomhetstyper: houseboats-, resorts-, og homestays.

Hovedfunnene fra denne forskningen er at bærekraft betyr mange forskjellige ting for de intervjuede bedriftene. Foruten å nevne noen utfordringer knyttet til miljømessig og økonomisk bærekraft, nevnes begreper som motstandskraft og overlevelse. Det ser også ut til at det er ulik forståelse mellom virksomhetskategoriene og at større og trolig mer profesjonelle virksomheter oftere innretter seg etter etablerte definisjoner og mål. Houseboats er mindre kjent med bærekraft, mens resortene knytter det til operasjonell overlevelse og å være naturvennlig. Homestays varierer i kjennskap, men prioriterer sosiokulturell bærekraft og forretningsstabilitet. Når det gjelder bærekrafts utfordringene, nevnte de alle infrastruktur som den største utfordringen.

Når det gjelder sertifisering er det mye fokus på statlig godkjenning (sertifisering), spesielt på forurensning. Andre private eller offentlig-private sertifiseringssystemer er imidlertid kjent og brukes delvis av enkelte virksomheter. Likevel er det liten interesse for flere/nye/økosertifiseringer, noe som kan skyldes det intense fokuset på statlig godkjenning.

Intervjuutfordringer knyttet til språkbarrierer kan imidlertid ha ført til misforståelser og mangel på oppfølgingsspørsmål på denne delen.

Nøkkelord: Bærekraftig turisme, India, Backwater turisme, ansvarlig turisme, Kerala, Alappuzha

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1. Introduction

1.1. Tourism and Sustainability

Tourism is one of the most critical sectors in today's global society and is a significant contributor to the worldwide economy (Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017). However, tourism also comes with some challenges regarding sustainability and keeping it sustainable. Since the Brundtland report “Our Common Future” was published 30 years ago, the issue of sustainability in general and climate change has attracted much attention (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019). Further, Jørgensen and McKercher's study (2019) also mentions that over the years, research has shifted from idealistic assumptions that tourism could be a symbol of sustainable development to recognize that, despite the best of intentions, the industry's continued expansion and the absence of environmentally friendly operations on a global scale means that tourism is inherently unsustainable.

The UN provided a common structure with 17 sustainability goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to guide everyone toward being more sustainable in their day-to-day life and with big global plans. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) range from no poverty (goal number 1), clean water, and sanitation (goal number 6) to life below water (goal number 14) and life on land (goal number 15) (United Nations, n.d.). There are, however, diverse challenges to reaching these goals within the tourism sector. Sustainable Development Goal 8 focuses on providing complete, productive employment and decent work. Within this goal, Target 8.9 has explicitly set the target to “*devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products*” (Goal 8 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.) by 2030. In addition, there is a target within SDG 12, Target 12.b, that specifically highlights the importance of developing and implementing tools to keep track of the impact of sustainable development concerning further creation of jobs and promoting local culture and products within sustainable tourism (Goal 12 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Study shows that the sustainable development of tourism has been researched and debated extensively in the last couple of decades. Øian, Fredman, Sandell, Sæþórsdóttir, Tyrväinen, & Jensen (2018) states that the debates and research revolve around the critical theme of basing

tourism development on the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, sociocultural, and economical sustainability.

Experts have claimed that tourism businesses used to perceive sustainability as a threat to their profitability and competitiveness (Øian et al., 2018). However, a sustainable operation is now more and more seen as an asset. According to Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010) (Øian et al., 2018), tourism businesses increasingly recognize that sustainability is a prerequisite for maintaining the resources they depend on to develop their products.

Furthermore, the topic of “sustainable tourism” emerged in the last decade after introducing the term “sustainable development” in the “Our Common Future” report. Butler (1999) claims that there has been specific attention to three features related to the applicability of sustainable development regarding tourism – carrying capacity, control over tourism, and mass tourism (Butler, 1999). However, Walls (1996) (Butler, 1999) argues that the Commission was silent about the ignorance of tourism by policymakers, which, according to Walls (1996), has resulted in the definition of “sustainable development” being used in various ways. Depending on the context of the definition being used, Wall (1996) argues that it has become a form of ideology or a political catchphrase, as well as a philosophy, a process, or a product (Butler, 1999). Additionally, ecotourism is a phenomenon closely related to “sustainable tourism.” However, ecotourism in tourism research has emerged as one of the least clearly defined areas of study (Page & Dowling, 2002). McKercher (1998), as cited in Page & Dowling (2002), claims that it recently has been common practice to put outdoor-oriented and non-mass tourism activities, such as nature-based tourism, ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and responsible tourism under one common label – ecotourism.

The term “regenerative tourism” has recently emerged within the tourism sector. This approach aligns with SDG 12 – responsible consumption and production, as well as Target 12.b mentioned above, and SDG 11 - sustainable cities and communities. However, “regenerative tourism” does not only focus on sustainable tourism but also on the concept of “giving back,” where tourism can be a tool for local well-being, revitalization, and sustainability (Duxbury et al., 2021).

1.2. Sustainable Tourism Development in the Global South

As mentioned earlier, tourism is one of the most important industries for the world's economy. It is further claimed by Yfantidou & Matarazzo (2017) that the industry can bring benefits in terms of environmental protection and sociocultural conservation, as well as jobs and income. Due to these benefits, tourism is encouraged in most countries and is expected to continue to grow. However, there is also an increasing realization that further tourism development has real and potentially damaging effects on nature, societies, and culture, often coined “overtourism.” Overtourism is a complex phenomenon often associated with the habitability of a place, the well-being of the residents, and tourism experiences. Milano, Novelli & Cheer (2022) define overtourism as “*the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences*” (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019, p. 413). Seasonal tourism peaks can cause overtourism. Still, the consequences of these peaks can cause permanent changes to the local residents' lifestyles, such as denied access to resources and damage to their general well-being (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019).

Furthermore, overtourism can be tied to excessive and poorly planned tourism growth and the rising demand for mobility, leisure, and bucket-list experiences (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019). Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė (2019) further argue that destinations and the local communities can be affected by overtourism if there is a breach in the balance between optimal and excessive development. Such a breach, according to Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė (2019), has historically led to a high concentration of tourists in some of the world's most popular destinations, which again has led to overcrowding and a breach in the carrying capacity of such places (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019).

Nevertheless, many developing countries have yet to find other alternatives to obtain sources of foreign currency earnings or create alternative jobs for those involved in the tourism industry. Thus, governments in the Global South with increasing tourism growth do not have many other options than supporting the industries' development, even though it may not be compatible with the principles of long-term sustainable development. Yfantidou & Matarazzo (2017) argue that unless developing countries find additional sources of foreign currency earning, the government in such countries will support all forms of tourism development, including unsustainable ones. Thus, Yfantidou & Matarazzo (2017) states that strict

environmental laws, free from misinterpretation and misuse, should be developed and enforced to protect unique and fragile natural resources and cultural heritage.

1.3. Tourism and Sustainability Challenges in India

India is the largest country in South-East Asia and one of the largest in the world with an increasing population, forecasted to reach a human population larger than that of China within the next few years. Up until 1947, India was a British colony. It extends from the northern Himalayas to the southern Deccan Peninsula. It borders Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and is encircled by the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. India has a surface area equal to one-third of Europe's. Currently, India has one of the largest and wealthiest middle classes in “The Global South.” In addition, India's economy has grown steadily during the 1990s thanks to robust expansion in the industrial sector and a rise in foreign investment. India is also among the most popular tourist destinations in the world due to its prominent culture and long history.

Tourism has become a tool for economic development and employment among developing nations. However, as mentioned earlier, the question of sustainability in the long run within the sector is increasingly becoming a challenge for all concerned due to the adverse effects of tourism on the environment (Manoj, 2010). Due to such challenges, Manoj (2010) suggests a growing relevance for environmental-friendly tourism (ecotourism) initiatives for long-term sustainability.

Due to its distinctive characteristics and extensive cultural heritage, a country like India makes for a desirable tourist country. Along with numerous historical sites, expansive coastal regions, high mountains, and serene terrain, it is claimed that Indians also have a vibrant culture, a joyful spirit, and a great deal of tolerance for tourists (Manoj, 2010). However, despite India's great diversity and potential, it needs a concrete ecotourism policy, according to Pujar & Mishra (2021), to promote responsible tourism practices and sustainable development. Further, Pujar & Mishra (2021) argue that to fulfill the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, a sustainable form of ecotourism must be developed. They go on to claim that the current ecotourism practices in India have primarily been used for marketing the country as a tourism hotspot to maximize profits with little regard for environmental consequences (Pujar & Mishra, 2021).

ATREE (2006) published a white paper on ecotourism policy in India. It states that ecotourism in India substantially impacts rural livelihoods, conservation education, and the preservation of nature and culture. The authors also argue that the goal of a tourism strategy is to develop mechanisms for limiting the expansion of tourism below levels that are viable, acceptable, and sustainable in terms of nature, society, and the economy. However, according to Batta (2000) in ATREE (2006), tourism policies should take into account all facets of travel-related goods and make it possible to identify and lessen adverse effects. Furthermore, according to ATREE (2006), ecotourism and tourism are unclear terms, and using “eco-friendly” tourism as an economic opportunity is risky because it involves pristine and rare nature. ATREE (2006) claims that if ecotourism is only seen as a means of generating foreign currency, it will miss the path to sustainability and lose its significance as a tool for conservation and sustaining livelihoods.

1.4. Problem Statement / Purpose of Thesis

Therefore, in light of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and the importance of more environmentally friendly practices within the tourism sector, the primary objective of this thesis was to:

Explore the challenges concerning sustainable development within the ecotourism sector in Alappuzha, Kerala, to create an understanding of the scope of the already existing sustainable practices as seen from the stakeholders' perspective, as well as to investigate the implementation of measures to increase sustainable operations within tourism in this region.

1.4.1. Research Questions

- A. How do tourism businesses representing houseboats, resorts, and homestays understand the concept of sustainability and what it means regarding their own operation?
- B. What are seen as the major sustainability challenges in these businesses, according to the informants?
- C. To what extent is certification (eco- or sustainable) seen as a tool to improve sustainable tourism operations in these businesses?

2. Theory

2.1. Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, sustainability has received much attention since the Brundtland report “Our Common Future,” published 30 years ago in 1987 (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019). However, some state that the concept has shifted in meaning (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). Kuhlman & Farrington (2010) argue that the environmental concerns are significant but that the main argument of sustainability is the one of welfare. Further, they claim that we should not just care for the environment due to its intrinsic value but also preserve resources for future generations. Since “Our Common Future,” there has been a significant development of the concept of sustainability: that being the concept of sustainability is commonly interpreted in terms of three dimensions – social, economic, and environmental – which should be in harmony (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010).

The three dimensions of sustainability stem from the Triple Bottom Line concept composed by John Elkington. Elkington intended the concept as a way to operationalize corporate social responsibility. Hence, there should be added care for the environment to the bottom line (which in this concept means profit), as well as being good people by, for example, providing jobs for the locals (which is the social aspect) (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). However, Kuhlman & Farrington (2010) argues that the environmental dimension may receive less attention or importance in a three-dimension approach to sustainability. The socio-economic aspects give more significant concern for the well-being of the present generation, whilst the environmental aspects are primarily about caring for future generations. Thus, the socio-economic aspects become twice as important as the latter. However, Kuhlman & Farrington (2010) argue that this violates the Brundtland requirements that development should not occur at future generations' expense. Lastly, the authors suggest that the contradiction between our desire for a better life and our concern for what this may do to the environment is obliterated by conceptualizing said concerns into three dimensions, and thinking that the solution is to create harmony between these dimensions.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism

According to UNWTO (2017), as mentioned in Jørgensen & McKercher (2019), due to a rise in the standard of living in developing parts of the world, domestic and international tourism has experienced sustained growth every year since the 1950s. However, this rise in tourism numbers raises questions about how to sustainably manage the increasing numbers and fundamental questions about people's right to travel. Weaver (2017) in (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019) agrees that this rising number presents challenges. Still, he also argues that despite efforts to control the number of tourists, there is no way to stop the growing numbers. Weaver (2017) (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019) states that this is due to the increasing number of tourists from new markets and the dependency on tourism as an economic sector.

Over the years, tourism research has focused on the early idealistic assumptions that tourism could symbolize sustainable development. Moreover, it has been recognized in the academic world of tourism research that despite good intentions, the industry's continuous growth and lack of implementation of environmentally friendly operations on a global scale mean that tourism is inherently unsustainable (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019). Butler (2015), in Jørgensen & McKercher (2019) even states that due to efforts being made in the wrong place, sustainable tourism is also inherently unsustainable, and this paradox of sustainable tourism is the foundation for several challenges related to tourism sustainability (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019).

In addition to tourism being inherently unsustainable, the sector is also a significant contributor to the world's carbon emissions (Scott et al., 2016). One might argue that slowing down tourism development is the immediate solution to these problems. However, Jørgensen & McKercher (2019) argue that since large parts of the world, particularly poorer areas, are increasingly dependent on tourism as a primary source of income and means for development, the argument for slowing down tourism development is complicated. Therefore, since it is rather difficult to stop tourism development, the authors argue that it is necessary to question how practitioners, politicians, and researchers can approach tourism development more broadly.

Jørgensen & McKercher (2019) also reflect upon a second issue related to sustainability, ecological impact, and climate change; how it may affect tourism destinations, as well as

tourism businesses and communities that rely on tourism as a primary source of income. Issues include access to a destination, experiences that tourists may or may not have, and the survival of such tourism destinations. To use McKercher's words, “... *the elephant in the room is what is going to happen with climate change and environmental deterioration and how that is going to affect the ability to travel to certain destinations, the ability of certain destinations to survive and the experience people are going to have in certain destinations*” (McKercher cited in (Jørgensen & McKercher, 2019, p. 909)).

In Jørgensen & McKercher's (2019) paper, the issues regarding tourism sustainability bring into focus some paradoxes: (1) that even sustainable tourism is inherently unsustainable; (2) that tourism destinations and the business of tourism are simultaneously threatened by and contributing to climate change and environmental deterioration, and (3) that the poorer parts of the world that are most vulnerable to climate change are also most dependent on tourism as a foreign exchange earner, as is the case for the developing nation of India.

As mentioned earlier, ecotourism is linked to sustainable tourism. Honey (2002) claims that ecotourism today is an idea and a concept that is challenging tourism as we know it. It is defined concisely as “*responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people*” (Honey, 2002, p. 1). Further, ecotourism explicitly focuses on the actions of the travelers, in addition to the impact of this travel on both the environment and the people in the host country, which, if the travel is considered to be labeled as ecotourism, should be positive. Thus, Honey (2002) further claims that ecotourism is not another niche market within the tourism industry. Instead, it will transform the way we travel if the philosophy, set of principles, and practices are understood and implemented properly. Ecotourism seeks to be low-impact and small-scale, in addition to educating the traveler and encouraging respect for different cultures and human rights (Honey, 2002).

Ecotourism first appeared as a term in the late 1970s, which according to Honey (2002), was a decade with a rise of global environmental movements and a merging of demands for sustainable and social forms of tourism. This resulted in that at the beginning of the 1990s, ecotourism was renowned as the fastest-growing sector within the travel and tourism industry. However, according to Honey (2002), there have been concerns voiced by those in the Global South linked to the principles of ecotourism and that these principles would not

continue to take root and grow in the new century. This concern was voiced due to these ecotourism principles being corrupted, weakened, and counteracted by “greenwashing” (Honey, 2002).

Linked to ecotourism and sustainable tourism, there is also the concept of regenerative tourism. As mentioned briefly, regenerative tourism does not only focus on sustainable tourism; it also focuses on the concept of “giving back” so that tourism can be a tool for local well-being, revitalization, and sustainability (Duxbury et al., 2021). According to Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard (2022), regenerative tourism poles apart from the sustainable development paradigm by placing tourism activities as interventions that flourish the capacities of places, communities, and their guests to operate in harmony with connected social-ecological systems. Furthermore, regenerative tourism, according to Bellato & Cheer (2021) in (Bellato et al., 2022), encourages tourism innovations by inserting tourism practices within local communities and ecological processes that promote human and non-human well-being.

Regenerative tourism, as opposed to ecotourism, has emerged as a niche with the goal of enhancing and transforming social-ecological systems where tourist activities are practiced, according to Hes & Coenen (2018) in (Bellato et al., 2022). Additionally, Caniglia et al. (2020) in (Bellato et al., 2022) claims that regenerative tourism addresses climate change, urbanization, justice, and inequality in both theory and practice. However, Cheer & Lew (2018) (in (Bellato et al., 2022)) argue that there is currently no agreement or clarity on the transformative power of regenerative tourism or its practical applications.

The concept of responsible tourism is utilized in Kerala as another idea of sustainability in the travel and tourism industry. Ecotourism and responsible tourism are both alternatives to mass tourism that focus on sustainability. Like ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and regenerative tourism, according to various scholars cited in Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), responsible tourism seeks to advance environmental protection, cultural integrity, economic development, and the welfare of communities, particularly the underprivileged population residing in tourist locations. However, responsible tourism may be challenging to put into practice, just like the other concepts that have been discussed. Tosun (2001), as cited in Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), specifically names a few difficulties as to why implementation is complex: these include different priorities of the national/regional

economy, the structure and incentives of the public administration system, excessive commercialization, and the structure of the international tourism system.

Thus, as concluded by Haaland & Aas (2006) and to some extent also by Honey (2002), regardless of whether ecotourism, sustainable tourism, or another form of a closely related label is being used, there is a risk that aspects related to the environment or environmental quality will be less prioritized or diluted if such terms are given too many different meanings (Honey, 2002; Haaland & Aas, 2006)

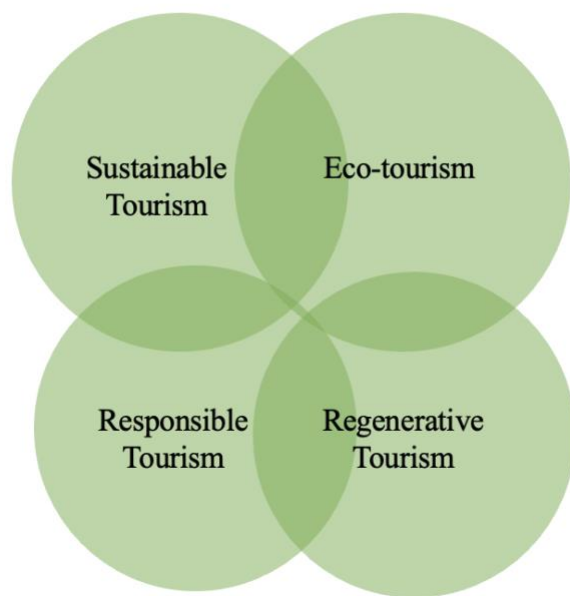


Figure 1. An illustration of the overlap and relations between typologies of different forms of tourism aiming to reduce their negative environmental impacts and improve their sustainability.

2.3. Certification/Branding as a Tool

Certification and branding systems are widely used in all sorts of businesses, whether it be tourist businesses or cafes, often to achieve a safer or more environmentally friendly operation or improved sustainability. According to Haaland & Aas (2006), such systems generally have one thing in common: The development of such systems took place to reduce or avoid adverse environmental effects regarding the business operation or production. Haaland and Aas (2006) further reflects that even though the tourism industry has been put forward as a potential contributor to financing of nature conservation and might change tourists' attitudes and behavior in a more sustainable direction, there is little doubt that tourism has many adverse environmental effects associated with it. Further, it is stated that a

lack of environmental considerations will lead to a degradation in a destination's tourism value because tourists do not find it as attractive as before.

Littering, the carrying capacity of a destination, pollution, and uncontrolled development are among the adverse environmental effects associated with tourism at several destinations. This indicates that the adverse environmental effects are related to different types of sustainability, not just ecological sustainability but also social sustainability. Thus, certification and branding systems within the tourism sector can be helpful tools to regulate the industry's operation and development, in addition to public laws and regulations. However, a central question arises if the criteria and the requirements that such systems are based on are specific and clear to understand and implement in practice (Haaland & Aas, 2006).

According to Gössling and Buckley (2016), cited in (Øian et al., 2018), the development of eco-certification schemes might be partially viewed as a reaction to the lack of sufficient legal, economic, or technological regulations. Additionally, eco-certification has been understood as a viable market-based solution to global environmental challenges, as a self-regulating alternative to state regulation, according to Buckley (2012) (Øian et al., 2018). Over the last 20 years, the tourism industry has had access to eco-certification systems because there is a greater demand for sustainable goods. Theoretically, eco-certification can help travel industry providers adopt environmentally friendly procedures. However, the majority of visitor management initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s focused primarily on reducing negative environmental consequences (Marion and Reid, 2007; Mason, 2005; in (Øian et al., 2018)).

Mason (2005) and Eagles (2014) (cited in (Øian et al., 2018)) state that such management techniques are now created with the intention of reducing the adverse effects of tourists without sacrificing visitor satisfaction. According to various scholars referred to in Øian et al., (2018), the management strategy in, for instance, national parks and other natural environments is environmental interpretation to generate curiosity and elicit thoughts. Environmental interpretation is a strategy for encouraging tourists to adopt actions that safeguard the resources in these natural regions.

According to Honey (2002), the field of socially and environmentally responsible certification is just a little more than a decade old. In the mid-to late-1990s, most of the green certification programs were established. Most green certification programs were launched in

the middle to late 1990s. Furthermore, according to Honey (2002), the issue of how to ensure sustainable development and how to develop an integrated strategy for industrial development, including tourism, has become increasingly important globally over the past thirty years. As a result, local and national governments started establishing laws in the 1970s requiring businesses to follow guidelines for environmental effects and emissions, notably into the air and water. As thus, green certification programs for the tourism sector as well as other businesses, started to grow in the 1990s (Honey, 2002).

Furthermore, according to Honey (2002), the travel and tourism sector currently offers about 206 optional incentives. There are 104 of these that offer emblems, stamps of approval, or awards to denote socially and/or environmentally superior tourism operations. In the past, these certification programs intended to gauge visitor satisfaction by grading quality and cost in addition to environmental safety and health standards. According to Honey (2002), similar certification programs are now starting to gauge tourist pleasure based on sustainable factors like the effects of the economy, society, politics, and culture.

Additionally, certification requirements may be performance- or process-based, or even a combination of the two (Honey, 2002). Performance-based certification systems use a set of externally defined criteria that are consistently applied to all operations seeking certification. Process-based initiatives, on the other hand, use internally created management systems for observing and enhancing protocols and practices. In the latter, there are three primary forms of tourist certification programs: conventional tourism, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism (Honey, 2002).

A first, second, or third party might do the evaluation of such certification systems. First parties are frequently managed and/or confirmed by the firms themselves. The second party could be an industry or a trade association. Third parties are independent outside organizations. The latter is seen as being the most objective and hence most reliable (Honey, 2002). Further, according to Honey (2002), all the certification programs offered within the tourism industry are so far voluntary, which is different from other sectors that use certification programs.

However, as mentioned, a trend within what is commonly labeled ecotourism is “greenwashing.” Greenwashing, as explained by Honey (2002, p. 6) is: *“projects or*

companies that claim to be involved in ecotourism but are merely using green language in their marketing in an attempt to ride on the crest of the ecotourism wave.” Thus, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the goals you want to achieve with certification or branding processes as well as the name you should give such systems. The goals of the certification- or branding system should be apparent in the name, as stated by Haaland & Aas (2006). Such systems should be identified by their name if they are primarily focused on providing high-quality services and, less so on upholding social or environmental ideals. Systems for certification or branding may lose credibility in relation to their primary objectives if this is not done.

To put it simply, certification systems are created to confirm that people, products, or services are competent or qualified in accordance with established criteria. Such systems' criteria are designed to guarantee uniformity, dependability, and safety across a range of industries, including the travel and tourism sector. Employers, consumers, and regulators can benefit from certification systems by being able to differentiate between competent and unqualified people, products, or services. This can improve market accountability, safety, and quality while also contributing to the standardization of procedures across various businesses and sectors. However, if they are implemented or designed improperly, certification systems can also be harmful. The competency or quality of the person or product being certified, for instance, may not be effectively measured if the certification requirements are too weak or too subjective. Additionally, if the certification procedure is too costly or time-consuming, it might put people or businesses off who would otherwise be qualified but cannot afford to go through the certification process at a disadvantage. Finally, monopolies in the market may be formed if a small number of players control the certification system, which may restrict competition and innovation.

3. Study Area and “The Tourism System” of Kerala

3.1. Study Area

3.1.1. Kerala

On the southwest end of the Indian Peninsula, along what is also known as the Malabar Coast, Kerala sits. It is referred to by many as “God's own country” in addition to being noted as a paradise for tourism (M. Edward & B. George, 2008). Kerala covers an area of 38 863 square kilometers (which is approximately the same size as Nordland County in Norway). In 2011, the total population was around 34.4 million (Department of Tourism, 2018). Kerala is well known for its eco-tourism initiatives, beautiful backwaters, and unique culture and traditions. Kerala is also unique due to its fascinating geographic diversity compared to other Indian states. Thus, Kerala offers a range of tourist attractions and experiences, as noted by Edward & George (2008).

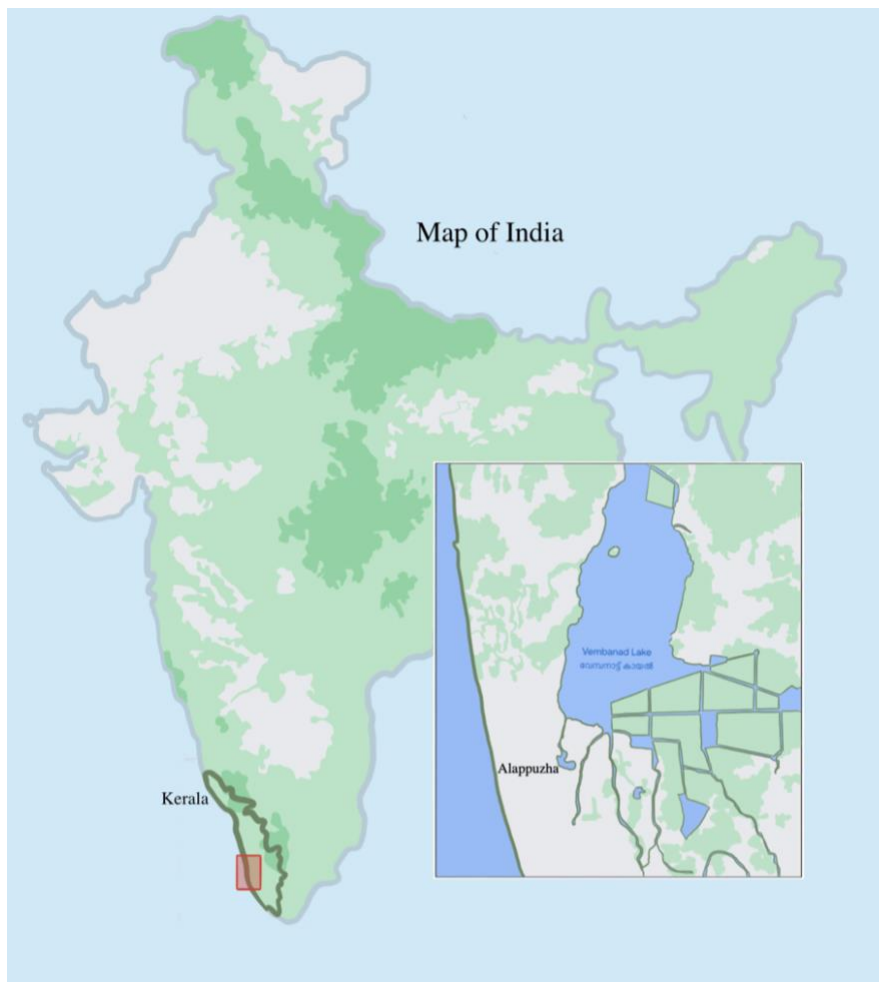


Figure 2. Location of Alappuzha, Kerala, India. Map: Elizabeth Belozertseva.

Additionally, Edward & George (2008) also mentions the geographical diversity of the beaches, backwaters, wildlife sanctuaries, and evergreen forests, as well as Kerala's diverse flora and fauna. Netto (2004) (M. Edward & B. P. George, 2008) even argue that Kerala is often projected as the “Green Gateway” due to this geographic diversity. Until the 1980s, Kerala was a relatively unknown destination, but now it is one of India's most popular tourist regions. It is now considered a prime high-end tourism destination. In 2004, the National Geographic Channel (M. Edward & B. P. George, 2008) included it in their list of “fifty destinations to visit in one's lifetime.” Additionally, according to Sebastian & Royagopalan (2009), as cited in Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), Kerala was listed as one of the top 10 “paradises found” in the Millennium edition of the National Geographic magazine.



Figure 3. Photos showing the geographical diversity in Kerala. Photo: Anne Marie Steinhag.

Kerala announced “industry status” for tourism in 1986, making the state one of the earliest in India to acknowledge the business potential of tourism. Along with that came the announcement of various public incentives and subsidies to attract investment in tourism (Roa & Suresh, 2001, cited in (M. Edward & B. George, 2008)). Kerala is now considered a tourism model for other states in India to strive for tourism growth (M. Edward & B. George, 2008). The Kerala Tourism Development Corporation launched several marketing campaigns, thus being the foundation for the growth of the tourism industry (Government of Kerala, 2022b). Major lending institutions like Kerala Financial Corporation (KFC), Travel Financial Corporation of India (TFCI), and Kerala state industrial development corporation (KSIDC) played essential roles in funding various tourism projects (M. Edward & B. George,

2008). According to Kokkaranikal & Baum (2002), as cited in Edward & George (2008), in the early nineties, the state's tourism department's priority changed to an even more proactive role in tourism development, and marketing and promotion of the destination started. However, the state government aimed to promote Kerala as a quality destination, attracting high-spending tourists rather than mass tourism. Developing new tourist products like backwater attractions with houseboats and ayurvedic (a system of traditional medicine native to India, such as yoga, acupuncture, herbal medicine, and massage therapy) rejuvenation-based attractions helped to acquire a unique image in the international and domestic markets (M. Edward & B. George, 2008).



Figure 4. Photos that show tourist products like backwater attractions with houseboats and ayurvedic rejuvenation-based attractions. Photo: Anne Marie Steinhaug.

Kerala's first specific tourism policy was launched in 1995 and focused on the industry's growth. According to GOK (1995), as cited in Edward & George (2008), the areas prioritized in the tourism policy were infrastructure development, human resource development for tourism, marketing, and product development. The study identified the critical role played by the private sector in all these areas, in addition to defining the state's role as a facilitator in creating suitable investment conditions. Despite setting the direction of growth in the tourism industry, the 1995 tourism policy needed to provide a detailed action plan for the destination to grow. Thus, the government published a new policy document in 2000 titled "Vision 2020", highlighting sustainability concerns and tourism growth (Kerala Tourism, 2007, as cited in (M. Edward & B. George, 2008)). "Vision 2020" reflected the growing concern for

environmental conservation, heritage, and culture protection, the lack of basic infrastructure surrounding significant destinations, and proper quality assurance systems and legislations to regulate and bring quality to tourism. Lastly, it also mentioned the need for integrated infrastructure development in some tourist zones to preserve the environment's quality (M. Edward & B. George, 2008).

Further, the state government views tourism as one of the few alternatives to develop the economy. The concept of responsible tourism has been present in the tourism literature since the early 1980s, and Smith (1990) (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012, p. 305) defined *responsible tourism* as “*a form of tourism which respects the host's natural, build and cultural environments of the interest of all parties concerned.*” The government of Kerala formed a Responsible Tourism Mission agency to spread and implement the ideologies and initiatives of Responsible Tourism all across the State. The Responsible Tourism Mission envisions a “triple-bottom-line” approach, which includes economic, social, and environmental responsibilities. The mission aspires to create a social and environmental equilibrium by providing, amongst others, an additional income and a better livelihood for farmers. Thus, developing tourism becomes a means for developing the village and local communities. The critical goals of the Responsible Tourism Mission are also to erase poverty and emphasize women's empowerment (Government of Kerala, 2022a).

According to the state's Declaration on Responsible Tourism (Goodwin & V, 2008), some of the initiatives and implementation facets of the responsible tourism mission were linked to suggestions for action in the areas of education and learning, which are necessary at all levels and where the concepts of responsible tourism should be incorporated into the primary curriculum to promote, for example, social inclusion and further empower people to participate in the management of tourism. Additionally, the tourism industry should support the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and further provide opportunities for employment at the community level to contribute to socioeconomic development; empowerment – to further strengthen the role of local communities in decision-making about tourism development; governance – overall responsibility for the tourism industry.

Furthermore, in addition to the interaction between tourists and locals, it was suggested that community-based tourism had to be more focused on business strategy and administration, consumer-based product development, and quality. Within the market, it needs to create

segments that are resilient and can encourage long-term and repeat travel. Commercial sustainability – in the development and to further sustain Responsible Tourism in destinations, the private sector needs to be actively engaged. Environmental sustainability – promoting conservation and biodiversity during planning, development, and operation of tourism, as well as building and operating in an ecologically and environmentally sustainable manner. Lastly, monitoring, measurement, and reporting – rely on the measurement of impacts rather than the self-declared motivations of the tourists or the business operators (Goodwin & V, 2008).

3.1.2. Alappuzha/Alleppey

The fieldwork conducted for this thesis took place in Alappuzha, a district located in the Kerala region. The district is more commonly known today as Alleppey. The Alleppey district covers an area of 1 414 square kilometers. Alleppey is famous for its boat races, beaches, marine products, and coir (coconut fiber) industry. It is referred to by travelers as the Venice of the East, and according to Joseph & MACFAST (2017), it is one of the most charming and captivating tourism destinations in Kerala. They also claim that beautiful nature endows Alleppey, making it a paradise for nature lovers.

Today Alleppey is a renowned so-called “backwater” tourist destination. As seen in Figure 2 above, the backwaters in Alleppey are like a labyrinth, making it one of Kerala's most exotic backwater destinations with the Vembanad Lake. The Vembanad Lake is the biggest waterbody in India, located in Kuttanad, which lies within the Alappuzha district. The Vembanad Lake stretches from Alappuzha to Kochi, 84 kilometers in length and an average width of 3.1 kilometers (District Administration, 2023). Kuttanad - also called a land of lush paddy fields - is also called the “Rice Bowl” of Kerala because it is one of the few places in the world where farming is done below sea level (Kerala Tourism, 2014).



Figure 5. Photos that show the infrastructure in the Alappuzha district, as well as the paddy fields in Kuttanad.
Photo: Anne Marie Steinhaug.

3.2. Governance and Governance Challenges of Kerala Tourism

As mentioned briefly above, tourism in Kerala was given industry status in the late 1980s. Following the confirmation of industry status for tourism, authorities announced a significant investment in tourism infrastructure and several incentives and subsidies for the industry. Tourism's industry status also made this sector eligible for all public sector incentives and concessions extended to other industries (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

Furthermore, according to Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), some of the public sector interventions taken during this time included forming the District Tourism Promotion Council in all 14 districts to decentralize tourism awareness in 1992 also to increase public awareness of tourism-related issues. These programs, projects, and interventions strategically served to elevate and proclaim tourism as a high-profile sector for travel investment (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Kerala benefited from private sector investment in tourism. During this period, Kerala also saw the potential of specializing in the niche market in health with Ayurveda, a traditional Indian medical practice. In addition, measures were introduced to support traditional practitioners through education, training, and marketing programs.

Authorities from Kerala started to participate in international tourism trade fairs and have, since 2000, organized a trade fair of its own called “The Kerala Travel Mart.”

Kerala has won the national award for the “best-performing state in the tourism sector” several times, in addition to being hailed as “the undisputed tourism hotspot of India” (Chakravarti, 2001, as cited in (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012)). Due to the India-Pakistan conflict, tourism in the Kashmir area declined, according to Kokkranikal & Morrison (2002), as cited in Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), which indirectly gave Kerala a tourism boost. Further, Kerala took this opportunity to present itself as an attractive and viable alternate tourist location, thus attracting national government budgetary support. Thus, according to Chakravarti (2001) (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012), Kerala tourism is now acclaimed as one of the most successful marketing stories in Indian tourism. Tourism statistics from the mid-1980s and onwards have consequently seen a quadrupling in arrivals.

Statistics from the Government of Kerala Tourism Department, with numbers dating back to 2007 (as seen in Table 1 below), before the global pandemic, international tourism arrivals to the state were approximately 1 096 407 tourists, which is an increase of 0.42% from the previous years. Additionally, domestic tourism in 2018 also had an increase of 6.35% than that of previous years (Department of Tourism, 2018).

Table 1. Tourism arrivals in Kerala from 2007-2018 (Source: (Department of Tourism, 2018)).

Year	No. of Domestic Tourist Visits	% Increase	No. of Foreign Tourist Visits	% Increase	Total no. of tourists	% Increase
2007	6642941	5.92	515808	20.37	7158749	6.84
2008	7591250	14.28	598929	16.11	8190179	14.41
2009	7913537	4.25	557258	-6.96	8470795	3.43
2010	8595075	8.61	659265	18.31	9254340	9.25
2011	9381455	9.15	732985	11.18	10114440	9.29
2012	10076854	7.41	793696	8.28	10870550	7.48
2013	10857811	7.75	858143	8.12	11715954	7.78
2014	11695411	7.71	923366	7.60	12618777	7.71
2015	12465571	6.59	977479	5.86	13443050	6.53
2016	13172535	5.67	1038419	6.23	14210954	5.71
2017	14673520	11.39	1091870	5.15	15765390	10.94
2018	15604661	6.35	1096407	0.42	16701068	5.94

Numbers from 2021 (Table 2 below) show that international tourists' arrival to Kerala during that year was approximately 60 500, which is a decrease of 82,25% from previous years, which can be a repercussion of the global lockdown during the global pandemic. However, the domestic tourist arrivals to the state during the same year had an increase of 51,09%, with the month of December being the peak for arrivals on both domestic and international tourism. Furthermore, within the district of Alappuzha, domestic tourism arrivals during the year 2021 were approximately 353 921 compared to international arrivals of only around 700 tourists (Government of Kerala, 2021).

Table 2. Month-wise Foreign and Domestic Tourism arrivals to Kerala during 2021 (Source: (Government of Kerala, 2021)).

#	Month	Foreign	Domestic
1	January	4298	788185
2	February	4167	728204
3	March	6024	683801
4	April	987	373290
5	May	169	66711
6	June	298	120473
7	July	4054	414189
8	August	4349	626792
9	September	5066	718945
10	October	7944	855682
11	November	10886	929262
12	December	12245	1232083
TOTAL		60487	7537617

However, Kerala has also suffered from the downside of tourism after the boost in tourism numbers. The spike in numbers caused problems such as littering and pollution, resulting in adverse environmental impacts. Thus, the government established The Kerala State Pollution Control Board (PCB) with the slogan: “*committed to protection of environment*” (Kerala State Pollution Control Board, n.d.-a). The PCB was established in 1974 as a regulatory authority for implementing various pollution control laws (Kerala State Pollution Control Board, n.d.-b). Some of the laws implemented are specific to the Prevention & Control of Pollution linked to the water and air, while the environment falls under the Protection Act. Additionally, waste rules – biochemical waste and solid waste – go under Management, Handling, and Transboundary Movement. Noise pollution rules fall under Regulation and Control, and lastly, there are rules regarding the manufacture, sale and use of plastic (Kerala State Pollution Control Board, n.d.-a).

Additionally, competition for resources and infrastructure have surfaced, and indigenous cultural attractions such as Kathakali (a traditional dance drama), Theyyam (a religious festival celebrated in North Kerala temples), and other similar temple festivals have been marketed and packaged as tourist products, leading to concerns of the commodification of traditional living practices. Thus, the government adopted the concept of “responsible tourism” as a way forward with the growth of tourism and the impacts that follow (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

The implementation of responsible tourism began with a state-level consultation organized by the Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala, in association with the International Centre for Responsible Tourism and EQUATIONS (Equitable Tourism Options) – a non-government activist organization “hard” campaigner on tourism-related issues. The consultation organization happened in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, in February 2007. The three sub-groups separated at the consultation: local self-government and civil society organizations, the tourism industry, and lastly, state government departments and organizations. Each sub-group identified economic, socio-cultural, and environmental issues, which led to the preparation of a framework for the implementation of responsible tourism and the emergence of a “State Level Responsible Tourism Committee (SLRTC).” SLRTC comprises around 40 members with representation from different groups of businesses and stakeholders (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

The SLRTC decided to test the responsible tourism initiative in four different types of tourism destinations in Kerala; Kovalam (beach), Kumarakom (Backwaters), Thekkady (Wildlife), and Wayanad (Hill Station) (Anupraveen, n.d.). These destinations were all chosen due to their importance as tourism destinations, but they are all different in tourist volumes and environmental sensitivity. Among these four destinations, Responsible Tourism in its first phase was developed as a successful model in Kumarakom; thus, Responsible Tourism became a milestone in the state's tourism sector in its first phase (Department of Tourism, n.d.). Kumarakom is a district located on the south side of Vembanad Lake, which is within the study area of this thesis. According to Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), Kumarakom is an ecologically fragile backwater destination. The proposed organizational structure for implementing responsible tourism, as shown in the study of Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal (2012), can be seen in Figure 6 below. The government established three state-

level multi-stakeholder working groups to steer tourism management's economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects. At the local level, multi-stakeholder Destination Level Responsible Tourism Committees (DLRTCs) were established. These committees (DLRTCs) were to have representatives from local self-governments, the tourism industry, NGOs, civil society organizations, academia, and media. Lastly, organizations and individuals with expertise in various subject areas relevant to tourism management were also members. The local committees worked on the specificities of implementing the guidelines in locations. In contrast, the state-level committees worked on preparing the guidelines for responsible tourism at destinations. Thus, the initiatives, though supported by the state tourism department, were to be formulated by local governments through destination-level planning, implementation, and monitoring (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

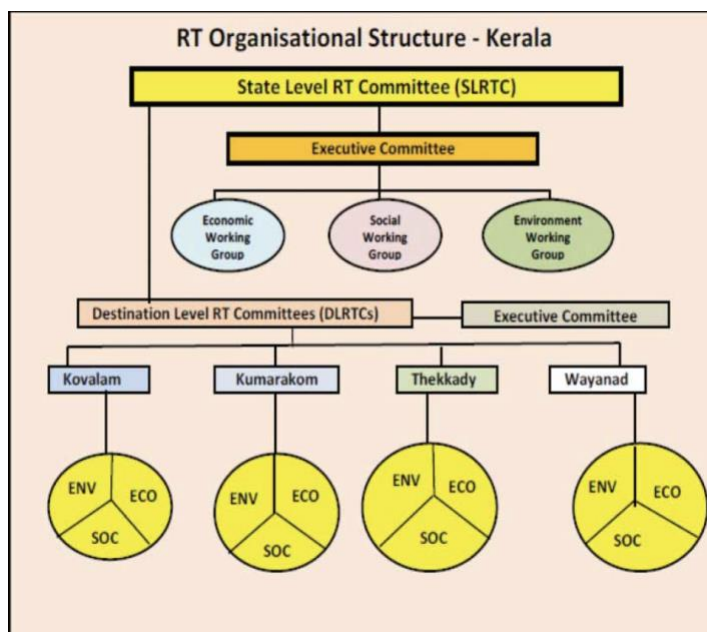


Figure 6. Proposed organizational layout for implementing responsible tourism in Kerala (Source: (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

Overall, the governance model implemented to ensure “responsible tourism” in Kerala is a form of public-private partnership between the Government of Kerala, the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, and EQUATIONS. On the local level, as seen in Figure 6, each region chosen for the testing of the responsible tourism framework has representatives from local self-governments, the tourism industry, and NGOs, in addition to organizations and individuals with expertise in various subject areas relevant to tourism management. Hence, it seems that Kerala has a highly decentralized, inclusive, and participatory governance structure for Responsible Tourism.

4. Methods

This chapter presents the research design choice and method regarding the data collection and analysis for this study. At the end of this chapter, I will give a critical assessment of the methods chosen for my research. The interview guide and information provided to the informants from the study area are presented in the appendix.

4.1. Research Design

This thesis has what Jacobsen (2021) calls an explorative problem statement. According to Jacobsen (2021), an explorative problem statement often requires a method that brings nuanced data, goes in-depth, is sensitive to unexpected conditions, and is thus open to contextual conditions. A method like this will be suitable for collecting qualitative or open data.

The research design that applies to this thesis is a case study. A common definition is that a case study is an in-depth study of one or a few units (Jacobsen, 2021). Yin (2018) also describes a case study with a twofold definition. Firstly, the definition begins with the scope of a case study when doing case study research. Further, a case study, according to Yin (2018), is an empirical method that investigates the “case” in depth within its real-world context. In this thesis, the “case” is how business owners of houseboats, resorts, and homestays in the Alleppey district in Kerala, India assess and bring sustainability into their business or not. Since I have three categories of tourism businesses, this also makes it possible to make comparisons across these three categories.

4.2. Fieldwork and Data Collection

4.2.1. Accessing the Field and Selection of Interviewees

I spent the final three weeks of December 2022 conducting fieldwork in the Alleppey district to investigate how representatives from the tourist businesses in the area assess and bring sustainability into their business or not, including the role of certification systems. When arriving in Alleppey, I met with local experts working in ATREE. Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) is a non-governmental organization that works to mitigate the environmental, social, and economic impacts of India’s rapid loss of biological

resources and natural ecosystems. ATREE seeks to promote socially equitable environmental conservation and sustainable development. One of the programs offered by ATREE is called Jalapaadom (lessons on water), which aims to teach young adults how to promote the responsible use of wetlands and is funded by the Keralan government's Department of Education. Additionally, they offer institutions that are inclusive and promote sustainable means of survival so that Vembanad Lake can be preserved and sustained through group effort and collective wisdom. ATREE also features social innovation labs, a training center for rural women focused on innovation, the creation of eco-friendly products, and alternative livelihoods (Community Environmental Resource Center, n.d.).

Within the first two days of my arrival in Alleppey, in cooperation with the local experts from ATREE, we selected the participants for this research, specifically choosing the owners and administrators of houseboats, resorts, and homestays in the area. To select the most applicable informants for this thesis, we sat down together, and I explained the scope of this study. From the information given at this meeting, the interviewees were contacted by ATREE, and meetings were arranged. The informants from the houseboat businesses were selected as the first interviewees, and the interviewees from the homestays and resorts were contacted later in the first week of the fieldwork. During the fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant using an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions.

Furthermore, language and cultural barriers are essential considerations when conducting research in a foreign country (Pischke et al., 2017). Due to the scarcity of English-speaking informants and to mitigate language barriers brought on by the strong Indian accent of those informants speaking English, the majority of the interviews were conducted in Malayalam with the assistance of a local translator. However, cultural barriers may have still presented challenges. For example, cultural differences in communication styles, social norms, and values may have affected the interpretation of interview questions as well as the informants' responses.

Additionally, specific topics related to sustainable tourism and certification systems may need to be clarified or might be subject to different perceptions within the local cultural context. To address these potential issues, the interviewer explained the purpose and scope of the study clearly, while at the same time trying to remain sensitive to the cultural norms and

values of the participants. Furthermore, the interviewer used open-ended questions based on the interview guide and encouraged participants to freely share their perspectives and experiences rather than imposing preconceived notions or assumptions onto the data.

An interview guide was used as the research instrument to obtain authentic and valuable information from the informants involved in his study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with business owners and employees from various houseboats, resorts, and homestays in the Alleppey district. The interview guide was written a few weeks prior to the fieldwork weeks in December. The interview guide was sectioned into parts with different topics related to the research questions. The first set of questions was related to the general understanding and meaning of sustainability for the different businesses as well as the impact of the tourism shift, from international to domestic, in regards to sustainability; the second set of questions helped to explore the certification systems used within the tourism industry in the state and the structure of said systems; the third set of questions helped to gather further information about specific certification systems and what impact they could have on the businesses as well as the importance for the tourism at the destination in general. The informants for the study were selected with the help of local experts in sustainability, who also assisted with translation and logistics.

Each interview ran between 30 and 60 minutes, and with the participant's permission, it was audio recorded. In addition to the planned interviews with business representatives, I also conducted a few unplanned interviews with some tourists, both international and domestic.

4.3. Analysis

After each interview, they were transcribed within a few hours or the following days. This was to preserve the information from each interview as well as possible, in addition to having the translator check the transcriptions in case of any language misunderstandings (Jacobsen, 2021). According to Jacobsen (2021), asynchronous is a written representation of recorded information. To make it easier for the researcher, it is crucial to write down everything of the recordings; thus, it will be easier to move back and forth in the recorded conversations (Jacobsen, 2021). The interviews were then independently examined and analyzed from February to May 2023 to elicit categories, codes, and meanings. The interview data were examined using a thematic analysis method for significant themes and patterns applicable to the research questions. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the research

design were used to understand the study's findings (Jacobsen, 2021). Furthermore, I worked organically with the material when writing Chapter 5 Results. To grasp the essence of each response, I wrote down keywords, marked the raw material, and copy-pasted some quotes I found helpful in filling out the mentioned chapter.

4.4. Methodological Limitations

The methods and research design chosen for this study undoubtedly have some drawbacks that could have led to different types of errors. Hence, it is necessary to present these and discuss their impact on the findings of this study in order to ensure high quality in the research.

Firstly, a limitation I want to highlight has to do with the potential difficulties that can arise while conducting fieldwork in foreign settings and in a culture unknown to the researcher, including foreseeing such difficulties. I was prepared for challenges related to language, culture, and even social norms; these challenges were, to a large extent, taken care of because I worked with local experts and a supervisor who had first-hand knowledge of the study area to make the best possible guarantees. However, even though I was prepared for potential challenges related to the language, it turned out to be a bigger barrier than me, and my supervisors were prepared for.

The decision to conduct qualitative instead of quantitative research should be discussed. Quantitative research could have provided more accurate numbers and findings. However, in consultation with my thesis supervisors, we chose to conduct qualitative research. This is because a quantitative research approach was less relevant at this stage because of the lack of prior knowledge on the topic of challenges within tourism and sustainability in the study area.

5. Results

5.1. Overview of Business Types, Informants, and Interviews

Houseboats

Houseboat Informant 3 explained the history of this small industry like this:

“The Kerala houseboat aspect started in 1993, that means not even 30 years so far. This concept was in one man’s brain, he is the person who originally started. The first it was called as “kettuvallam” (meaning a small canoe with simply a roof, later it came to be known as houseboats). He was operating in the southern side of the backwaters in Trivandrum, and here in Alleppey we people took over” (Houseboat Informant 3). The informant of Houseboat 3 talked about the first houseboats being built with wooden bodies and bamboo shelters, which were slightly different from today’s houseboats. In addition to it being completely made out of bamboo, the houseboats had no electricity, and it was humanly operated, meaning they had no engine. Further, this informant said that in the second growth, the houseboat industry started to use out-boat engines instead of paddling, and in the third growth, they bought in-boat engines, which resulted in power to generate the light and the A/C.

Most of the houseboats are divided into three different categories, depending on the facilities on the boat. These three categories are premium, deluxe, and luxury. A premium houseboat usually provides air conditioning all day – both in the living area and the bedrooms. Some houseboats also provide add-ons to the menu and a one-hour canoe ride in the evening at the premium level. A luxury houseboat is usually standard level, while the deluxe houseboat is in the middle. These houseboats provide A/C at night in the bedrooms. These boats are also more traditional-type houseboats with basic facilities.

In addition to these three levels of houseboat standards, all the houseboats usually have three to four employees: a driver, a chef, and a cleaner, which are all permanent jobs due to the houseboat business being a full-year operation. The houseboat business is a full-year business because the boats' maintenance is so expensive, so without income, the owners cannot keep their boats in shape. *“Full-time. Otherwise, we cannot maintain the boat. Maintenance on the boat is expensive [...] So, full-time with guests except the maintenance period.” (Houseboat*

Informant 4). However, the peak tourism season is usually October to March, while the remaining months, April to September, are considered off-season. The domestic tourists (from Kerala and India generally) travel throughout the year. At the same time, the internationals (mostly Europeans) will come from August to February, with December and January being the best months. Some houseboat operations, like Houseboat Informant 3, only target domestic tourists because that is who they will get from their cooperating agencies.

The houseboats are like moving hotels that specifically cater to the guests onboard. Since most houseboat owners cooperate with travel agencies, they request to know who is coming on the boats – international or domestic tourists – due to the food they must provide to the guests. All the houseboats operate with fresh foods and vegetables on the boats, and they do not store any foods in refrigerators, so the food served is always fresh. Houseboat Informant 4 said: *“You have to tell the choices before, because after we leave this place, we cannot buy anything, we are purchasing the raw material as per the booking only.”* (Houseboat Informant 4).

The houseboat owners that participated in this research were all, except for one, a part of either the Kerala Houseboat Owners Association or the Kerala Houseboat Owners Federation, which are a body of houseboat owners. Most of the houseboat informants own 6 or 7 houseboats each. However, Houseboat Informant 4 only owns one houseboat now due to the informant being close to retirement.



Figure 7. Example of houseboats in the study area. Photo: Anne Marie Steinhag.

Resorts

The resort businesses are more like fancy hotels that offer additional activities. Resort Informant 2 explained the history of their resort: “[...]at least 30 years before and we had a purpose of doing this, because during 1980’s and other things, when the petrol boom was existing, a lot of Kerala went to gulf countries. They were demolishing all the wooden houses which was so beautifully made. So, we thought that was very sad and we wanted to rebuild all these villages back” (Resort Informant 2). So, for this reason, some of the resorts today are rebuilt with these old houses, made to look like how Kerala used to be in the day. Resort Informant 2 specifically says they want to give the tourists “the indigenous experience when coming to Kerala or India.” (Resort Informant 2).

Most of the resorts provide different categories of rooms, depending on their standard. A resort might have a total number of rooms between 50 and 150. The facilities provided in the different categories is depending on the resort. To give an example, Resort Informant 1 explained the four different categories of rooms like this:

“We are having 4 categories of rooms. The first is the basic one with a lagoon view. The lagoons are man-made and 5 acres and the water is coming from the Vembanad Lake itself. The next categories are deluxe rooms. The only difference is that the lagoon rooms are on the first floor and the deluxe rooms are on the second floor so the view towards the lake and the lagoon is wider. The next category is the cottages, it is a bigger size room and the view is the same [...] Cottages are having a double shower area so the guests can experience the open air, small experiences like that. All the three categories are having the view of the lagoon. Next comes the pool villa, that’s the highest category. The villas are having a bedroom attached with a living room, two washrooms, one open shower area and a private pool. The pool is just next to the Vembanad Lake. You can experience the beauty and the nature.” (Resort Informant 1). Resorts can have additional houseboats that the guests can rent out for an extra charge. The facilities and staff are the same on these houseboats as on a regular houseboat.

In addition to the different types of rooms, the resorts provide meals and activities. The food served is typically authentic Kerala food or various indigenous Indian foods. There are many different activities, ranging from average sporty activities like basketball or badminton to nature-based activities. While some activities are more nature-based, such as bird watching,

some offer backstage activities where the guests can see all the sustainability activities the resorts are doing.

The resorts have seen a more significant market change than the houseboat businesses regarding the main customer groups. Resort Informant 3 said: *“Before covid we were having a 60/40 ratio, 60 was from domestic and 40 was from international. After covid it has changed, we are seeing 80/20, 80% domestic and 20% from international.”* (Resort Informant 3). Most of the resorts interviewed for this research say that after covid-19, their primary customer group is North Indian tourists. However, before the pandemic, important segments were international from countries such as the US, UK, and other European countries. However, the international market has slowly picked up after the pandemic.

The resort business is a full-year operation, with November to January being the peak time. The employment ranges from 100 to around 200, however, some of the employees are regularly being switched out due to some of the resorts being internship places for tourism students. The resorts also provide jobs for local women in the area. Resort Informant 2 said: *“[...] we also have the local labors, like the women who works in the gardens and all – that comes around 45, but every 45 do not come in one day, 13 people will have a job every day. That is a contract-based job so they are not permanent employees.”* (Resort Informant 2).

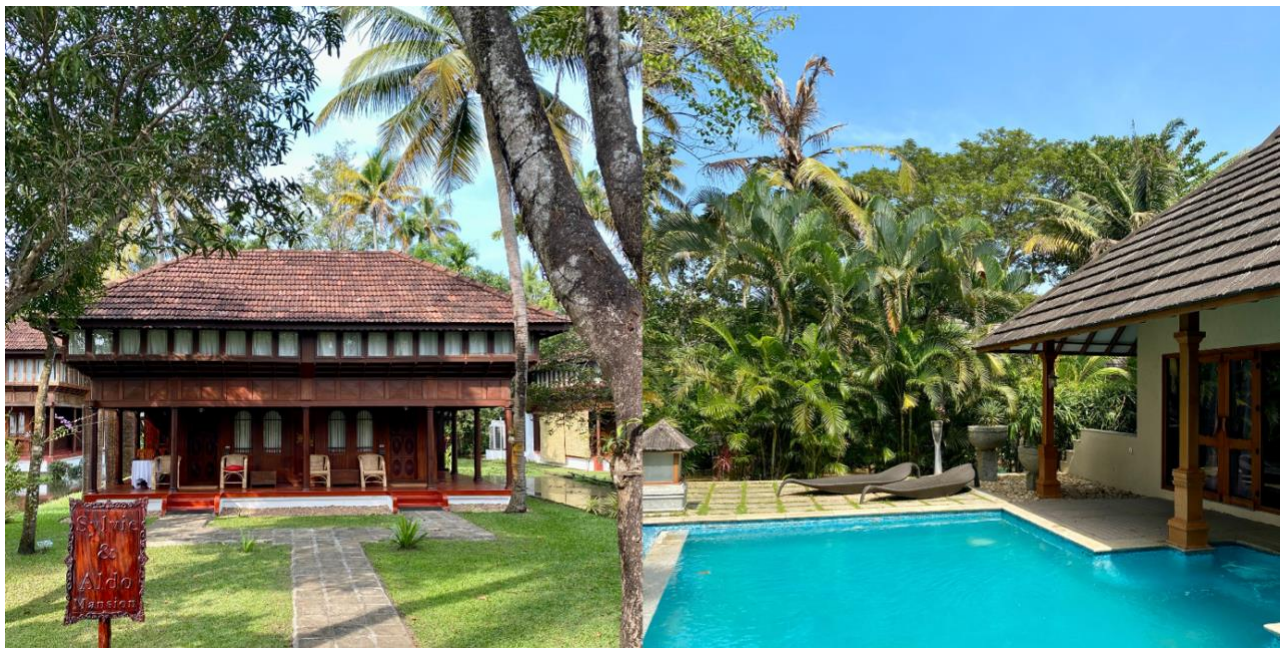


Figure 8. Example of resorts in the study area. Photo: Anne Marie Steinhaug.

Homestays

Homestays are closely linked to the concept of Airbnb, with the opportunity to live in a close connection to the local communities. The homestays provide food and accommodation, in addition to a few activities. However, most of them only provide food and accommodation. Homestay Informant 3, who offered activities, said: *“We have a program here; backwater activities, cooking classes, canoeing, exploring the village. Here it is a complete package; accommodation, food, activities.”* (Homestay Informant 3). Homestay Informant 4 also stated: *“Here the activity is; explore the Kerala family experience – that is our caption”* (Homestay Informant 4).

Out of the homestay informants for this research, one is currently not operating due to the owner being of old age. However, the plan was to pass it on to a family member to develop the property further and open it back up. Two other informants were independent homestays, and one of the informants was the manager of a homestay community in the Alleppey area with four houses in total.

Within the homestay businesses, they are rather diverse regarding their main customer groups. Most of them mention international tourists as their primary customers because they have international partners. While one of the homestay operators only gets domestic customers, this homestay also has an attached restaurant that offers authentic Kerala food that attracts international tourists. The accommodation availability varies from homestay to homestay. One homestay had 9 rooms in total; however, only 4 rooms were licensed as homestays. Another Homestay Informant explained that they had 7 rooms in total. The same Homestay Informant explained that they would be getting around 6 groups of tourists every year with 10-15 people in each group.



Figure 9. Example of homestays in the study area. Photo: Anne Marie Steinhaug.

Overall, I conducted interviews with four representatives from each type of business, as well as one interview with a representative from the Department of Responsible Tourism (Table 1). In the table, it is described the role each informant had within the business operation, as well as for the houseboat operators, I wrote down how many boats they owned. In the notes part of the Table 1, I wrote down additional information which I felt was essential to highlight.

Table 3. Overview of informants from the houseboats-, resorts-, and homestay tourist businesses in Alappuzha, Kerala.

Informants	Role	Notes	Number of houseboats owned	Interview day	Interview duration time
Houseboat 1	Owner	Houseboat owner association member		12.14.2022	50 min 22 sec
Houseboat 2	Owner	Association member	Owens 6 or 7 boats	12.14.2022	12 min 2 sec

Houseboat 3	Owner	Association member	Owens 6 or 7 boats	12.15.2022	40 min 22 sec
Houseboat 4	Owner		Owens 1 boat	12.20.2022	42 min 26 sec
Homestay 1	Owner	Attached restaurant that offers authentic Kerala food		12.16.2022	33 min 59 sec
Homestay 2	Owner	Not working		12.21.2022	17 min 24 sec
Homestay 3	Owner			12.21.2022	25 min 57 sec
Homestay 4	Manager of society	Community of homestays		12.28.2022	14 min 19 sec
Resort 1	Employee and HR			12.22.2022	27 min 53 sec
Resort 2	Senior naturalist			12.22.2022	41 min 41 sec
Resort 3	HR			12.29.2022	28 min 55 sec
Resort 4	Manager and engineer			12.29.2022	13 min 26 sec
Government	Deputy director	Responsible Tourism		12.28.2022	25 min 21 sec

5.2. Meanings of Sustainability

5.2.1. Houseboats

The general impression from the interviews is that the houseboat informants are not very familiar with the concept of sustainability. The word sustainability was unfamiliar to most of them. Houseboat Informant 4 even responded with, “*Eh I don’t know*” when asked about “What comes to mind when you hear the word sustainability?”. However, at the same time,

many mentioned, e.g., challenges with pollution. Some informants even argued that sustainability means the same as responsibility (meaning responsible tourism). Houseboat Informant 3 said: *“Sustainability in a sense means responsibility, that is another word of sustainability.”* (Houseboat Informant 3). This is very reasonable given the project that has been ongoing in the region regarding the implementation of responsible tourism organized by the Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala.

However, this informant narrowed down “responsibility” to something that is closely tied to delivering. Delivering to travel agencies and to guests to make them satisfied. Houseboat Informant 3 continued: *“The responsibility in this case, we have two responsibilities – when I get a business I have the responsibility to the travel agencies who give the business to operate without any complaints, my clients should not have any complaints. And if they get a complaint I will lose my business, so I am totally responsible for all the operation of my houseboat to the client who is coming, because I am earning from them.”* (Houseboat Informant 3).

The sustainability of the houseboat business is also challenged by global changes, e.g., the pandemic, but also unrest in other regions, e.g., wars in the Middle East. Houseboat Informant 3 stated that: *“The only thing is the calamities. Like war (Iraq and America – at that time I was working in Delhi), that time also business we lost. The thing is that the firstly affected is tourism and lastly recover is tourism [...]”* (Houseboat Informant 3).

5.2.2. Resorts

The general impression from the interviews is that the resorts are more aware of and familiar with the term sustainability, and they are all incorporating sustainable measures into their business operations. Resort Informant 1 said: *“Right now, with the word sustainability I think that we have to work in such a way that the nature shouldn’t be destroyed or damaged in any way. Rather we should enhance the nature, enhance the beauty [...]”* (Resort Informant 1) when asked about the word sustainability. This informant also said the difference between a regular hotel and the resorts is that the resorts are more nature friendly. Resort Informant 2 explained their resort like this: *“[...]kind of a hotel chain which looks into environment and sustainability we do not want to make any kind of changes in the biosphere of what we are into and we want that to benefit the local community around.”* (Resort Informant 2).

Resort Informant 3 stated that: *“Well, sustainability is, it’s a very good word, but everybody is here to sustain in their field. And we will have to sustain, the houseboat and homestays are having their own plans for their survival. It all depends upon the arrival of tourism, when they come and go and when the tourism department will promote.”* (Resort Informant 3). The reflection that Resort Informant 3 gave on “What comes to mind when you hear the word sustainability?” can also be linked to the operation's survival and, therefore, to be sustainable depends upon the revenue earnings from the guests.

The state's infrastructure also challenges the sustainability of the resort business, according to the informants. Two of the resort informants reflect upon the less developed infrastructure in the state that adds hours to the travel time of the tourists to and from the resorts. Resort Informant 3 said: *“Definitely traveling. I will tell you an example, the nearest airport is Kochin, it is only 100km from Alleppey. So, if you look at the standard of traveling in a national standard, so outside Kerala standards, hardly 1 hour, but in Kerala it takes more than 2 hours. Because the poor infrastructure, because of poor conditions, all the roads. Because of the poor roads and the poor connectivity from the nearby airports as well as the railway station we are facing difficulty, because the guests has to come early and they have to go early.”* (Resort Informant 3). Resort Informant 4 also mentions the travel to and from the airport.

However, Resort Informant 2 talked about other challenges more tied to the environment and the biosphere surrounding the resort. More specifically, the sewage waste in the surrounding lake. Resort Informant 2 said: *“the sewage – maybe the biggest threat we are facing now. Especially the houseboats they used to throw all the sewage in the lake, that is one of the reasons why these water hyacinth plants are flourishing like anything because they get a lot of nutrients and they make a carpet.”* (Resort Informant 2).

5.2.3. Homestays

The general impression from the homestay interviews is that some of the informants do not know what to say about the term sustainability. However, they are trying to be sustainable in some ways. Nevertheless, some informants are very aware of the term sustainability, such as Homestay Informant 3, which reflected primarily upon the sociocultural part of the concept.

Homestay Informant 3 said: *“In my village they are all facing the same problem, so I would like to improve their income every day, if I can do something, add something. That is one part. And living standard can be improved, and within this locality they can live because almost all the things we have. We have rice, fish, everything is available. So, we can sustain within this village.”* (Homestay Informant 3).

However, as many of the houseboat and resort informants, also some of the homestay informants link sustainability to their business being stable and making enough surplus to sustain commercially. Homestay Informant 2 said: *“Can mean to keep it afloat. Maintain safety.”* (Homestay Informant 2). Thus, the safety this informant refers to has to do with a stable business – the economical part of sustainability.

5.3. Business-Related Sustainability Challenges

5.3.1. Houseboats

On a more concrete level, the houseboats were primarily concerned with three challenges, one related to the environment, one related to their infrastructure, and one to the competition in the market. The ones that are tied to the environment have to do with pollution and waste management. Houseboat Informant 4 mentioned that there are problems regarding pollution, specifically water pollution. The Informant continued to say: *“Nationally and internationally, there is issues with that. So, if one day they say to stop the houseboats we are forced to stop.”* (Houseboat Informant 4). Another Houseboat Informant stated that they had difficulties separating plastic, however now, they do not carry plastic onto the boats. *“[...] only the water bottles carried by the tourist are the plastics available in our boats, these are also sent for recycling units.”* (Houseboat Informant 2).

Some of the sustainability challenges the houseboat operators faced were mainly concerning the deterioration of the materials used. As mentioned, the houseboats are primarily built out of bamboo, thus being one of the biggest challenges for the operators. Bamboo is a material that turns black after a minimum of 1 year, according to Houseboat Informant 1. Due to the weather conditions in Alleppey – the monsoon season and the sunny weather, it deteriorates and needs to be replaced often; however, this is expensive. Houseboat Informant 1 stated:

“All these items have to be replaced after three months. We might get a cancelation due to this.” (Houseboat Informant 1).

Houseboat Informant 4 mentioned the strong competition among the houseboat operations as another sustainability challenge: *“Challenges like every business – competition. Everywhere it is facing that. They want their people there so they are trying to blame a houseboat so you are staying there, different types of competitions. That’s always, everywhere.” (Houseboat Informant 4).* With the high competition in the houseboat business, Houseboat Informants 1 and 3 also claimed that constant upgrades of the accommodation and facilities were needed to attract high-end tourists, which will leave good revenue for the business. *“The better the boat the better the customers.” (Houseboat Informant 1).* Houseboat Informant 3 added to this by saying: *“One thing is that it is very competitive, so I have to be alert with my accommodation, is it comfortable, is it comparing to others, am I doing very well. So, this part I have to be, because new things are coming [...] type of growth and what is happening in the market I should be alert and I have to re-invest money for the development of my accommodation.” (Houseboat Informant 3).*

Some of the informants also claimed that they found their operation sustainable as it was, such as when asked about their aim to make the business operation more sustainable, Houseboat Informant 2 claimed: *“It is already sustainable.” (Houseboat Informant 2).* Houseboat Informant 4 reflected that in their aim to become more sustainable, they must renew the boats to be *“more nature friendly and the environment – trying to install the solar energy here [...]” (Houseboat Informant 4).* This informant also stated that they were trying to install solar energy for the entire boat; however, they need a higher occupancy rate to invest in this, though they already had solar energy for the air conditioning.

5.3.2. Resorts

For the resorts, the dominating sustainability challenges according to the informants were linked to environmental problems, e.g., sewage, plastic, and water hyacinths. However, when talking about these problems, Resort Informant 2 also reflected and posed solutions to the challenges: *“The sewage – maybe the biggest threat we are facing now [...] all the sewage which is treated back as normal water which we later use for aviation, we use sewage output water – recycle and use it.” (Resort Informant 2).*

Regarding the plastic problems, the same informant explained that for the last 12 years, they have had a bottle plan and a bottle ban on their property. *“We completely got rid of plastic bottles, we don’t use them. I will give an example, on a month we make around 30 000 L of water, so that is filled in a glass bottle, that is a reusable glass bottle. We wash them up and clean them, heat them up and sterilize and stuff. So, if you think this way that 30 000 bottles which is equal to 130 kg of plastic, so these are the things that the people would see.”* (Resort Informant 2). Resort Informant 1 also mentioned that the government has banned plastic use; therefore, they do not carry any plastic on the property. However, this informant also gives an example of why this can be a problem: *“[...] during the check out a guest asked if we have a plastic bag, I told we do not have anything like that, we do not keep that because it is not ecofriendly [...]”* (Resort Informant 1). Due to such inquiries, they sometimes carry plastic bags, because their main priority are the guests. Furthermore, plastic is still a problem due to the surrounding lakes. Resort Informant 2 explains that they collect the plastics that come into their property and give it to the recycling station: *“So, that later can be converted into some long-lasting plastic products or something, that is one way of looking forward.”* (Resort Informant 2).

On the challenge linked to water hyacinths, the same informant explained that they have introduced a project they call “project water hyacinth.” This project involves local women that make crafts, such as hats, out of water hyacinths that the resort collects from surrounding areas. *“[...] I am saying if this can become an income of Kumarakom, your water hyacinth problem will become solved as well as tourism thing and also it will boost the local economy, the local people.”* (Resort Informant 2).

On the aspect of becoming more sustainable, all the resorts are already implementing many ways of being sustainable, in addition to wanting to become even more sustainable. Resort Informant 1 explained that their primary focus on becoming more sustainable is to plant trees while also *“making some nature friendly choices.”* (Resort Informant 1).

5.3.3. Homestays

Just like the houseboat operators, the homestay operators were primarily concerned with challenges related to their infrastructure, the aftermath of natural calamities, e.g., floods and

pandemics, and the last challenge mentioned was regarding food waste. Homestay Informant 1 said that the most significant sustainability challenge was the maintenance of the business.

Regarding challenges due to natural calamities, Homestay Informant 3 explained: “[...]right now, because of the flood people are facing a lot of problems with the septic tanks. Sometimes it leaks (that is the main reason why people move from here when there is a flood, because there are problems with the toilets), when water comes, whatever is in the tank will come out, you cannot help that, so that is a big problem.” (Homestay Informant 3). This informant clarified that challenges related to the aftermath of such natural calamities also sparked challenges related to hygiene and clean drinking water, that again would affect the tourism industry in the area: “In this particular region, tourism is the most important income generating business.” (Homestay Informant 3).

Additionally, in regard to the challenges caused by the recent pandemic, Homestay Informant 4 said: “Last October to December we lost 17 groups, each group is 16 persons plus one tour leader and they are staying in each room for two nights, so 32 persons in the 17 groups. That is a big loss, and the activities (boating), nearly 40 lifeworks [man-years] we lost in 3 months.” (Homestay Informant 4).

Homestay Informant 2 reflected upon the challenges of having different tourists – domestic or international – that could lead to challenges with food waste. The informant said: “The problem that we face, unless we are informed early, we cannot provide food that they want. Some people like our food, but with the element of bringing down the quantity of the spices and chilies.” (Homestay Informant 2).

Homestay Informant 1 mentioned two aspects in regard to becoming a more sustainable operation: one is waste management, and the second is the plan to have solar power in the future. This informant explained that all the organic waste is being fed to the fish in the pond surrounding the homestay while all the other inorganic waste is being segregated. With the plan to have solar power, this informant says that they can get all the energy needed from the solar panels.

5.3.4. Other Challenges

Some of the informants also mentioned challenges and competition between the businesses and how they operate regarding the sustainability aspect. Resort Informant 2, for instance, blames the houseboat businesses for problems related to the water quality of the lake: “[...] *the houseboats they used to throw all the sewage in the lake, that is one of the reasons why these water hyacinth plants are flourishing like anything because they get a lot of nutrients and they make a carpet.*” (Resort Informant 2). This informant also stated that there had been studies done on the Vembanad Lake regarding the fish meat quality, which show that it contains microplastic.

Even though the houseboats are blamed for the pollution in the lake, Houseboat Informant 4 said: “[...] *if one day they say to stop the houseboats we are forced to stop.*” (Houseboat Informant 4). Resort Informant 3 added to the reflection on the concept of sustainability by saying: “[...] *everybody is here to sustain in their field. And we will have to sustain, the houseboat and homestays are having their own plans for their survival [...] the question of survival of the entire tourism sector in Alleppey will come. So, without limited resources we are doing our best to sustain us in this industry [...]*” (Resort Informant 3).

Additionally, there is also competition between the operators regarding the tourists coming to Kerala. Resort Informant 2 reflected upon this that it might be due to the facilities that are offered: “[...] *they are more into the enjoy full experience, it is not eco-friendly or something close to nature.*” (Resort Informant 2). This informant mentioned that some tourists do not like to be close to nature, and if they see insects around the resort, they will check out and leave for another resort within the study area due to their facilities being a little bit more on the high-end side. Furthermore, Houseboat Informant 4 reflected upon the competition and said that within the industry there will always be competition, and the informant also added to this by saying: “*They want their people there so they are trying to blame a houseboat [...]*” (Houseboat Informant 4).

However, regarding the cooperation with the local community and their survival all the informants – houseboats, resorts, and homestays – mentioned that the government have a few restrictions on the houseboat business. The houseboats, independent or as part of another business operation, are not allowed to be roaming around on the lake after a given time. This

is due to the local fishermen that are casting their nets in the evening, and they do most of their fishing during night-time. Houseboat Informant 1 said: “[...]all boats stop at 5:30 pm, because the fishermen are catching the fish at nighttime. We are getting the fish from the fishermen. The next morning, we will start operating the boats again.” (Houseboat Informant 1). However, if there are any emergencies happening on the boats, they are allowed to run, though this might interfere with the net casting of the fishermen. Houseboat Informant 3 said: “[...]that time it is very careful because the nets, we cannot break the net, because it is their livelihood.” (Houseboat Informant 3).

5.4. Sustainable Tourism Operations – Certification as a Tool

All the houseboat businesses and resort businesses need to obtain a certificate from the pollution authorities through something called the “Pollution Control Board”-certificate (PCB). This certification is mandatory from the government, and to operate the business, they have to be certified through this. As such, the mandatory PCB certificate is something different from a voluntary certificate system where the cooperating partners define criteria and objectives that aim further than authority-controlled regulations and demands that all businesses must adhere to.

During the interviews, some typical and voluntary certification systems were mentioned, such as ISO2000, Vendum Green Certificate, and Green Leaf Certificate, all mentioned by resort informants. For the homestay informants, I did not ask about certifications because my initial perception was that they are operated more on a private basis, meaning that private people open their houses to tourists. Thus, this chapter will present the results from the houseboat and resort interviews.

5.4.1. Houseboats

As mentioned, all the houseboats are approved through the Pollution Control Board (PCB). Additionally, the houseboats get licensed by the Port Department. If the houseboats do not get the approval through the PCB, they are not allowed to be operating on the Vembanad Lake. Houseboat Informant 1 explained that all the houseboats that achieve the PCB approval get a license number on the outside of the boat, which also helps visualize to both customers and the tourism department that they are following the mandatory restrictions of the state to operate on the lake legally. According to Houseboat Informant 4, the PCB is regularly testing

the water quality of the lake to check if the houseboats are throwing waste in the lake or not. Houseboat Informant 3 explained: *“PCB is a must, because even though the rule is there, there are people who are not obeying them. I should say that these boats have to be banned, because the lake only got one state, anything that goes in is added, going on adding and adding and polluting, there will be a state where the lake cannot take any more waste.”* (Houseboat Informant 3).

Houseboat Informant 4 also explained that the Port authority comes every 5 years to re-check the boats, and if everything is how it is supposed to be, they will be getting the renewal of the approval. Additionally, every 3 years, the houseboats have to do something called drydocking. For this part, the boats will go into the dock, and the water surrounding it will be pumped away so maintenance can be done on the outside of the boats. Houseboat Informant 4 added to this by saying: *“[...]we can check the boat on the outside to see if there are any repairs, any damage. The experts are coming there.”* (Houseboat Informant 4).

The motivation linked to the houseboats being approved is that, as mentioned, they cannot operate their businesses without being approved. Houseboat Informant 1 said: *“We have to take it because the government will be having inspections – at any time.”* (Houseboat Informant 1). Houseboat Informant 3 added to this by saying: *“[...]if they check and find something, they will not arrest the boat immediately, because there will be guests, so we don’t want to give the problem to the guest. So, they will tell them tomorrow morning you can come and park here in a particular place – you are banned. That is the basic thing.”* (Houseboat Informant 3). However, they are all saying that being approved is a positive thing in regard to tourism. Houseboat Informant 1 stated: *“It is good, otherwise people will start throwing things, more pollution. People have different mindsets. The certification systems are making the people more responsible.”* (Houseboat Informant 1). Houseboat Informant 4 also said: *“Yes, it is helpful for tourism because of the water pollution, it is the main issue here. If nobody is there, authority, to control the pollution, everybody can start discharging the toiled waste in the river.”* (Houseboat Informant 4).

Even if the PCB approval is something all houseboats must have and that it as such is not a sustainability or eco-certification system, it is used for marketing purposes. Houseboat Informants 1 and 2 explained that if they have the mandatory approval of PCB, the Kerala

Tourism Development Corporation can market them to international tourists. Additionally, Houseboat Informant 4 said: “[...]the environmental impact, if there is authority like this, they will be controlling all the practices taking on the lake, if there is no authority like that anyone could do anything, so it is also helpful for environmental impacts.” (Houseboat Informant 4).

When asked about the barriers to the certification systems being used, Houseboat Informants 1 and 2 mentioned that it is very time-consuming. Houseboat Informant 1 said: *“The only barrier is that it will take a long time.”* (Houseboat Informant 1). Houseboat Informant 2 agreed on this; however, this informant stated: *“[...]but it is okay. No problem with that.”* (Houseboat Informant 2). When reflecting upon how the certification systems should be organized, Houseboat Informant 1 said: *“It will take a long time to get the certification. It will be bad money, everyone is working with us – the farmers, fishermen, the operators working with us – everyone will have a livelihood crisis at the time because of the delay.”* (Houseboat Informant 1). Houseboat Informant 2 added to this by saying: *“Someone should be there, it makes it simplifying it even better, some representation from this side.”* (Houseboat Informant 2).

The last reflection regarding being a sustainable business operation that attracts both domestic and international tourists, Houseboat Informant 1 explained that they could not only depend on international tourists even though they care more about the sustainable part of their travels. They would, however, economically benefit more if they would go all in for a sustainable operation, though since they are also dependent on domestic tourists, they have to upgrade their facilities to meet the demands of both segments.

5.4.2. Resorts

Like the houseboats, it is also mandatory for the resorts to be approved through the Pollution Control Board (PCB) to be able to operate their businesses. For the resorts, the PCB will come every 3 months to assess the water quality, air quality, and sound coming from within the properties. Furthermore, there is a certification system from the central government to rank the resorts by class. Resort Informant 1 explained that without this ranking certification system and the PCB, they cannot operate their business.

In addition to this mandatory PCB system, unlike the houseboats interviewed, some resorts are certified through voluntary certification systems, e.g., ISO2000, Vendum Green Certification, and Ayurveda Green Leaf certificate. The ISO2000 certification is linked to the operations requirements on how to implement and maintain a quality management system and is as such not directly oriented towards sustainability. The Vendum Geen Certification is explained by Resort Informant 3: *“[...]this is a policy by the international Vendum parent group. To maximize environmentally friendly hotels. They want to create an environmentally friendly atmosphere and environmentally friendly situation in almost all their hotels. They are having 56 hotels all over India and the green certification has been given to few of them and we are having one of them.” (Resort Informant 3).*

The last certificate mentioned by the informants was Ayurveda Green Leaf. This certificate is linked to the Ayurveda treatments done at some of the resorts. Hence, Ayurveda treatments originated in Kerala, the Government of Kerala has implemented a certification system to ensure safety and health regulations. Ayurveda Green Leaf are classified into three categories – Ayur Silver, Ayur Gold, and Ayur Dimond (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Additionally, Resort Informant 4 also explained that the Green Leaf certification is also needed for herbal gardens.

For the resorts, the motivation to be certified was also linked to it being a mandatory thing to achieve to be able to operate the businesses. Further, they are not explicitly voicing any reflections on whether or not it is helpful to be a certified business in regard to tourism. However, Resort Informant 3 explained that: *“Now, not only guests, even the corporate houses are asking whether your hotel is having environmentally friendly services and all. So, it is very good in both domestic as well as for international.” (Resort Informant 3).* Resort Informant 4 also mentioned that: *“[...]Before when the foreigners were coming here they were asking about the certification, now the domestic travelers are not that concerned with the certificates. They are mainly concerned with the classification, the 5-star, 3-star certification.” (Resort Informant 4).*

Regarding the marketing purpose of their businesses, they all state that it does not affect them too much because the tourists do not ask about it. Resort Informant 1 explained: *“The guests are not concerned about the certification thing, they believe in the government and they will be coming here.” (Resort Informant 1).* Resort 2 is displaying their certificates on the wall for marketing purposes, however, they are also saying that: *“everyone is believing in the*

government and they are coming in.” (Resort Informant 2). Resort Informant 4 explained that all their marketing is online, this informant added: “98% is online the rest is word-of-mouth. The local community is saying that the hotel is there, that it is a good one.” (Resort Informant 4).

When asked about the barriers to the certification systems being used, Resort Informant 3 said: *“Regarding this environmental certification I can tell you that the government has to strictly implement.” (Resort Informant 3).* This informant continued to say that the certification systems should be more transparent. The informant added to this by saying: *“They should address the root cause of the problem, they are not addressing the root cause of the problem [...] So, the government is not addressing the problems facing the locals [...] They should understand the need of the tourism people.” (Resort Informant 3).*

On reflection on whether or not the tourism shift has changed their operation in regard to sustainability, Resort Informant 1 explained that international tourists are more concerned with nature and are interested in knowing everything related to nature and sustainability. This informant added: *“When shifting to the domestic these people are mainly coming for their enjoyment.” (Resort Informant 1).* Other reflections made by the other informants in regard to the shift in tourism were linked to the revenue of their business, meaning the economical aspect of sustainability. Resort Informant 3 said: *“The revenue is major. If we get good revenue from the tourists and all we can pay good salary to the staff, we can provide more accommodation facilities to the staff, we can upgrade the room facilities to the guests. Everything depends upon the revenue.” (Resort Informant 3).* Resort Informant 4 added to this reflection by saying: *“Mainly it is considering the currency value. The foreign currency and the Indian currency, the difference is there.” (Resort Informant 4).*

6. Discussion

This chapter will begin with an overview of the study's key findings. The results will then be examined and compared to the theoretical framework that was applied to this study. The discussion seeks to show and discuss how the findings in this study relate to findings from previous research. Structurally, I have formed this chapter from the research questions proposed at the beginning of this thesis. Third, the research's potential limits will be explored. Finally, some recommendations for further research will be given.

6.1. Summary of Findings

Table 2 below summarizes the results that were presented in Chapter 5 Results, which are linked to the three research questions: (A) How do tourism businesses representing houseboats, resorts, and homestays understand the concept of sustainability and what it means regarding their own operation? (B) What are seen as the major sustainability challenges in these businesses, according to the informants? (C) To what extent is certification (eco- or sustainable) seen as a tool to improve sustainable tourism operations in these businesses?

Table 4. Summary of Findings about the meaning of sustainability, business challenges and the role of certification among houseboat-, resort-, and homestay tourism accommodation businesses in Alappuzha, Kerala.

	<i>What is Sustainability</i>	<i>Business Sustainability Challenges</i>	<i>Certification: Yes/No – why?</i>
<i>Houseboats</i>	- Not very familiar with the concept - Responsibility - Delivering (good service)	- Global changes, e.g., pandemics, wars - Environmental challenges, e.g., water pollution and waste management - Infrastructure challenges, e.g., deterioration of the materials - Competition challenges causes constant upgrades of facilities	- Pollution Control Board-certificate (mandatory) - Port Department (mandatory)

Resorts	- Aware and familiar with the concept - To be nature friendly - Operational survival	- State infrastructure - Environmental challenges, e.g., sewage waste, plastic, and water hyacinths	- Pollution Control Board-certificate (mandatory) - Voluntary certificate, e.g., ISO2000, Vendum Green Certificate, Green Leaf Certificate
Homestays	- Both aware and unaware of the concept - Sociocultural aspect to sustain the community - A stable business	- The infrastructure of their operations - Food waste – domestic or international tourists - Maintenance	Not Relevant

As we can see, the houseboats are not very familiar with the concept or word sustainability; however, they do give some reflections on their responsibility and delivery of services. Regarding business-related sustainability challenges, they mention challenges that are linked to the environment, infrastructural challenges within their operation, challenges relating to competition, also the repercussions of global changes. The resorts, however, are aware and familiar with the concept of sustainability and tie it to operational survival as well as how to be more nature friendly. The challenges mentioned within the resorts are, like the houseboats mentioned, also tied to the environment, in addition to the state's infrastructure. The homestays are mixed in their familiarity with the concept of sustainability, yet they reflect upon the sociocultural aspect of sustainability, as well as having a stable business. Like the houseboats and resorts, the homestays mention the challenges tied to infrastructure, however, regarding their own infrastructure. They also mention challenges linked to food waste and the maintenance of their operations.

6.2. Discussion of Findings

According to the theoretical framework presented in both Chapter 1 Introduction and Chapter 2 Theory, it is suggested that the tourism business used to perceive sustainability as a threat to their profitability and competitiveness (Øian et al., 2018). We can argue that this is, to some extent, still valid from the findings presented in this study. It is argued by the informants that they need to invest more in the facilities of their business to attract more tourists due to the high competition. Thus, they need to give less prioritization to the sustainable development of their business.

However, it is also argued by researchers that a sustainable operation is now seen as an asset. Hence, tourism businesses increasingly recognize that sustainability is a prerequisite for maintaining the resources they depend on to develop their products (Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010) in (Øian et al., 2018)). We can argue from the findings in this study that for the resort operators to be a sustainable operation, it is most definitely seen as an asset, both within the business, yet also to market themselves. This can again arguably be because, from the findings, the resorts are more aware and familiar with the concept of sustainability. However, the houseboats also mention that for the marketing of their business to international tourists, it is seen as an asset to have PCB approval due to international tourism being more concerned with environmental sustainability.

Since the publishment of “Our Common Future” in 1987, Jørgensen & McKercher (2019) argues that sustainability has received much attention. However, Kuhlman & Farrington (2010) claim that the concept has shifted in meaning. They argue that the environmental concerns are significant but that the main argument of sustainability is the one of welfare. This might seem to be applicable to the tourism sector researched for this study; hence most of the informants interviewed link sustainability to the revenue of their business operations before they mention the environmental aspects.

The results from this study show that there is a mixed understanding of the concept of sustainability. The concept of sustainability, as presented in Chapter 2, Theory, is commonly interpreted in terms of three dimensions – social, economic, and environmental. However, there have been claims made by researchers that the latter dimension may receive less attention or importance in a three-dimension approach to sustainability (Kuhlman &

Farrington, 2010). With the research done through this study, we can argue that it is further shown that most of the business operators tie the concept of sustainability to the assurance of keeping their operations afloat. The difference between the business operations views on sustainability, for this study, is that the bigger business operators (resorts) express more concern with the sustainability challenges linked to the environment. However, all the informants mention the environment in some parts of the interviews, yet they do not necessarily link it so much to the dimensions of sustainability.

Research shows that many developing countries have yet to find other alternatives to obtain sources of foreign income and to create alternative jobs for those involved in the tourism sector (Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017). From the findings of this study, we can argue that this is accurate for Kerala. Since it is one of India's biggest tourism regions, most of the income is generated from the tourism sector. The informants also claim that the revenue for their businesses is more significant when international tourists come. Furthermore, the term “regenerative tourism,” according to Duxbury et al. (2012), focuses on how the tourists are giving back to the community, and one can argue that the homestays indirectly are applying this term to their business operations since they focus on showing their lifestyle and including the tourists in their day-to-day life.

The term regenerative tourism, according to Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard (2022), differs from the sustainable development paradigm due to tourism activities being used as interventions that flourish the capacities of places, communities, and their guests to operate in harmony with connected social-ecological systems. One can argue that the homestays are unconsciously practicing their operation with this term as a framework. Thus, homestays might become a niche market within the tourism sector in Kerala. This is a prediction from the experience I got while talking to the homestay operators that they are very excited to show the tourists their way of living. To engage the tourists in, e.g., cooking classes and teaching them about the herbal plants in the gardens were some points the homestay operators mentioned that they enjoyed very much.

However, still, the argument made by Haaland & Aas (2006) that too many closely related labels of tourism can cause the risk of environmental or environmental quality being less prioritized or diluted is essential to consider within the backwater tourism sector in Alappuzha. Hence, also because the lack of environmental considerations will lead to a

degradation in a destination's tourism value because tourism does not find it as attractive as before. Additionally, Jørgensen & McKercher (2019) also argue that issues related to the ecological impact and climate change linked to sustainability can affect tourism destinations, as well as tourism businesses and communities that rely on tourism as a primary source of income.

Further, as previously mentioned, littering, the carrying capacity of a destination, pollution, and uncontrolled development are among the adverse environmental effects associated with tourism. Thus, certification and branding systems within the tourism sector can be helpful tools to regulate the industry's operation and development (Haaland & Aas, 2006). However, one can question how effective and helpful the certification/approval systems are within the state due to the lengthy process and added competition these systems make for the business operators.

According to previous research done on certification and branding systems, the goals of these systems should appear in the name (Haaland & Aas, 2006). This is the case for the mandatory PCB system from the government of Kerala. Primarily the certification systems that we wanted to see if the tourism sector in Kerala was utilizing were voluntary certificates, such as voluntary systems that Honey (2002) writes about in her study.

However, even though voluntary certification systems are not much utilized by the business operators interviewed for this study, it is still beneficial to have a mandatory system such as the PCB. This is because, according to research done, employers, consumers, and regulators can differentiate between competent and unqualified operations. Which again can improve market accountability, safety, and quality, as well as contribute to the standardization of procedures across the business operations. Additionally, such certification and branding systems, according to Haaland & Aas (2006), were developed to reduce and avoid adverse environmental effects regarding the business operation or production. Furthermore, the Ayurvedic certificate is also a certificate system implemented by the government. This is, however, only applicable if the business operation is practicing Ayurvedic treatments.

The resorts, as mentioned, are the only business operation that utilizes voluntary certificates, such as ISO2000 and Vendum Green certificate. One can argue that the mandatory PCB approval that the houseboats all have are too focused on the pollution aspect, which the

houseboats are a significant contributor to, so also to achieve voluntary certificates are thus unprioritized. To draw this line even further, one can question if India is a liberal society or do the government interfere with the forms of governance.

Even though tourism is a tool for economic development and employment among developing nations, Manoj (2010) argues that the question of sustainability in the long run within the sector is becoming a challenge due to the adverse effects of tourism on the environment. Therefore, Manoj (2010) argues that there is growing relevance for environmental-friendly tourism initiatives for long-term sustainability. We can argue that the state of Kerala has thought of this, hence the implementation of the “Responsible Tourism Mission” framework adapted from the concept of responsible tourism, which seeks to advance environmental protection, cultural integrity, economic development, and the welfare of communities (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikal, 2012).

The topic of sustainable tourism is relatively new and tied to sustainable development. Related to the applicability of the latter, Butler (1999) argues that there has been specific attention to three features regarding tourism – carrying capacity, control over tourism, and mass tourism. From this study, one might say that hence the tourism sector in Kerala promotes, e.g., ayurvedic rejuvenation-based attractions with the aim to attract high-spending tourists; together with the Responsible Tourism Mission, the state is actively trying to prevent mass tourism. However, it seems that the tourism sector, in addition to the government, is dismissing the carrying capacity of the geographical diversity surrounding Vembanad Lake. Furthermore, Walls (1996) in (Butler, 1999) argue that the definition of sustainable development is being used in various ways, resulting in it becoming a political catchphrase, a philosophy, a process, or a product. Though one might argue that this is the outcome in Kerala, or at least in the Alappuzha district.

Additionally, with the increasing numbers of both international and domestic tourism to developing countries, Honey (2002) points out the issue of how to ensure sustainable development and how to develop an integrated strategy for industrial development, including tourism, have become more popular. Hence, local and national governments started to establish laws in 1970 with guidelines for environmental effects and emissions, notably into the air and water. The PCB approval is a result of this; hence, this system was established as a

regulatory authority in Kerala for implementing pollution control laws. Notably, under Prevention & Control of Pollution, water and air fall.

As mentioned, tourism is encouraged in developing countries due to potential benefits in terms of environmental protection and sociocultural conservation, as well as jobs and income. However, it has been realized that further tourism development has real potential damaging effects on nature, societies, and culture (Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017). From the findings of this study, it is clear that some of the tourism business operators are damaging the environment and nature more than others. Which in the long run will also have a damaging effect on the culture and society in Alappuzha. However, since it is the only way of income for many within the sector, there are not many alternative options, yet they are all trying to be sustainable with the limited resources they have.

Yfantidou & Matarazzo (2017) further claim that if developing countries do not find alternative ways of earning foreign currency, the government in such countries will support all forms of tourism development, including unsustainable ones. Therefore, they further argue that strict environmental laws should be developed and enforced to protect unique and fragile natural resources and cultural heritage. Which, we can argue that the Pollution Control Board system is, to some extent. However, one can also argue that this approval is too time-consuming, so voluntary certification systems are often forgotten.

6.3. Limitations and Further Research

To discuss the validity and reliability when doing qualitative research means, according to Lewis (2009), as cited in (Jacobsen, 2021), that the researcher is trying to be critical of the quality of the data collection. Jacobsen (2021) argues that all qualitative research is only as good as the data that are managed to be collected in the first phase. The data collection always comes from an informant, a situation, or a document, as for this research, an informant. Hence, the validity of the data is heavily dependent on these sources (Jacobsen, 2021).

One could further argue that for this research, the researcher – me – did not have access to the unit (informant) that gives the correct information due to language barriers. According to Boelen (1992) (in (Jacobsen, 2021)), such language barriers can lead to the researcher – me –

not grasping the central part of the unit; thus, the research can contain incorrect conclusions. Therefore, as mentioned in Jacobsen (2021), it is essential that in the validation of the findings, we, as researchers, critically discuss whether we have obtained the sources that can provide the correct information. Hence, as mentioned earlier, the challenges linked to language and cultural barriers were, to a large extent, taken care of due to the collaboration with local experts. Despite the fact that this was a sensible strategy, there may have been room for additional planning and adjustments while in the field. Adjustments could have been made to make sure that relevant follow-up questions could have been better addressed in the different interviews, to get a broader aspect and understanding of the topics this research focuses on.

Further, it is essential to consider whether there are features of the context that could lead to the informants not wanting to give the correct information. Jacobsen (2021) claims that the actions of humans, in addition to what they say, are affected by others. Hence, it will always be difficult for the researcher to control if the informant is telling the truth or not. The golden rule, as mentioned by Jacobsen (2021, p. 231), is: *“information from several independent sources provides a valid description of the phenomenon.”* This limitation was hard to consider at all times due to some of the interviews being conducted in the front office with tourists and other workers around. However, some interviews were conducted in a calm setting with no one else around, in addition to it happening in a setting that was familiar to the informant, thus lessening the effect of others on the interview object.

The information which emerges in interviews can, according to Jacobsen (2021), appear in two different ways: it can either be a direct reaction to stimuli (question) from the researcher, or it can come spontaneously from the respondent. The information which comes as a result of a question from the researcher will often act as a guide to the additional information that the informant provides. On the other hand, information that comes unsolicited from the informant will often be given greater validity. This is information that is not directly controlled by the researcher and can therefore be assumed to be closer to the informant's actual perception of the phenomenon. Furthermore, data collected from either first-hand sources, several independent sources, or unsolicited information will broadly support the argument that the information we have is both reliable and valid (Jacobsen, 2021). Since most of the interviews had to be conducted in the local language, the interviewer had to briefly explain the concept of the research, which possibly could have led to the informants using

that as a guide when answering the questions. However, this was not the case for all the interviews. Some of the informants spoke English very well, and some of the informants even spoke freely throughout the whole interview.

The analysis of the data collection, according to Jacobsen (2021), always implies that the researcher cuts out some details and simplifies and systematizes the information from the informants. Hence, in this process, the researcher moves further away from the sources of the data, those who were interviewed. Thus, there is also a danger that the researcher, instead of representing data, adds their own options and prejudices (Jacobsen, 2021). To try and limit this potential error, as mentioned, the recordings of each interview were transcribed within a short time after each interview. Additionally, the results chapter (Chapter 5) was written by looking at the transcriptions organically to try and grasp the correct information for each section of the mentioned chapter.

Further, to validate the research, it is essential to have a critical discussion of connections. Jacobsen (2021) argues that the strength of qualitative analysis lies in the fact that the data broadly describes mechanisms that connect two or more categories or events; however, even if we can demonstrate that there is co-variation and further argue that there is a connection, due to the fact that we can describe one informant's viewpoint, we should never take such conclusions for granted. Hence, the advantage of such a critical approach is that those we talk to do not always have the correct perception of what the explanation is. At the same time, we can never be entirely sure that we have found the actual cause and not what both the researcher and those being interviewed think is the cause (Jacobsen, 2021).

Jacobsen (2021) claims that the more units the researcher examines, the greater the probability that one can generalize the findings. Further, he argues that the same principle goes for case studies as well. The results conducted in a single case study will often, according to Jacobsen (2021), be closely linked to a specific context; however, by repeating similar research in other contexts, i.e., other cases, the probability that one can generalize from one context to another increase. Replication of studies in different contexts - that is, in different rooms at different times - will be a way of checking whether the findings in one context also apply in other contexts (Jacobsen, 2021).

This study is limited to only a few business operations within the tourism sector in Alappuzha, Kerala, India. Further research should implement a more extensive selection of informants and comparisons of informants at other prominent tourist destinations in India to research further the general understanding of the theoretical framework used in this thesis. By repeating this study within a more extensive scope of the tourism industry in India, e.g., within the state of Kerala or another big tourism state, one could most likely generalize the tourism sector within these states and later go on to generalize the tourism sector within India as a whole.

Later, to research even further, the same study can be conducted in other countries in the Global South. By doing this, one could make comparisons of countries within the Global South, and this could also help to develop the tourism industry in a more sustainable manner in the future. Alternatively, to make an even more extensive comparison, the study can be conducted in The Global North. Eventually, one could compare the findings of the study conducted in the Global South to the ones found in the Global North and, thus, might help to bridge the gap within the tourism industry and the education on sustainable tourism.

7. Conclusion

This thesis had the purpose of researching the backwater tourist operations within the Alappuzha district in Kerala, India. The three research questions that were explored were:

- A) How do tourism businesses representing houseboats, resorts, and homestays understand the concept of sustainability and what it means regarding their own operation?
- B) What are seen as major sustainability challenges in these businesses, according to the informants?
- C) To what extent is certification (eco- or sustainable) seen as a tool to improve sustainable operations in these businesses?

Regarding the first research question, the main findings show that sustainability have different meanings to the informants. Besides mentioning some challenges related to environmental and economic sustainability, terms such as resilience and survival, are mentioned. It also seems that there are different understandings between the business categories and that larger and probably more professional businesses more often align with established definitions and goals. Houseboats are less familiar with sustainability, while resorts tie it to operational survival and being nature-friendly, homestays vary in their familiarity but prioritize sociocultural sustainability and business stability.

The major sustainability challenges within the businesses in regard to sustainability differed. For the houseboat operators, the main challenges were tied to global changes and challenges linked to the environment and the houseboat's infrastructure. For the resorts, the main challenges were firstly tied to the environment and, secondly, the infrastructure of the state that indirectly made challenges for the guests, which again made challenges for the resorts. For the last business operation, homestays, they mentioned the operations infrastructure, food waste, and maintenance as their biggest sustainability challenges. We can therefore conclude that their perception of the concept of sustainability is quite different to what we tie to sustainability.

Regarding the last research question, this study shows that certification tools, those that are voluntary, are not seen as an immediate tool to improve sustainable operations within some

businesses. The business operators that were familiar with the concept of sustainability utilized such voluntary systems; however, the business operators that were not familiar with the concept only used the governmental mandatory system, PCB, with a primary focus on achieving the PCB so that they are allowed to operate.

Lastly, this study did encounter a few difficulties related to language, culture, and even social norms; however, these challenges were, to a large extent, taken care of due to the collaboration with local experts and a supervisor who had first-hand knowledge of the study area to make the best possible guarantees.

8. References

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Attachment A. Interview Guide

Opening questions

- Hello, I am Anne. I am a student from The Norwegian University of Life Sciences. I am studying Nature-based Tourism and I am here as part of my fieldwork for my master thesis. The purpose of this visit is to explore the existing and potential future role of eco- or sustainable tourism, including certification and branding systems in Kerala. Also, to understand governance of tourism in Kerala, especially since the shift in tourism (from international to domestic) after covid-19.
- Is it okay with you that I do a recording of this interview? It will be anonymous and it will not be able to trace it back to you, after transcribing it the interview will be deleted.
- If you are interested in seeing the final report I am happy to send it to you in August 2023, and I would need your email address.

Tourism operators/accommodations

- What comes to mind when you hear the word sustainability?
- What do you think are the biggest sustainability challenges for your business?
- What do you think are the biggest sustainability challenges for the tourism in general in this area?
- What are you doing to make your accommodation business more sustainable?
- Are you engaging with the tourists to make them aware of their environmental footprint?
- How has the shift in tourism (from international to domestic) affected your business? How has it affected the local community?
- How are the accommodation businesses cooperating with authorities and/or the local destination management and marketing organization?
- How are the accommodation business communicating and cooperating with other local businesses (fishermen, farmers) to not interfere with each other's businesses and to cooperate for instance regarding local food?

Tourism board – DMO (destination management organizations)

- What is the main role and tasks for the DMO?
- What are the priorities and main objectives for the DMO?

- How has the shift in tourism (from international to domestic) affected the local community?
 - Is there a shift in your priorities as a tourism board?
- What is your role in the tourism board?
 - What does this role entail?

Local inhabitants (fishermen, farmers)

- How are the local inhabitants communicating with the accommodation businesses (mainly houseboats) to not interfere with each other's businesses?
- Is there a high demand of local food in the area?
 - What are the main products requested from the local businesses?

If there is a request of locally produced food, is this considered a positive request for the local community (fishermen, farmers)?

Certification brandings?

Accommodation businesses – resorts and houseboats:

- Is your business certified (sustainable certification, tourism certification)?
 - If yes, through what certification system? Can you tell me more about this certification branding? Is it working for the business?
 - What was the motivation for becoming a certified business?
 - Is the marketing of your business as a certified one important for the guests? Does it have an impact of who chooses to stay with you?
 - If no, why not? (is it not important or is it because of other issues like it being too expensive or too time consuming?)

Tourism Board - DMO (destination management organizations):

- What are the views on certification brandings/systems?
 - Also, specifically for the Kerala region? How many certified tourism businesses are there in the region? (how many houseboats and resorts?)
- Who is in charge of the management of the certification brandings/systems?

General questions

- Do you know if environmental or sustainability certification systems are in use or have been in use in Kerala/among houseboats (Best Luxury Houseboat Kerala,

Alleppey Nightstay Houseboats) /among accommodation businesses (Resorts: Kayalloram Heritage Lake Resort, Punnamada Resort, Palmgrove Lake Resort, Malayalan Lake Resorts)?

- Do you think certification systems would be useful for tourism in this area? Why? Why not?
 - If yes, what would be the most important benefits? (More sustainable business operations? Better worker conditions? Reduced environmental impacts? Marketing and communication to domestic markets? Marketing and communication to international markets?)
- Do you see barriers to implementation of certification in this area/in your business? (Costs, administration, inefficiency, unnecessary.... Keywords for follow-up)
- Do you have thoughts on how a certification system for this area should be organized? Who should be involved? Who should own it? What would be the benefits of developing a local system? What would be the benefits of using an existing, international system?

Closing questions

- Do you think the next years for your business will be profitable and good or the opposite? What are the main challenges and what are the main opportunities?
- Is there something that we did not talk about that you want to mention in regards the topics we have discussed?

The interview guides are very similar between the businesses. The main difference is that the certification questions are not asked to the Homestay Informants. Hence, only the complete interview guide of one of the business operations (resorts) is presented in the attachments.

Attachment B. Complete Interview Guide. Tourism Businesses (Resorts)

Introductory questions:

- What do the business offer? (types/categories of accommodation, food/meals, activities?)
- Who are your main customer groups?
- Are you a full-year or seasonal operation?
 - If seasonal; what time of year? Why this time?
- Do you have employees?
 - How many?
 - Permanent/part time/seasonal

Sustainability questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word sustainability?
- What do you think are the biggest sustainability challenges for your business?
- Are you aiming to make your accommodation business more sustainable?
- Are you engaging with the tourists to make them aware of their environmental footprint?
- How has the shift in tourism (from international to domestic) affected your business, including its sustainability?
- How are the accommodation businesses in this area cooperating with authorities and/or the local destination management and marketing organization?
- How are the accommodation business communicating and cooperating with other local businesses (fishermen, farmers) to not interfere with each other's businesses and to cooperate for instance regarding local food?

Certification questions:

- Do you know if environmental or sustainability certification systems are in use or have been in use in Kerala among accommodation businesses (Resorts: Kayalloram

Heritage Lake Resort, Punnamada Resort, Palmgrove Lake Resort, Malayalan Lake Resorts)?

- Do you think certification systems would be useful for tourism in this area? Why? Why not?
 - If yes, what would be the most important benefits? (More sustainable business operations? Better worker conditions? Reduced environmental impacts? Marketing and communication to domestic markets? Marketing and communication to international markets? – keywords for follow up, make sure you don't put our words in their mouth!)
- Do you see barriers to implementation of certification in this area/in your business? (Costs, administration, inefficiency, unnecessary.... Keywords for follow-up)
- Do you have thoughts on how a certification system for this area should be organized? Who should be involved? Who should own it? What would be the benefits of developing a local system? What would be the benefits of using an existing, international system?

Certification branding questions:

- Is your business certified (sustainable certification, tourism certification)?
 - If yes, through what certification system? Can you tell me more about this certification branding? Is it working for the business?
 - What was the motivation for becoming a certified business?
 - Is the marketing of your business as a certified one important for the guests? Does it have an impact of who chooses to stay with you?
 - If no, why not? (is it not important or is it because of other issues like it being too expensive or too time consuming?)

Closing question:

- Do you think the next years for your business will be profitable and good or the opposite? What are the main challenges and what are the main opportunities?
- Is there something that we did not talk about that you want to mention in regards the topics we have discussed?



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