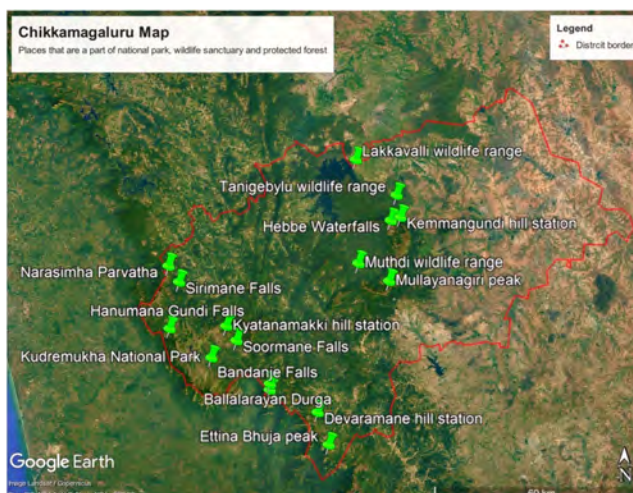


Ecotourism Unmasked: Profits at the Cost of Environmental Degradation

Chikkamagaluru also known as the land of coffee lies in the Malnad sub-region of Karnataka. It is located at a distance of 251 km from the capital city of Bengaluru, sharing its borders with Hassan, Udupi, Dakshina Kannada, Shimoga, Davangere, Tumkur, and Chitradurga districts. Geographically, it is located between 12.9117 & 13.8981 N and between 75.0794 & 76.3639 E. It includes the taluk Koppa, Sringeri, Narasimharajapura, Tarikere, Kadur, Mudigere, Kalasa, and Chikkamagaluru. Around 60% of the district is a part of Western Ghats including Kudremukha National Park and Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary, and home to numerous waterfalls and hill stations. It receives 1,900+ mm of annual rainfall. Tropical evergreen forest, wet deciduous forest, dry deciduous forest, and dry forest are found in this district. The population of the district according to an estimate in 2022 was 1,502,109. Chikkamagaluru is one of the most famous tourist destination, and witness heavy



Map highlighting some of the most popular ecotourism destinations of Chikkamagaluru district.



Map of Karnataka highlighting Chikkamagaluru district.

inflow of tourists from all the parts of the state and country. My curiosity and concern to know about the impacts of ecotourism on environment led me to meet wildlife activist and conservationist, D.V. Girish with whom I discussed the following things.

Heavy inflow of tourists

Due to the emergence of the social media platforms especially Instagram, it has become a source of information for people to explore new places. Places which were unknown to people for the past several years have all of a sudden become the most popular tourist destinations and there is a hike in the number of tourists. An article published by the Asianet Suvarna News stated that the number of tourists visiting Chikkamagaluru has crossed three million in just six months (Jan-Jul) 2023 and is expected to cross eight million. Chikkamagaluru district has a small population of 15 lakhs and the Chikkamagaluru town population is around 1.6 lakhs. Which means that the district is witnessing tourists almost 5



Image depicting the traffic caused due to heavy inflow of tourists at Kemmangundi, Chikkamagaluru.
© Zabi Ullah.

times the existing population. The resources which, are meant for small population is now being utilized by large number of people. There is a term called 'carrying capacity' which means that each place will have a certain limit to which it can accommodate the people so that the tourists get good experience of the natural beauty at the same time the local environment is undisturbed.

The numbers have gone way beyond the carrying capacity. These uncontrolled numbers has led to problems like disturbing the air quality, sound pollution by the vehicles, traffic which was an urban phenomenon has now reached to the remote places. When the crowd is very high it is very difficult to manage the place hence it has resulted in the littering of the plastic wastes at the spots in large amounts, it is also disturbing to the wildlife.

Uncontrolled number of homestays and resorts

Homestays and resorts are the integral part of the tourism. As the number of tourists increase the number of homestays and resorts also increases. There are 531 homestays and resorts that are registered under the ecotourism development board but in reality the numbers are way beyond, there are around 800 plus homestays and resorts according

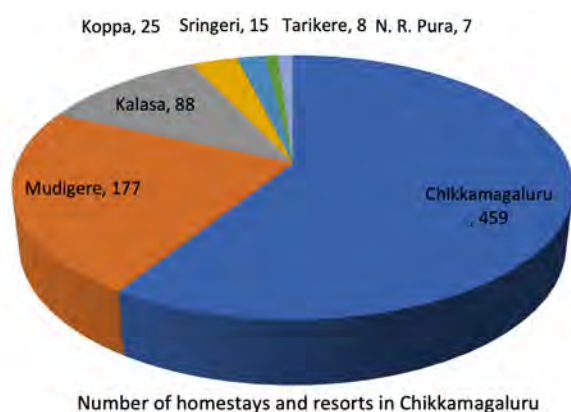
to my survey conducted using google earth making 250 plus unregistered ones. There are many homestays and resorts that are being constructed inside the sensitive regions, very close to the forest. It has resulted in the degradation of the forest. It has become a party place where they play loud music, consume alcohol and enjoy themselves, which, disturbs the wildlife and the local people. The concept of homestays was that it would help the local community being a source of employment and economic growth but it has also turned into commercial business where many outsiders have purchased the lands and have constructed homestays. In many places they exploit the water resources.



Image depicting plastic litter at Mullayanagiri, Chikkamagaluru. © Zabi Ullah.

Table. Number of registered homestays and resorts in Chikkamagaluru district. Source: District Tourism Development Council, Department of Tourism, Chikkamagaluru.

	Taluku	Number of homestays and resorts
1	Chikkamagaluru	321
2	Mudigere	166
3	Koppa	20
4	Sringeri	11
5	Tarikere	07
6	Kalasa	04
7	Kadur	01
8	Narasimharajpura	01
Total		531



Actual number of homestays and resorts in Chikkamagaluru district.

Poor management by the Karnataka State Forest Department and Ecotourism Development Board.

They have no restriction on the number of tourists visiting per day which has resulted in the problem of overcrowding and inconvenience. Many places do not have enough number of staff to manage the crowds. Basic facilities like toilets, drinking water facilities, plastic monitoring, dust bins are not been managed by the departments. Moreover, many places do not have the entry fee and no staff by the department.

Jungle lodges and resorts

Most of the jungle lodges and resorts are being constructed within the sensitive regions; for example, Bhagawathi nature camp in Kudremukha, hill resort in Kemmangundi, and River Tern lodge in Bhadra Reservoir. Air pollution, noise pollution by vehicles due to heavy inflow of tourists and activities such as camp fire will impact the wildlife causing disturbance, change in the animal behaviour and also migration of the wild animals.

Ecotourism policy

Karnataka state has tourism policy to regulate the tourism, in which it clearly mentions that the ecotourism shall focus on increasing awareness towards conservation and sustainability of biodiversity and natural environment. It also mentions that tourism shall be done after careful consideration of the destination's carrying capacity and in adherence to the orders and guidelines issued by the relevant authorities. They have also mentioned the water conservation and harvesting, adopting renewable source of energy and adopting pollution control measures, but all these are not being effectively implemented. Since the district witnesses heavy inflow of tourists there is a need for separate ecotourism policy for the district to manage the ecotourism, many environmentalists have raised their voice for the cause.

Reference

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Acknowledgement

D.V. Girish, Managing Trustee, Bhadra Wildlife Conservation Trust, Chikkamagaluru.

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