

Study to understand the profile, taste and needs of visitors to the Oceanarium proposed to be set up at Kochi, Kerala, South India

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Abstract

Tourism is reckoned as one of the most dynamic economic sectors of Kerala. Realizing the economic significance of tourism, the State Government has initiated innovative programmes, which have resulted in placing Kerala at an enviable position among its counterparts in the country. Today, the State offers a wide variety of tourism attractions anchored on its natural splendour and cultural miscellany. The vast coastal reaches of the State, intermingled with lagoons, estuaries and backwaters, offers immense possibility to diversify backwater tourism. The rich cultural heritage, including traditional music and dance forms, alternative healthcare systems, martial arts and cuisine add to its attraction. Of late, the impetus on educational tourism with the objective of imparting awareness on the marine resources of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean has resulted in the concept of creating an oceanarium together with a Marine Biological Research Centre at Kochi, the vibrant city on the south-west coast of Indian peninsula, informally referred to as the 'Gateway to Kerala'.

As part of the demand estimation exercise, a survey of target visitors comprising foreign and domestic visitors was conducted. The principal objective of the study was to understand the profile, taste and needs of visitors to the proposed oceanarium. The respondents were drawn from all walks of life with varying income levels, spending capacity, and varying perceptions about the tourism facilities both existing and to be planned. Hence a random selection was done among the visitors of different age groups. For the purpose 220 visitors each from foreign and domestic sectors were identified at Kochi. All the identified visitors were administered with the questionnaire and personal discussions were held. The questionnaire templates were different for foreign and domestic tourists. The draft questionnaire was initially field tested and relevant improvements / modifications were carried out to make the process interactive and user friendly. The questionnaire was administered during the period from 10th August to 20th December 2013. Focused group discussions (FGD) were also conducted with identified target visitors and assessed market potential of the oceanarium.

The results of the present study indicated that the proposed oceanarium should be high end, full family entertainment facility for varied profile of visitors. People are generally willing to spend for family entertainment options in a substantial way. It indicated the need for the development of themes which are compatible and complementary. There is a need for the integration with other compatible tourist destinations. The project should depict themes which are not common in this part of the world. The project should focus on environment, marine ecology, man and ocean. There is also a need to provide a wide range of social amenities. The observations of the present study may be useful in planning oceanariums in other parts of the country also.

Keywords: oceanarium, puthuvypeen, aquarium

1. Introduction

Kerala (South India), popularly known as 'God's Own Country', officially declared Tourism as an industry in the year 1986^[1]. Gradually, the state of affairs of tourism industry changed remarkably, and today it is reckoned as one of the most dynamic economic sectors of the state. Realizing the economic significance of tourism, the State Government has initiated innovative programmes, which have resulted in placing Kerala at an enviable position among its counterparts in the country. Today, the State offers a wide variety of tourism attractions anchored on its natural splendour and cultural miscellany. The vast coastal reaches of the State, intermingled with lagoons, estuaries and backwaters, offer immense possibility to diversify backwater tourism. The rich cultural heritage, including traditional music and dance forms, alternative health care systems, martial arts and cuisine add to its attraction. On realizing the potential, the State has taken initiatives in linking tourism to other allied sectors like health, culture and traditions. Of late, the impetus on educational

tourism with the objective of imparting awareness on the marine resources of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean has resulted in the concept of creating an oceanarium together with a Marine Biological Research Centre at Kochi (colonial name Cochin), the vibrant city on the south-west coast of Indian peninsula, informally referred to as the 'Gateway to Kerala'^[2]. Proximity to the international water way and the peculiar physiographic settings, with an agglomeration of tiny islands in the backdrop of Vembanad Lake, makes Kochi the most ideal location for setting up the oceanarium complex. The site chosen for the development project is at Puthu Vypeen, the southern part of Vypeen island, situated south west across the backwaters and connected to the mainland of Kochi by a series of bridges known as the Goshree Bridges^[3]. The oceanarium development project, proposed at Puthu Vypeen in Kochi by the State Fisheries Resource Management Society (FIRMA), a Government of Kerala undertaking, forms the country's first such initiative. It has been conceived as an *infotainment facility* serving the dual objective of *information*

and *entertainment* [2]. The project envisages setting up of a state-of-the art fifth generation oceanarium, featuring one of the world’s most advanced and largest exhibitions of underwater marine life and aims to propagate awareness on conservation of marine environment and biodiversity including mangroves. Being an education and entertainment space, the facility would mostly play into its inner dimension with the beauty and diversity of life forms and colours of the underwater realm in order to offer a complete vision of the many ecological facets of marine ecosystems.

As part of the demand estimation exercise in connection with the setting up of the oceanarium project, a survey of target visitors comprising foreign and domestic visitors was conducted. The principal objective of the study was to understand the profile, taste and needs of visitors to the proposed oceanarium

2. Material and Methods

The respondents for the present study were foreign and domestic tourists who visited Kochi during the study period. They belonged to all walks of life with different age groups, varying income levels, spending capacity and varying perceptions about the tourism facilities both existing and to be planned. Respondents were selected randomly from among the visitors mentioned above.

A well-structured, interactive, user friendly questionnaire was prepared keeping in view all the attributes necessary for a primary survey and without consuming much of the valuable time of the respondents [4]. The questionnaire was designed based on different verticals. The questionnaire templates were different for foreign tourists and domestic tourists. The draft questionnaire was initially field tested and relevant improvements / modifications were effected to make the process interactive and user friendly.

For the study 220 visitors each from foreign and domestic sectors were identified at Kochi. As Kochi is the Gateway to Kerala all the visitors were identified at Kochi itself. The identified visitors were administered with the questionnaire and personal discussions were held. The questionnaire was administered during the period from 10th August to 20th December 2013. To avoid any misconception of the questions, the study was conducted through one to one personal interaction/interview.

Each identified visitor was briefed about the objectives of the survey and the concept of the project before seeking their views and opinion. Parameters such as interest in the project, paying capacity, mode of transportation, facilities required, future requirements etc. were included in the survey. As repeat visitation by the tourists would have a direct bearing on the success of the project this aspect was also included in the survey. Focused Group Discussions (FGD) with identified target visitors were also carried out. The response was analyzed covering various deciding attributes of the survey.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Admiration of Nature

All respondents, foreign as well as domestic, were found to admire nature. Since the project attributes towards nature and marine animals with state of the art facilities the results of the present study indicated the need for planning the facilities friendly with nature and the need to create a sustainable environment.

3.2 Leisure Activity

84.09% of the foreign tourists and 76.36% of the domestic tourists preferred outdoor leisure activity (fig. 1). This brings out the varied perception of tourism indicating that the proposed Oceanarium should be of total family entertainment facility. The planning, zoning, pavilions, themes and display techniques should take this into consideration and accordingly land use pattern and zoning to be decided.

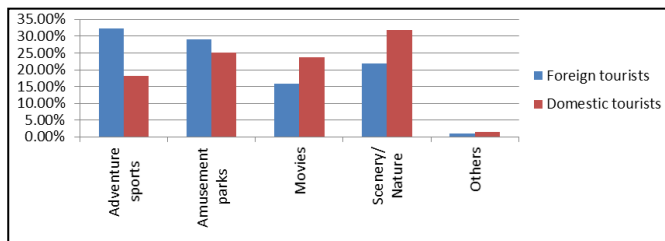


Fig 1: Preferred leisure activity of tourists

3.3 Pets at Home

This probes into the likes of the population towards pet animals. 85.00% of the foreign tourists and 91.82% of the domestic tourists were found to keep pet animals at home (fig. 2).

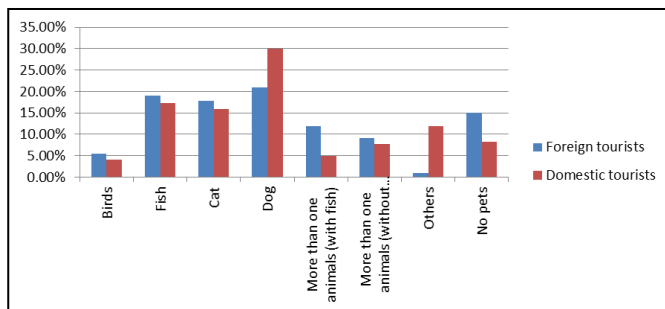


Fig 2: Pet animals at home

This indicates the affinity of the population towards pet animals. The product display section and souvenir shop in the proposed oceanarium should be able to capture this market by making revenue out of selling aquarium related products, home aquaria, souvenirs covering bio diversity, oceanarium brand building products, oceanarium specific CD’s, albums, marine research books, toys for children, replica / models of display items, etc.

3.4 Visit to Aquarium

All foreign tourists and 95.45% of the domestic tourists surveyed visited an aquarium revealing the desire of the people to visit facilities exhibiting aquatic creatures. It indicates that the project should be a high end model of marine entertainment facility depicting marine life to have the visiting population keen on such innovative facilities of difference.

3.5 Understanding about Oceanariums

100% of the foreign tourists have understanding about oceanariums. The tourists were very much aware about the concept and features. Most of them have visited other projects in other parts of the world and are excited to make a repeat visit. Some people could name a few oceanariums worldwide and the names indicated may be considered while making the benchmarking exercise. The domestic tourists had only a

limited idea about the oceanarium as against foreign tourists. Only 8.18% had prior understanding about oceanariums and 91.82% had no idea about oceanariums. When explained in detail about the concept and features, the domestic tourists who were unaware of the oceanarium concept showed high acceptance level towards the project and were enthusiastic to visit one. Hence project launch, strategy formulation, taking the project information to schools, colleges and to target group in the initial stages are vital.

3.6 Purpose of Visit

75% of the foreign tourists and 82.27% of the domestic tourists have come to India/ Kerala/ Kochi on vacation and obviously this is the target visitors of oceanarium in Kerala (table 1). The remaining 25% of foreign tourists and 17.73% of the domestic tourists, though on business tours, or for other purposes like Ayurvedic treatment, culture, heritage etc. are waiting for a chance to take a gaze at Kerala’s culture, heritage, and scenic spots.

As the majority of tourists are visiting Kochi seeking leisure, being potential visitors to oceanarium, this is an encouraging factor for attendance modeling. Attracting this crowd will form a sizeable portion of audience for the project. The oceanarium need to position itself to attract this varied segment of people by well structured product mix like marine entertainment facility, family entertainment facility, sustainable marine ecology and environment display, cultural and heritage display zones and other such themes which could lure the people of urban and rural settings.

Table 1: Purpose of visit of the tourists to Kerala

Category	Percentage of tourists		
	Business	Vacation	Others
Foreign tourists	9.09	75.00	15.91
Domestic tourists	5.45	82.27	12.27

3.7 Duration of Visit

The details regarding the duration of stay of tourists are provided in fig. 3. 95.91% of the foreign tourists have stayed for more than 5 days in India. 64.09% of the foreign tourists visiting Kerala stayed for more than 5 days in Kerala. This shows Kerala's relative importance in India, as a tourist destination. 60.45% of the domestic tourists stayed for more than 5 days in Kerala. More particularly the significance of Kochi being gateway to Kerala to the tourists is apparent. As any visitor staying for more days in any tourist destination will invariably visit most of the tourist spots in and around the area, the possibility of them visiting the new tourism spots is very high. Hence the proposed oceanarium in Kerala will be a part of visitor's itinerary in the days to come. Since the tourist spots in and around Kochi is limited and can be covered within a short span of time, the visitor population can be a target population for the proposed oceanarium. These visitors will have a lot of free time to visit oceanarium, even if their stay in Kochi is limited. Oceanarium marketing efforts should be substantial to attract people even when they are on lesser days of stay. Efforts should be made to market the oceanarium in such a way that the oceanarium visit should appear in the priority list and is integral part of Kochi tourism destinations. A specific discussion was also conducted with the respondents about their willingness to utilize the free hours for an oceanarium visit and the response was encouraging.

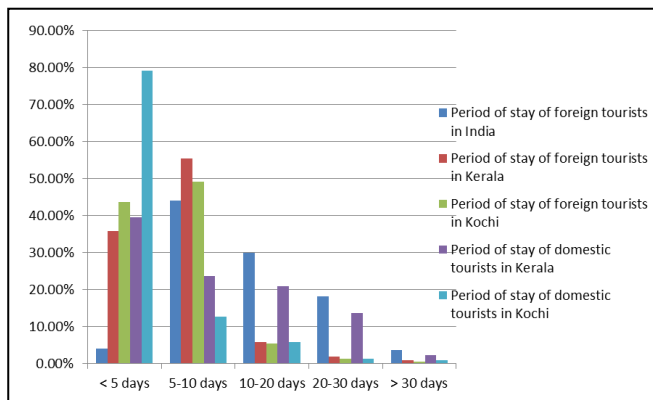


Fig 3: Duration of stay of tourists

45% of the foreign tourists have visited India more than once in the past 5 years and the balance is visiting India for the first time. This substantiates the fact that India is a preferred tourist destination.

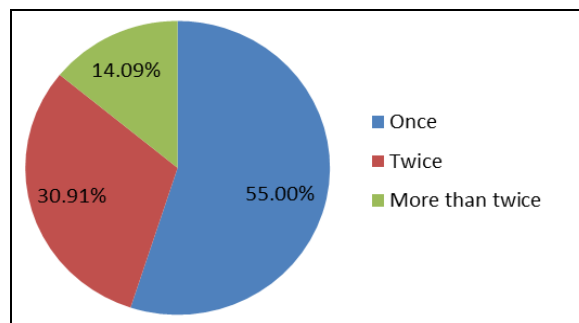


Fig 4: Frequency of visit of foreign tourists to India

65% of the foreign visitors have come to experience Kerala for the first time. 23.18% have come to Kerala on their previous visit to India. The balance have visited Kerala more than twice. Thus 35% of the foreign tourists showed a repeat nature of visit.

The trends observed are encouraging as proposed oceanarium can attract the new tourists to a sizable extent. Any entertainment facility more specifically marine entertainment may not attract repeat client in a shorter span of time. Hence, the survey findings of 65 % of the foreign tourists visiting for the first time fall under potential visitor category. Marketing efforts need to be focused to include the oceanarium visit as a part of the tourism itinerary.

95.91% of the foreign tourists and 100% domestic tourists have shown a positive response when asked about a repeat visit to Kochi; this shows their acknowledgement towards Kerala as a repeat tourism destination in general and Kochi in particular. Further it was understood that the frequency of visit to Kochi is fairly spread over obviating the negative influence of repeat visit. To keep continued interest among the visitors, it is pertinent that the project planning and development should be phased with new attraction modes created and properly promoted. The operation and maintenance and live interactions with visitors are key issues for maintaining sustained interest.

3.8 Period of Visit

The details regarding the period of visit of tourists in Kochi are presented in table 2. Foreign tourists in general prefer to

visit Kochi during winter months owing obviously to the pleasant weather. But the domestic tourists prefer to visit

Kochi during summer and winter months. The observation is possibly in view of the holidays for schools during the period.

Table 2: Period of visit of tourists to Kochi

Category	Percentage of tourists			
	Summer (March- May)	South- West monsoon (June- August)	North- East monsoon (September- November)	Winter (December- February)
Foreign tourists	0	1.81	13.63	84.56
Domestic tourists	38.18	11.36	9.09	41.37

The period of visit is an important factor in deciding on the attendance forecast model. This trend however needs to be analysed on a larger period of time based on actual visitation witnessed in the past.

3.9 Composition of Group

Details regarding composition of groups are provided in fig. 5. For international tourists the adult population was higher. Hence, in display techniques apart from being multi lingual the information about species, marine ecology, marine environment etc. need to address this segment of the visiting public. Among the domestic tourists the majority of the groups had children with them. The adult- child ratio is important to arrive at the entry fee which varies for adults and children. Oceanarium is also likely to attract school children as a study/ excursion tour. Hence, adult child ratio is a complex factor and differential entry pricing between adult and children need to be carefully assessed and finalized.

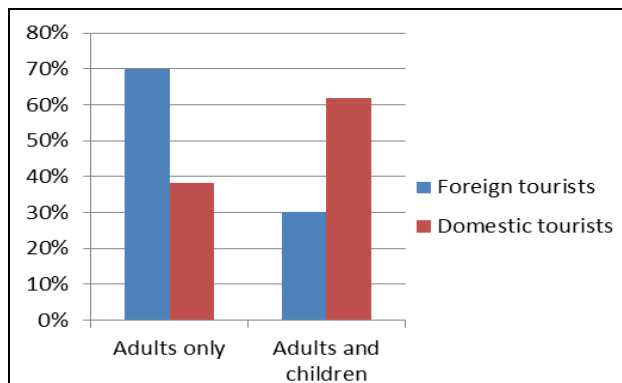


Fig 5: Details regarding composition of groups

3.10 Income and Readiness to Spend

The average monthly income is an important factor in determining the entry fee for the project and the willingness to spend on food, as higher is the average monthly income more will be the person's disposable income. The information on monthly income is presented in fig. 6 and 7. 96.81% of the foreign tourists were found to have a monthly income of more than Rs. 1.00 lakh. 60% of the domestic tourists were found to have a monthly income of more than Rs. 0.50 lakh. It is observed that the disposable income of the foreign tourist is reasonably higher and the same may be considered while fixing the entry fee.

Information on willingness of the tourists to pay entry fee to oceanarium is presented in table 3. 93.18% of the foreign tourists were willing to pay more than Rs. 400 as entry fee. But only 41.82% of the domestic tourists were willing to pay more than Rs. 400 for the purpose. The proposed oceanarium should structure the fee in tune with market feedback.

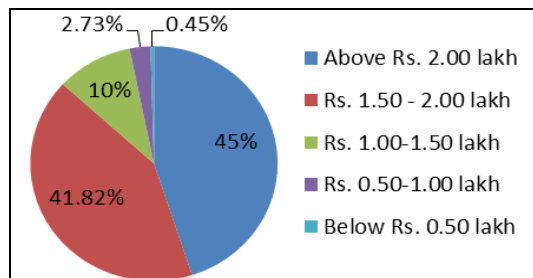


Fig 6: Average monthly income of foreign tourists

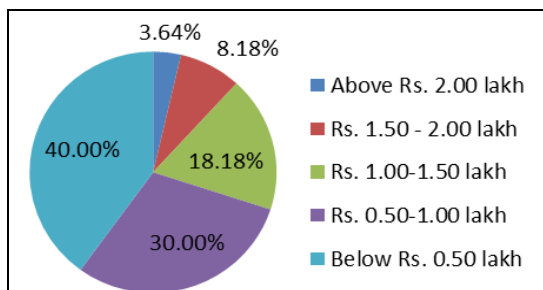


Fig 7: Average monthly income of domestic tourists

Table 3: Willingness of tourists to pay entry fees to oceanarium

Category	Percentage of tourists willing to pay as entry fee (Rs.)			
	Below 400	400 - 600	600- 800	>800
Foreign tourists	6.82	33.18	45	15
Domestic tourists	58.18	31.82	8.18	1.82

Information on willingness of the tourists to spend on food (one time per head while on tour) is presented in fig. 8. 80% of the foreign tourists were willing to spend more than Rs. 300 for food. 72% of the domestic tourists were willing to spend more than Rs. 200 for the purpose. Oceanarium facilities shall have multi cuisine restaurants, food courts, regional food counters, sea food pavilions, themed food festivals, local delicacies and margins from this sector would be sizable.

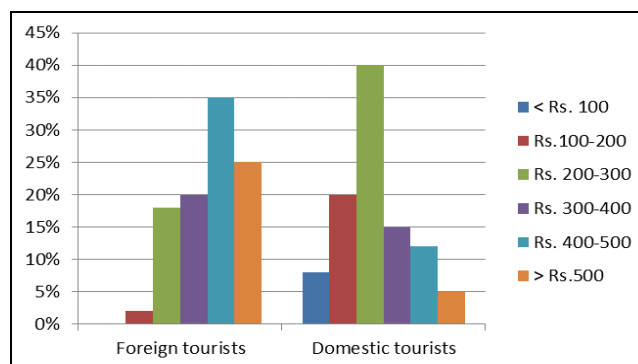


Fig 8: Willingness of the tourists to spend on food (one time per head while on tour)

3.11 Mode of Local Transport

46.36% of the foreign tourists preferred taking auto rickshaws for going around the city, 43.18% of the foreign tourists preferred taking rented cars, most probably from the hotel they stay. 8.64% preferred public transportation system for going around the city. And 1.82% of the foreign tourists preferred bikes/ cycles for the purpose. Among the domestic tourists 34.09% preferred auto rickshaws, 28.18% preferred rented cars, 15% preferred buses/ mini buses and 12.73% preferred bikes/ cycles as modes of local transport. 10% of the domestic tourists preferred public transport system.

Since, the present project is fairly far from city centre, adequate parking area need to be provided. To facilitate visitors, steps like themed bus services operated by oceanarium need to be deployed from strategic locations. Public transport linkages are to be created. Revenue from 4/2 wheelers and bus parking are significant streams of revenues for the project.

3.12 Memory Capture

This is a part of revenue stream 60% of the foreign tourists and 21.81% of the domestic tourists preferred to have handy cams for capturing the memory. The rests preferred to have still cameras for the purpose. Since the user fee for handy cam and still camera varies, knowing the population's preference helps in arriving at the fee structure.

4. Conclusion

Foreign tourists in general have understanding about oceanariums. They are aware about the concept and features of oceanariums. Many of them have visited other projects in other parts of the world and are excited to make a visit to some oceanariums. The domestic tourists in general had only a limited idea about oceanariums as against foreign tourists. However when explained in detail about the concept and features, the domestic tourists also showed high acceptance level towards the project and were enthusiastic to visit one.

The results of the present study indicated that the proposed oceanarium should be high end, full family entertainment facility for varied profile of visitors. People are generally willing to spend for family entertainment options in a substantial way. It indicated the need for the development of themes which are compatible and complementary. There is a need for integration with other compatible tourist destinations. The project should depict themes which are not common in this part of the world. The project should focus on environment, marine ecology, man and ocean. There is also a need to provide a wide range of social amenities.

The oceanarium development project proposed forms the country's first such initiative. Hence the observations of the present study may be useful in planning oceanariums in other parts of the country also. However the response of target population towards oceanariums may vary very much with location, time, facilities intended to be provided etc. and hence the results of the present study must be approached with reservation for use in other areas.

5. Acknowledgement

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6. References

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