

---

## **Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS) as an Institutional Mechanism For Community-Based Ecotourism: Evidence from Kerala, India**

---

**Ms. Susan Sunny**

Research Scholar,

PG & Research Department of Commerce,  
Mahatma Gandhi College, Kesavadasapuram,  
University of Kerala

Email: [susansunny87@gmail.com](mailto:susansunny87@gmail.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4400-9234>

**Dr. Pradeep Kumar N**

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor,  
PG Department of Commerce,  
NSS College, Nilamel, Kollam,  
University of Kerala,

Email: [pradeepkn30@gmail.com](mailto:pradeepkn30@gmail.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5980-8165>

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the role of Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS) as an institutional mechanism for promoting community-based ecotourism in Kerala. It analyses how VSS incorporates the local communities in forest conservation and tourism activities using the Participatory Forest Management framework. The study is a descriptive and analytical methodology paper based on secondary sources and selected field insights, highlighting the structural and functional aspects of VSS. The results show that VSSs have created livelihood opportunities, supports biodiversity conservation, and increased community participation through micro-planning and institutional support from the Forest Department. This model is effective in achieving the balance between ecological sustainability and socio-economic development. The study has challenges like limited data availability and varying levels of community engagement persist. The study points out the policy relevance of strengthening VSS and its potential as a replicable model for sustainable ecotourism and forest governance in other regions with similar socio-ecological conditions.

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

**Keywords:** Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS), Ecotourism, Community-based tourism, Participatory Forest Management (PFM), Sustainable development, Forest Conservation, Livelihood generation, Institutional mechanism, Biodiversity conservation, Forest Development Agencies (FDA)

## Introduction

Tourism is the largest industry in the world. It drives the economy, shapes culture, and influences environmental policies (Venegas, 2025). The movement of people from their usual place to other places for enjoyment, education, adventure, business, or other personal reasons is explained as tourism (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). A travel experience intended to be convenient, entertaining, and large-scale accessible is known as traditional tourism, also known as mass tourism. Easy access, luxury accommodation, and standard travel experience were priorities over cultural and environmental factors in this type of tourism. This type of tourism leads to over-tourism in fragile ecosystems, pollutes the air and water with carbon emissions, and creates economic imbalances. The environment is significantly impacted by tourism, and to overcome these adverse effects, sustainable tourism practices are adopted. Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism, which is a responsible way of travelling. It minimises the environmental impact, supports local communities, conserves natural habitats, and provides educational, immersive travel experiences. Local community development is one priority of ecotourism, along with the protection of the natural ecosystem. It ensures that tourism revenue stays within the destination and long-term community development is possible (Venegas, 2025).

The community-based institutional mechanism plays an important role in the functioning of ecotourism. In tourism, one such initiative for community participation is the Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS), which represents a significant initiative that integrates local forest department communities into ecotourism management. They work in collaboration with the Forest Department to foster community-based ecotourism ventures in potential destinations (Kerala Forest Department, n.d.). They greatly enhance the concept of ecotourism and environmental conservation. The participation of the community increases livelihood income and raises awareness of forest protection, eco-tourism, and environmental preservation (Kuttancherry & Arunachalam, 2020). Through activities like eco-guiding, forest protection, and awareness creation, VSS contributes to sustainable tourism as well as biodiversity conservation. This paper examines how VSS function as a key institutional mechanism in implementing ecotourism in Kerala.

### 1. Background of the Study.

#### 2.1 Ecotourism.

Ecotourism is defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education (TIES, 2015). The goal is to bring together sustainable travel, communities, and conservation (The International Ecotourism Society, n.d.). It gives importance to ethical and

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

low-impact travelling. Ecotourism protects the ecosystem rather than exploiting it. It promotes ethical wildlife encounters by keeping the animals in their natural habitat rather than in captivity. It also empowers the local communities through revenue generation (Venegas, 2025).

Ecotourism is guided by certain key principles, such as minimise the physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts, build environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provide positive experience to both visitors and hosts, provide direct financial benefit for conservation, financial benefit for local people and private industry, design, construct and operate low impact facilities, deliver meaningful experience to increase visitors' awareness of environmental, social and political conditions of destination, and respect indigenous communities' rights and beliefs and work with them to support their empowerment (The International Ecotourism Society, n.d.).

Ecotourism can be understood through three elements: it is nature-based, includes education, and follows sustainable management that considers economic and socio-cultural aspects. While considering the first element, natural environments are the main focus of ecotourism, especially in areas like national parks and wildlife reserves. It prioritizes conservation, education, and responsible management, making it different from general tourism. For successful ecotourism, stakeholder cooperation, proper planning, and balanced tourism activities are necessary. Secondly, ecotourism includes an educational and interpretative component that helps visitors and local communities to understand natural environments, biodiversity, and sustainable practices. Interpretation, training, and guided experiences promote awareness and encourage responsible behaviour. Ecotourism is guided by the third element, sustainable management. It emphasises balancing environmental conservation with economic and social development. It generates benefits such as biodiversity protection, income generation, and community development. It creates challenges like environmental degradation, financial constraints, and cultural disruption. Ecotourism also needs proper planning and management based on sustainability to make it different from other forms of tourism. The goals, prospects, and opportunities of ecotourism should be clearly defined in economic, social, and environmental terms, and adapted to the specific conditions of each destination (Diamantis, 2010). This conceptual understanding of ecotourism establishes a foundation for analysing the function of community-based institutions, such as VSS, in implementing ecotourism at the local level.

## 2.2 Community-based Tourism

The tourism where the money made from tourism goes directly to the whole community, it is Community-based tourism. The community could be a group of people, a cooperative, or a village that receives financial benefits and decides how to use the profits. Other non-monetary benefits include promotion of cultural exchange, cultural enrichment, protection of the environment, and preservation of lifestyle. Community-based tourism is considered a tool for removing poverty and for international development (Barker, n.d.).

## 2.3 Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS)

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

The Vana Samrakshana Samithi is a Panchayath-ward-level committee of forest-dependent local communities and representatives of the Forest department for the management of forest areas. They are community-based institutions established under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) framework to promote participatory forest conservation and sustainable resource management. It operates within defined geographical units based on the forest and the nearby areas, with formation processes involving community meetings, bylaws, and official registration. The membership is primarily for forest-dependent communities, ensuring inclusive participation, and they contribute labour or cash for the protection activities of the forest. The governance includes the General Body with subgroups and the Executive Committee. Regular meetings and participatory decision-making are mandatory (Government of Kerala, Forest and Wildlife Department, 2009).

In Kerala, VSS facilitates the involvement of forest communities in planning, implementing, and monitoring the forest activities through micro-plans prepared with the help of the Forest Department. The micro-plans are prepared for 10 years by integrating traditional knowledge with scientific forest management. The Forest Department provides necessary technical, financial, and institutional support for its effective functioning. Operational fund and core fund support the activities of VSS (Government of Kerala, Forest and Wildlife Department, 2009).

Other than forest conservation, VSS contribute to socio-economic development by creating livelihood opportunities, promoting income generation, and providing access to forest produce and funds for development. It is one of the effective means of social interaction for tribal communities in Kerala. The long-term goal of VSS is to achieve self-reliance and sustainable forest management through community participation (Kuttancherry & Arunachalam, 2020; Government of Kerala, Forest and Wildlife Department, 2009).

## 2. Objectives

1. To examine VSS as an institutional mechanism in promoting ecotourism in Kerala.
2. To analyse the role of community participation in forest conservation and livelihood generation through VSS.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of VSS in achieving sustainable tourism and inclusive development.

## 3. Literature Review

Community-based tourism has become a different way of tourism, focusing on local involvement, sustainability, and fair distribution of benefits. It involves community in planning and running of tourism, and ensuring economic and social benefits are retained. This type of tourism fosters inclusive development by conserving the environment with economic opportunities, thereby aligning tourism activities with broader sustainability goals (Prakoso et al., 2020).

Community-based Tourism (CBT) supports the economy and environment by reducing poverty, creating jobs, and strengthening local economies. Because of its weak governance,

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

unequal sharing of benefits, and low community capacity, its effectiveness is limited (Jackson, 2025).

Community participation is essential for successful CBT because involving locals in decision-making and management fosters ownership and ensures that tourism meets their needs, along with supporting conservation. However, the level of participation often changes due to differences in institutional support, stakeholder coordination, and socio-economic conditions (Quang et al., 2023).

In Kerala, VSS and EDC facilitate community participation under the participatory forest management system. They facilitate cooperation between local communities and the forest department and promote conservation and livelihood activities (Alexander, 2024)

The case studies point out that VSS effectively supports ecotourism by allowing communities to engage in forest protection and earn from tourism activities, as seen in Vazhachal. The initiatives in Thenmala and Palaruvi also demonstrate that VSS can help in generating income to the local community along with promoting environmental awareness and conservation (Kuttancherry & Arunachalam, 2020)

#### 4. Research Gap

The existing studies emphasise the roles of local participation in the attainment of sustainable development and conservation. The research on VSS also highlights its contribution through ecotourism. Limited attention is given to the VSS function as an institutional mechanism.

#### 5. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary and primary data. The data were collected from government reports, Kerala Forest Department publications, academic literature, and informal interviews with VSS members. The analysis focuses on understanding the institutional structure, functioning, and outcomes of VSS within the participatory forest management framework.

#### 6. Results

While talking about the Forest Conservation Committee, its history needs to be mentioned. The forest policy was initially implemented during the British rule in order to seize control of the rich forest resources. As a result, the people were restricted from entering the forest. This instance led people to illegally enter the forest for survival, leading to the occurrence of forest exploitation. Later, following Indian independence, the policymakers introduced a new National Forest Policy in 1988 to protect forests through participatory measures. The Central Government published a circular in this regard in 1990, and all states except Kerala began implementing this policy from 1991 onwards. The idea of participatory forest management was first introduced in Kerala in 1998 to secure a World Bank loan for forest conservation practices. The Joint Forest Management (JFM) / Participatory Forest Management (PFM) has three concepts, namely participating local forest-dependent people in forest management, organising residents for collective action in managing a specific forest area, and sharing responsibilities and benefits according to a mutually agreed set of rules and

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

regulations. The primary objective of this effort is to reduce the over-reliance of local people on forest resources and safeguard them from exploitation by developing an appropriate participatory forest management method and ensuring the socio-economic development of the forest-dependent community.

In Kerala, the management of Kerala Forest Ecotourism has a multi-layer structure. The Kerala Forest Department monitors the ecotourism activities through its eco-development and tribal welfare wing. The State Forest Development Agency supervises the Forest Development Agencies formed in different Forest Circles, like Vana Samrakshana Samithis and Eco-development Committees. It works with forest-dependent communities, comprising tribal groups who rely on the forest ecosystem, to manage ecotourism centres. According to the Kerala Forest Department, there are 723 tribal settlements located within forest areas in Kerala. The ecotourism projects include these communities and ensure that their traditional knowledge and way of life are respected and sustained, and better job opportunities are provided. Across 34 forest divisions, 2,172 local community members are getting jobs and opportunities through VSS and Eco-development Committees. Ecotourism in the State provides regular jobs for 933 women. Kerala ecotourism focuses on community empowerment and gender equality, indicating that the state is serious about sustainable development and inclusive growth. VSS plays an important role in employment generation and the active participation of the communities. They are supported by Forest Department training programs that build skills in customer service, management, and overall service quality (Kerala Forest Department, n.d.).

## 7.1 Institutional mechanism of VSS

VSS is an institution coming under Participatory Forest Management (PFM), which focuses on reducing the over-dependence of the community on forest resources by improving the standard of living of local people. There are 5 models of PFM. The first model, Fringe VSS, includes people living near forests under the supervision and cooperation of the Forest Department, who are actively involved in the conservation and management of forest land. The second model is Tribal VSS. The area where tribal people living near or inside the forest usually collect forest resources is the forest collection committees' working area, and the tribal group that has gathered in this aim is the Tribal VSS. Unit Level Organisation (ULO) is the third model, a collaboration between cardamom farmers, the forest department, and related scientific and social institutions for the conservation of cardamom forest. The fourth model is the Eco Development Committees (EDC), which aims to reduce the dependence of people living in Wildlife Protected Areas, leading them to self-sufficiency. And the fifth model is the Grama Haritha Samathy/ Participatory Haritha Samathy (GHS/PHS), which performs protection and conservation of the environment outside the forest area.

The PFM works through 12 stages from site identification to field implementation. Once the site is identified, the Memorandum of Association is prepared, followed by registration of VSS and the Membership campaign. The fourth stage is the opening of the core fund and operational fund accounts. Then, a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is done to collect the

## The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

data from the community on forest matters and their management. Based on the data collected, a micro-plan is prepared as the sixth stage. This plan is then approved by the Conservator of Forests. As the eighth stage, an MoU is signed between the Forest Department and the VSS to execute the plans in that area. In the ninth stage, a credibility fund is sanctioned for the samathy to meet the initial expenses. An Annual Action Plan is approved in the next stage. Based on the approved plan, the twelfth stage of field implementation is carried out.

The institutions established in the territorial forest divisions are known as VSS, and in sanctuaries and national parks, they are known as EDC (eco development committees). They are the platforms for community engagement and decision-making. Their activities are monitored by the Eco Development and Tribal Welfare Wing, which plays a crucial role in promoting the Participatory Forest Management (PFM) (Kerala Forest Department, 2024). They work under the FDA (Forest Development Agencies), which is a federation of all PFM institutions within its jurisdiction. The FDA was an initiative by the Indian Government to distribute funds for forest activities; accordingly, the FDA should be formed in all forest divisions. The FDA was formed in 2002 as a registered body under the Charitable Societies Act, acting as an independent body within the Forest Department. It is headed by the State Forest Development Agency (SFDA). Kerala has 36 FDAs, each of which is responsible for a territorial or wildlife forest division (Kerala Forest Department, 2025). It is a confederation of VSSs in place. The FDA comprises a President and one woman member representative from each VSS, ensuring inclusive participation of member communities, along with the Conservator as its Chairperson, and the DFO as the Member Secretary. The general meeting of the FDA is attended by these group members along with 15 district-level officers from various other departments. As a part of forest conservation, they mobilize the available funds to uplift local people, thereby reducing their dependence on the forest.

Through the Executive Committee, the SFDA performs its actions. The committee comprises two types of stakeholders. Primary stakeholders who go to the forest and collect forest products for their own use. Whereas, secondary stakeholders are those who use products collected by others. Regarding membership in the VSS, in the case of Fringe VSS, two people, one of whom must be a woman, from each family in the area, can become members. From these members, an executive committee of 9 members is formed, where a minimum of three members should be women. Also, SC/ST representation should be proportional. There will be a President and a Vice President, one forest department officer as Secretary, and the Panchayath ward member as an official member. This committee will carry out all the responsibilities of the respective VSS. In the case of membership in Adivasi VSS, only tribal people who are 18 years old can become its members. From these members, there will be an executive committee with 9 members, with a minimum of 4 women members, and 5 out of 9 members should be collectors who go to collect forest products. There will be a President and a vice-president for the committee, one officer from the forest department as the Secretary. Other members include a Panchayath ward member and an officer from the

## The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

Tribal Department of the respective jurisdiction. The term of each Executive Committee is 2 years.

The members in the Samithi protect the forest from exploitation, collect forest products and market them to the public, and get employment opportunities to support their financial needs. All the activities are directed towards the fulfilment of its ultimate objective, i.e., the development of the local community. It is a source of income for these local people. The VSS works according to the byelaws and micro-plans. These micro-plans are prepared by the micro-plan team, formulated by the DFO. The team consists of trained officers of the Forest Department and representatives from the public. The team visits the community and prepares a plan with their cooperation based on the knowledge, problems, and opinions collected through discussions and other PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) methods. This plan, after being approved by the Forest Department, is implemented by the VSS. The VSS is allowed to perform activities only as per the plan approved. These micro-plans are renewed every 10 years.

Within the eight Forest Circles of the State, 36 FDA handles 640 PFM institutions, including VSS, AVSS, and EDC. These institutions perform conservation activities related to their area. Ecotourism is one of the VSS activities. There are 71 ecotourism destinations in Kerala that provide several eco-friendly activities like trekking, sightseeing, boating, cycling, and accommodation. These sites are managed by VSS/EDC. They are centrally supervised by the SFDC. The Samithi controls the visitors of the destination. Each destination has a separate micro-plan. It is a source of revenue generation through fee collection under the principle "polluters shall pay for the pollution," which in turn ensures responsible tourism. The fees collected are daily deposited into the FDA. The amount in the FDA is utilized for forest protection activities, and an action plan is prepared regarding its use. The salary of the staff is also provided by the FDA. (Kerala Forest Department, 2025)

The Samithi helps the communities for a sustainable livelihood and forest protection. They perform various activities like fire protection, Vana Oushdha Samridhi (Medical Plant Cultivation), Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board Projects (KIIFB), like fencing forest boundaries to reduce human-wildlife conflicts, Eco-friendly practices in the tourism sector, Vanasree to sell the forest products collected by the tribal communities. All these are performed at the State level. There are some Central Government Projects like the Green India Mission that provide employment, afforestation and fire protection, fuel efficiency to reduce forest fuel use, capacity building through training and awareness programs to manage forests efficiently. Another is Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (VDVK), like skill development, market access through SHGs (Self Help Groups), and traditional knowledge to create products and services. Then Nagar Van Yojana to create urban forests, School Nursery Yojana to connect students with nature, and MSP for MFP to ensure fair prices for non-timber forest products like honey, bamboo, etc (Kerala Forest Department, n.d.).

VSS is a successful model because it emphasises community participation in forest management and ecotourism. It combines traditional knowledge with scientific planning

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

through micro-planning. The Forest Department's continuous support guarantees administrative coordination, technical direction, and budgetary stability. It reduces the pressure on the forest resources through its sustainable livelihood opportunities and thus promotes forest conservation. The model is flexible and can be repeated in different areas with similar socio-ecological conditions.

## 7. Implications

The results highlight the importance of incorporating community-based institutions like VSS into a sustainable tourism and forest governance framework. Through increased finance, capacity building, and institutional support systems, the strengthening of VSS can be done. The role of VSS in promoting livelihood, along with environmental protection, is highlighted in the study. The model is capable of replication in other similar ecological and socio-economic conditions in other states.

## 8. Limitations

The study relies mainly on secondary data, with limited primary data. Recent statistical data on VSS performance is lacking here. Insights into the challenges and community perceptions are limited. The study is focused only on Kerala.

## 9. Conclusion

The study concludes that VSS is an important institutional mechanism to link community participation to sustainable forest management and ecotourism. It properly balances the conservation objectives and livelihood generation. It is a viable model for sustainable development. It enhances the operational efficiency and local acceptance through a participatory planning and implementation framework. VSS promotes inclusive growth through actively involving women and tribal communities in economic activities. Overall, the model has the potential to be a replicable model for promoting sustainable tourism and environmental conservation.

## References

- Venegas, G. (2025, March 10). *Traditional tourism vs. ecotourism: What's the difference and why does it matter?* Green Circle Experience. <https://greencircleexperience.com/2025/03/10/traditional-tourism-vs-ecotourism-whats-the-difference-and-why-does-it-matter/>
- Kerala Forest Department. (n.d.). *Kerala forest ecotourism*. Tourism In Kerala: A brief History of Kerala Forest Ecotourism. <https://ecotourism.forest.kerala.gov.in/>
- Kuttencherry, D.J., & Arunachalam, D.P. (2020). ROLE OF TRIBAL VANA SAMRAKSHANA SAMITHI (VSS) MEMBERS IN BUILDING FOREST PROTECTION AND ECO-TOURISM AT VAZHACHAL ECO-TOURISM AREA IN THRISSUR DISTRICT OF KERALA.
- The International Ecotourism Society. (n.d.). *What is ecotourism?* <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>

## The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

- Diamantis, Dimitrios. (2010). The Concept of Ecotourism: Evolution and Trends. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 2. 93-122. 10.1080/13683509908667847.
- Barker, E. (n.d.). *Community-based tourism travel guide*. Responsible Travel. <https://www.responsibletravel.com/holidays/community-based-tourism/travel-guide>
- Government of Kerala, Forest and Wildlife Department. (2009). *Participatory forest management guidelines*. <https://forest.kerala.gov.in/images/pdf/pfmenglish.pdf>
- Prakoso, A. A., Pradipto, E., Roychansyah, M. S., & Nugraha, B. S. (2020). *Community-based tourism: Concepts, opportunities and challenges*. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism and Entrepreneurship*, 2(2), 95-107. <https://doi.org/10.35912/joste.v2i2.563>
- Jackson, L. A. (2025). Community-Based Tourism: A Catalyst for Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals One and Eight. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 6(1), 29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6010029>
- Quang, T. D., Nguyen, Q. X. T., Nguyen, H. V., Dang, V. Q., & Tang, N. T. (2023). Toward sustainable community-based tourism development: Perspectives from local people in Nhon Ly coastal community, Binh Dinh province, Vietnam. *PloS one*, 18(10), e0287522. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287522>
- Alexander, G., George, L. P., & Jayakumar, M. S. (2024). *Local community participation in ecotourism: Empowering forest-dependent and indigenous communities in Kerala, India*. <https://antrocom.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/alexander-local-community-participation-ecotourism-kerala.pdf>
- Kuttencherry, D.J., & Arunachalam, D.P. (2020). ROLE OF TRIBAL VANA SAMRAKSHANA SAMITHI (VSS) MEMBERS IN BUILDING FOREST PROTECTION AND ECO-TOURISM AT VAZHACHAL ECO-TOURISM AREA IN THRISSUR DISTRICT OF KERALA.
- Kerala Forest Department. (2024, May 29). *Various wings*. <https://forest.kerala.gov.in/en/various-wings/>
- Paul, G. B. (n.d.). *Joint forest management – Kerala* <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/joint-forest-management-kerala/8459930>
- Kerala Forest Department. (2025, February 17). *State Forest Development Agency (SFDA)*. <https://forest.kerala.gov.in/en/sfda/>
- Kerala Forest Department. (n.d.). *State Forest Development Agency (SFDA)*. <https://forest.kerala.gov.in/sfda-ml/>