

# Backwater Tourism : RT Initiatives and Socio- Environmental Dynamics

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The Vembanad Lake is an iconic tourist place and an identified Ramsar Site. Over the years, it has been touted as an established backwater tourism region. Vembanad Lake is also the biggest fresh water lake in Kerala and the people around are profoundly dependent on its offerings for their livelihood. Kumarakom, the premier backwater tourism destination in the region is listed as part of the Responsible Tourism (RT) initiative of Kerala Tourism. An in-depth enquiry has brought to light the road blocks with respect to the RT initiatives and the thematic analysis and inferences shall strengthen the blueprint so as to enable the planners, policymakers, and tourism service providers fine tune the societal dynamics as well as take remedial measures for the preservation of the depleting lake ecosystem in a sustainable manner.

**Key words :** *Backwater Tourism, Responsible Tourism Initiative (RT), Wetlands, Ecosystem, Ecological Threats, Environment Pollution, Preservation, Sustainable Development.*



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The paradigms of tourism are undergoing certain marked shifts; world over. The scale of tourism development and tourists' footfalls at the global level is quite impressive. According to UNWTO, in 2015, international tourist arrivals touched 1,186 million and are forecasted to rise to 1.8 billion by 2030. Thus, the tourism phenomenon can be expected to continue to expand as more people in more countries around the world have growing affluence and time to travel. Domestic tourism is even more significant than international, with estimates pointing to 4 billion domestic tourists' worldwide. The neo forms of tourism are slowly but steadily gaining traction. An explorative dimension has started to rule the roost as regards the vibrant and varied tourism offerings dished out by fascinating global destinations. The experiential aspects of tourism have been leveraged by Destination Management Organizations (DMO's) to greater effect so as to woo the various segments of tourists. Through the ages, water bodies have mesmerized tourists across continents. Destinations possessing marine resources are rapidly growing and the

impacts of tourists' activities are posing serious concerns to planners and developers. However, there are scores of examples where tourism has produced positive results in aqua-based tourism destinations in terms of associated infrastructural developments, enhancement of standard of living of the host communities, eco-cultural revival, and resource protection. Furthermore, the silver lining here is that tourism brings forth an agenda for the legitimate protection of water-based resources and the emergence of more conservation advocates and projects. Rather than putting its weight on mass tourism, the need of the hour for fragile destinations such as backwater regions like wetlands is to focus on alternative tourism practices. The value of the world wetlands is ever increasing and receiving due attention as they contribute to a healthy environment in many ways (Paul et.al 2011). It is also observed that urban wetland act as a haven for many species of flora and fauna, stabilize the local climate, help in flood control and replenish ground water, and also it is important for carbon sequestration and emission. Wetlands are amongst the most productive of the world's ecosystems, providing services such as water, food, construction materials, transport, and coastline protection, as well as provide important opportunities for tourism and recreation, which are also defined as 'ecosystem services'. Wetlands and Wetlands associated tourism are enamoring forms of tourism which configure leisurely cruise through the lakes, rivers, or backwaters, and the experience linked dimensions of adventure water sports activities. Projections of tourism and ecological organizations such as UNWTO, IUCN, etc., vouch for the fact that many segments of tourists evince interest towards wetland and wetland related tourism activities. At present in India only 50% of the wetland remains. They are disappearing at a rate of 2% to 3% every year (Surker.D).

In India, the state of Kerala which is often described as '*the favorite child of nature*' possesses a niche identity owing to the extensive backwaters and blue lagoons that dot the coastal belt. Kerala is among the few states renowned for wetlands and more importantly for its scintillating backwaters. Kerala has a long coast line of 580 km (360 miles) entrenched with beautiful sandy beaches, 44 rivers and 10 lakes, (41 west flowing rivers and 3 east flowing rivers, viz, *Kabani, Bhavani & Pampar*). The important stretch of this unique water world is the 168 km expanse

from Kollam to Kottapuram, declared as a National Waterway. ([http://www.kerenvis.nic.in/Database/Lakes\\_1634.aspx](http://www.kerenvis.nic.in/Database/Lakes_1634.aspx))

The number of rivers and lakes establishes that the state is rich in water potential. Besides, canals, springs, waterfalls, rivulets, marshes, vernal pools, bogs, and mangroves adds to the wetland potentiality of Kerala. As regards the tourists' arrivals to Kerala in 2015, the State was ranked 7<sup>th</sup> (4.2% of the total foreign tourist visit in India). The foreign exchange earnings during the year 2015 stood at Rs.6949/- crore, which record an increase of 8.61% over the previous year. While the total revenue generated from tourism was Rs.26689.63/-crore. The Kerala Tourism Policy document's projections of 2012 targeted an annual growth rate of 15 percent in foreign tourists' arrivals and expect to receive 3 million tourists by 2021. On the Kerala front, the planners are looking forward to achieve an annual growth rate of 7 percent for the next decade and host 18 million domestic tourists by 2021. (Source: [www.keralatourism.org/tourismstatistics.pdf](http://www.keralatourism.org/tourismstatistics.pdf)) Kerala has been in the forefront in offering finest travel and hospitality experiences to the visitors. The cultural and biological diversity of the wetlands as a whole incredibly represents the invaluable wealth that sustains the hosts and guests, both physically and emotionally.

### **Wetland Tourism – World Scenario**

The global importance of wetlands came into limelight after the Ramsar Convention. Around the globe, there were much hue and cry to protect the wetlands and flora and fauna directly or indirectly associated with it. The Mission of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world. Giving more importance to Wetlands and Wetlands associated tourism, UNWTO and the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention signed a Memorandum of Cooperation in February 2010 as the starting point for effective and fruitful synergy. Particularly, UNWTO mooted the theme of "*Wetland Tourism and Recreation*" for the Ramsar's 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of the partners in Bucharest, Romania and the World Wetland Day 2012 was dedicated to the theme "*Wetlands & Tourism-A Great Experience*". Wetlands are among the most productive of world's ecosystems providing a diversity of ecosystem services that sustain all forms of

lives. These include *Cultural Ecosystem Services* such as the aesthetic, recreational, and spiritual values manifested by any wetland and it is these services that will go on to explain the popularity of wetlands as tourist destinations, attracting millions of visitors every year. Some of the most important wetland destinations across the globe and its geographical and tourism importance are (a) Everglades, (United States of America), 6,21,000 ha of the wetland consists of fresh water and wet prairies, subtropical forest, salt marshes, mangrove forests, beaches, dunes, brackish water estuaries; (b) Sooma Wetlands (Estonia) 39,639 ha, famous for its raised bogs, rivers, swamps, forests, flood plains, and meadows; (c) Skocjan Caves (Slovenia), 41,300 ha, having a unique geographical system like river catchments with meadows, forest plains, karst and under water cave system; (d) Ichkeul (Tunisia), 12,600 ha lake surrounded by Mediterranean scrubs and forests; (e) Pantanal (Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay) which is one of the largest and best preserved wetlands in the world, covering a total area of 1,50,000 km<sup>2</sup> and its complex system of marshlands, flood plains, lagoons, and interconnected drainage lines are home to over 658 species of birds, 190 mammals, 50 reptiles, 270 fish species and a truly outstanding 1,132 species of butterflies. Pantanal is also a renowned Jaguar Tourism destination; (f) Ibera Marshes (Argentina) 13,000 ha, configures lakes, marshes, rivers and forests; (g) Nakuru (Kenya) 18,800 ha, renowned for shallow alkaline lake in an enclosed basin surrounded by marshes, grass lands and forests; (h) Abrohlos Marine National Park, Brazil 91,300 ha consists of coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangrove beaches and sand banks; i) Tso Moriri (India ,J.K & Ladakh) 12,000 ha in high altitude consists of fresh water lakes and marshes; (j) Be Lake (Vietnam) 10,480 ha of freshwater lake surrounded by forests and limestone karsts and jaw dropping landscape.

## Literature Scan

### Wetland – Core Concepts

The geographical resource of Wetland is aptly distinguished thus: “*A wetland is a land which is wet*”. But not all wet lands results in a wetland. Why is this so? A wetland is found where the land is wet enough (i.e. saturated or flooded) for long enough to be unfavorable to most plants but are favorable to plants adapted to anaerobic soil conditions. As soil becomes increasingly wet, the water starts to, fill the space; between the soil particles. When all the spaces are

filled with water the soil is said to be saturated. In areas which are not wetlands, water drains away quickly and the soil does not remain saturated. However, in wetlands the water persists or drains away very slowly and the soil remains saturated or flooded for long periods. Soil in these conditions is said to be waterlogged. Depending on factors such as temperature, it usually takes a week or so for the plant roots and other living organisms in the soil to use up the oxygen, causing anaerobic conditions to develop in the waterlogged soil. The importance of wetlands got a global visibility after the famous Ramsar Convention which was held in Iran in the year 1971. The Ramsar Convention (1971) Article 1 (1) defines Wetland as “*area of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salty including areas of marine water, the depth of which at low tide do not exceed six meters. It may also incorporate riparian and coastal zones adjacent to wetlands and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than 6 meters at low tide lying within the wetlands. A Ramsar Site, or Wetland of International Importance, is a wetland area designated under the Ramsar Convention by the national government of a Member State. Currently there are over 2,000 such sites covering over 192 million hectares: an impressive global network of wetlands that meet criteria related to their biodiversity and uniqueness.*” Researchers often refer to wetland as ‘kidneys’ of the earth and forest as the ‘green lungs’ of the earth. The same concept has also been adopted by the European Commission, which groups the wetlands in Europe broadly as marine and coastal wetlands, estuaries and deltas, rivers and flood plains, lakes, freshwater marshes, peat lands and manmade wetlands (CEC, 1995). Cowardin et.al (1979) defines wetlands as “*the lands transitional between terrestrial land aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface, or the land is covered by shallow water.*” It includes three attributes that help to delineate a wetland: (i) the area must be permanently or periodically inundated or water must be present for at least seven successive days during the growing season; (ii) the area must support hydrophytic vegetation; and (iii) the substrate is predominantly hydric soils that are saturated or flooded for a sufficiently long period to become anaerobic in their upper layers. The following is a brief description of the major classes of wetlands under the Cowardin (1979) system. Marine - Open Ocean overlying the continental shelf and coastline exposed to waves and currents of the open

ocean shoreward to (1) Extreme high water of spring tides; (2) seaward limit of wetland emergent's, trees, or shrubs; or (3) The seaward limit of the Estuarine System, other than vegetation. Salinities exceed 30 parts per thousand. Estuarine - Deepwater tidal habitats and adjacent tidal wetlands that are usually semi-enclosed by land but have open, partly obstructed, or sporadic access to the ocean, with ocean-derived water at least occasionally diluted by freshwater runoff from the land. The upstream and landward limit is where ocean-derived salts measure less than during the period of average annual low flow. The seaward limit is (1) an imaginary line closing the mouth of a river, bay, or sound; and (2) the seaward limit of wetland shrubs or trees when not included in: (1). Riverine - All wetlands and deepwater habitats contained within a channel except those wetlands (a) dominated by trees, shrubs, persistent emergent's, emergent mosses or lichens; (2) which have habitats with ocean-derived salinities in excess of Lacustrine - wetlands and deepwater habitats (3) situated in a topographic depression or dammed river channel; (4) lacking trees, shrubs, persistent emergent's, emergent mosses or lichens with greater than 30% aerial coverage; and (5) whose total area exceeds 8 hectares (20 acres); or area less than 8 hectares if the boundary is active wave-formed or bedrock or if water depth in the deepest part of the basin exceeds 2 m (6.6 ft) at low water. According to Bacon (1987), recreational use of wetlands need not conflict with their conservation objectives. However, decisions concerning the protection of wetlands should precede recreational planning. From the utilitarian point, wetlands can be defined as transitional areas between permanently flooded deep water environments and well drained uplands that contribute to a wide array of biological, social, and economic benefits (Watzin & Gozzelink, 1992). Orams (1995) argued that ecotourism management strategies should attempt to move ecotourism experiences beyond mere enjoyment to a more active role which incorporates learning, attitude, and behavioural change. Through these desired objectives, the activities of visitors would actually contribute to the health and viability of the natural environment. The Boondall Wetlands Reserve has adopted such management strategies through the facilitation of education at the Visitor Centre. By providing financial support and/or labour through community involvement, visitors are assisting directly in the maintenance and

protection of the natural environment. The behavioural objective is more complex and difficult to measure, and is recognized as being a somewhat idealistic objective. Wetland ecosystems are such a complex resource. They account for about six percent of the global land area and are among the most threatened of all natural resources. Wetlands found in temperate climate zones in developed economies have long suffered significant losses and continue to face an on-going conversion threat from industrial, agricultural, and residential developments, as well as from hydrological perturbation, pollution, and pollution-related effects (Turner, 1991).

### Responsible Tourism

The responsible tourism concept mandates each tourism business to do their part and take responsibility for achieving sustainable tourism. Specifically, the 2002 Cape Town Declaration, formulated during the Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, argues that this form of tourism: minimizes negative economic, environmental and social impacts; generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities; improves working conditions and access to the industry; makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and also to the maintenance of the world's diversity while providing more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people; creates a greater understanding of local culture, social and environmental issues; provides access for physically challenged people and, is culturally sensitive and engenders respect between tourists and hosts and builds local pride and confidence. (p.3). In other words, responsible tourism helps "*create better places for people to live in and better places to travel and visit.*" (Cape Town Declaration 2002). In 2007, the Kerala government adopted "Responsible Tourism" (RT) as the cornerstone of its tourism policy and chose Kumarakom, Thekkady, Wayanad, Kovalam, and Bekal as pilot destinations for implementing the concept. The objective was to promote community engagement in tourism planning and programmes. The community engagement came through creation of micro enterprises, undertaking group farming, and setting up ethnic restaurants run by women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families.

## Research Design and Methodology

The researchers chose the qualitative method by reviewing and analyzing the media reports, published works, and research outputs and dossiers of consultancies and NGOs working in the field of Responsible Tourism such as EQUATIONS, DHAN Foundation, Ecosphere and Srishti. Tourism officials and industry practitioners were consulted over the social media platforms as well as over e-mail to reinforce the thematic analytical insights posited by the researchers and also to take resourceful views on the issues. In the present study, thematic and content analyses were used to scrutinize and infer the data acquired from report reviews and expert responses.

## Backwater Tourism Vistas in Kerala

Kerala is situated in the extreme south west corner of the Indian Sub-Continent. The *God's Own Country* comprises the narrow coastal strip surrounded by the Western Ghats in the East and the Arabian Sea in the West. Kerala comprises three natural divisions which are: (a) The High Land – The Western Ghats constitute this region; (b) The Low Land – it stretches along the coastal plain in the West, and (c) The Midland- in between the High Land and the Low Land which is rich in agricultural products. Besides the sea coast Kerala has a chain of lagoons and backwaters. They provide communication between different parts of Kerala. The most important lakes of Kerala are *Ashtamudi*, *Vembanad*, and *Sasthamkotta*. Backwater tourism has been positioned in the tourism map as the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of Kerala Tourism.

Kerala's centuries old backwater stretch over 900 km long snake their way across the land, sometimes seeping into the sea, then emerging and flowing on, bestowing fertility on surrounding villages and paddy fields. The merchant ships used to tread the backwaters carrying valuable articles of ivory, gold, coconut, rubber, and spices. The entire backwater stretch- some clogged over a period of time- act as vital channels for the transport of goods, people, and produces (<http://www.keralabackwater.com/tours/backwaters.htm>). The backwaters are sometimes the only link between remote villages and major towns. The backwater regions throb with enchanting cultural expressions and manifests. The tourists get invigorated by just experiencing the voyage through the poppling water relishing the lake side delicacies and delights. The lush palm

groves and lovely paddy fields offer spectacular visual treat. Tourists are found eagerly observing the practices along the shoreline such as pounding coconut husks for coir fiber, angling, etc. There are regular ferry services and cargo boats that ply to and fro from dawn to dusk. The smaller canoes also can be found operated by native village folks. Thatched country-side shops along the lake side offer fermented nectar with fried carps (*Karimeen*).

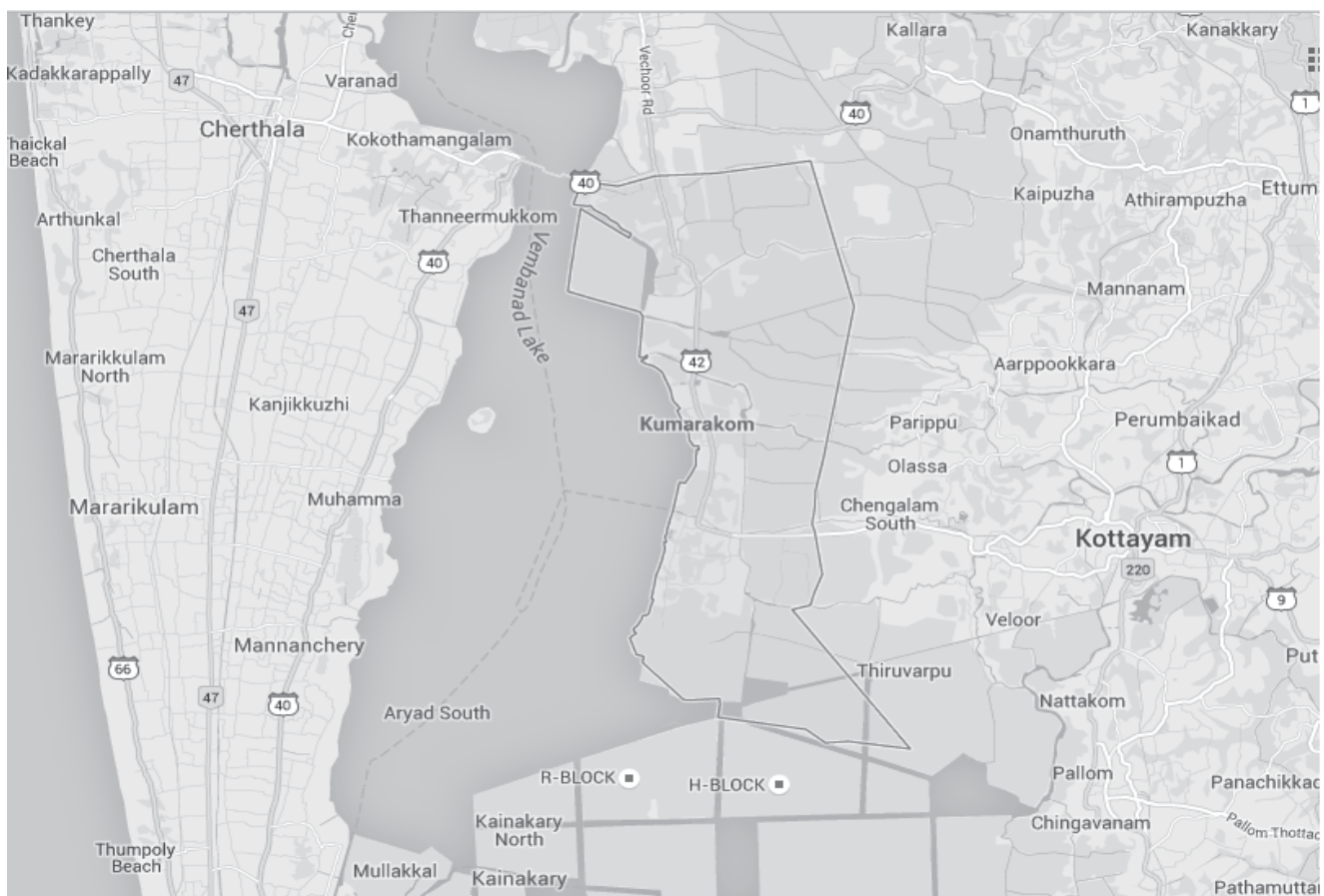
The history of water transportation in Kerala can be traced back to the mighty Chera period. It is believed that Chera kingdom had one of the impregnable and powerful navy and the boats were designed in such a way that it can carry 100 army troupes at a time. The renowned backwaters comprise an intricate network of lakes, canals, estuaries, and deltas of forty-four rivers that drain into the Arabian Sea. The important stretch of this unique water world is the 168 km expanse from Kollam to Kottapuram, declared as a National Waterway. As tourism activities started gaining momentum, local country boats were converted for sports and leisure activities. Today, the traditional boat (*Chundan Vallam*) is used during the annual boat races during the harvest festival of Onam. The age old cargo boats were converted in to luxury house boats (*known as Kettuvalloms in olden days*) in due course of time. Country boats are made using sustainable and local materials like jack wood, woven together with coir (*a coarse fiber found on the exterior of a coconut shell*) and sealed with fish oil. The house boats are usually made of Rose Wood. The boats normally have longevity of 50-60 years, with annual application of fish oil. Houseboats are in the current age constructed lavishly and configure one bed room to five bed rooms. Some houseboats provide facilities like restaurants, swimming pools, ayurvedic massages and cultural entertainments.

The backwaters were formed by the action of waves and shore currents creating low barrier islands across the mouths of many rivers flowing down the Western Ghats range. The backwaters have a unique ecosystem - freshwater from the rivers meets the seawater from the Arabian Sea. In certain areas, such as the Vembanad Kayal, where a barrage has been built near Kumarakom, salt water from the sea is prevented from entering the deep backwaters and lakes inside, keeping the fresh water intact. Such fresh water is extensively used for irrigation purposes. Vembanad Kayal is the largest of the lakes, covering an area of 200 sq.km, and bordered by Alappuzha (Alleppey), Kottayam, and Ernakulum districts. The gateway to the great backwaters is the magnificent

eight-armed Ashtamudi Lake in Kollam, which gets connected to the vast Vembanad Lake that flows through Alappuzha and Kottayam districts, before opening out into the sea at the Kochi Port. Home to more than 20,000 waterfowls - the third largest of such population in India, the Vembanad Wetland System is included in the List of Wetlands of international importance, as defined by the Ramsar Convention for the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands in November 2002. The backwaters in Kerala consist of Allapuzha, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Kuttanad, Kozhikode, Kasaragod, Kochi, and Kumarakom backwaters. Conjointly, Kerala Tourism has tagged it as *'The Most Fascinating Water World on Earth - The Great Backwaters.'*

Unique and Enthralling Offerings of Kumarakom Backwaters vis-a-vis Facets of Special Interest Tourism Kottayam district is popularly known as the *Land of Lakes,*

*Latex, and Letters.* Bordered by the towering Western Ghats on the east and the alluring Vembanad Lake and paddy fields of Kuttanad on the west, Kottayam is a land of unique characteristics. Panoramic backwater stretches, lush paddy fields, highlands, hills, and hillocks, extensive rubber plantations, places associated with many legends, and the high number of literate people have made Kottayam a vibrant district of Kerala with a special place in the realm of tourism. The State is an important trading center of spices and commercial crops, especially rubber. Most of India's natural rubber originates from the acres of well-kept plantations of Kottayam, also home to the Rubber Board. Kottayam is also called as *"Akshara Nagari"* which means the *'City of Letters'* considering its contribution to print media and literature. Kottayam Town is the first town in India to have achieved hundred percent literacy (*a remarkable feat achieved as early as in 1989*).



**Figure:1. Mapping Destination Kumarakom and its Location Features.**

Source: <http://www.google.co.in/kumarakom+map>

The name '*Kumarakom*' is said to have derived from the words '*kuminja*' (*heap*) and '*akam*' (*inside*), referring to a land formed by the accumulation of sediments. The island created by the deposition of mud and other materials through natural and man-made methods, is one of the world's most favorite tourist spots. The mythological name of "*Kumarakom*" was derived from the deity of the oldest temple Kumaran. '*Kumaran's Akam*' or place eventually became Kumarakom. In 1878, the marshy mangroves on the banks of the Vembanad Lake was cleared and replaced by coconut plantations. Kumarakom is situated on the banks of Vembanad Lake, 10 km west of Kottayam district located between. (09° 00' – 10° 40' N Latitude and 76° 00' -77° 30' E Longitude). It has an area of 51.67 sq.km (12,844 Acres) of which 24.13 sq.km is part of Vembanad lake, 15.04 sq.km spatially dotted by an island and 16 sq km is covered by paddy fields. Four important canals connect the lake to the sea namely (a) *Thottappally* (b) *Andhakaranazhi* (c) *Kochi* (d) *Azhikode*. The lake is fed by six major rivers from Western Ghats (a) *Achankovil* (b) *Pampa*(c) *Meenachil* (d) *Manimala* (e) *Muvattupuzha* (f) *Periyar*. The total length of the lake is 96km. South to Thaneermukkam Bund is 13,224 hectares and the area of the lake North of Thaneermukkam Bund is 23500 hectares. The designated area of the settlement of the village is only 12 Sq.kms. Due to its natural charm and aesthetic beauty, Kumarakom has gained momentum to entice both foreign and domestic tourists. The saying '*Kayal, Kuil, and Karimeen*' (*Lakes, Indian cuckoo—(Cuculus Micropterus)- and Pearl Spot- a highly sought after variety of wetland fish.* is popular keeping in view the offerings of Kumarakom. George Alfred Baker, an English farmer who arrived in India in 1857, reclaimed 500 acres of Vembanad Lake and made gardens and paddy fields. He built Baker's House, in which four generations of Bakers lived until 1962. Apart from the efforts of the Government to promote tourism in the area a crucial factor which has also contributed to the growth of tourism here is the mention of Kumarakom in one of the best seller novels of the modern century - *God of Small Things* by Booker Prize winning writer Arundhati Roy. Following the success of the book, the Ayemenem House, where Arundhati Roy spent her early childhood has been turned into a tourist attraction. In order to protect the ecology of the place, the Kerala government has declared Kumarakom as a Special Tourism Zone (STZ). In pursuance of the Declaration, any development against the ideals of sustainability is restricted in the area and the

projects must be approved by the government, as laid down in the Special Tourism Zone Act of Kerala. Kumarakom is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary is a noted bird sanctuary where many species of migratory birds visit. The charming backwaters have rich aquatic life. The Vembanad Lake/Vembanad Kayal spans several districts in Kerala. The Vembanad Wetland System covers an area of over 2033.02 km<sup>2</sup> thereby making it the longest lake in India and the largest in Kerala. The Vembanad Lake is approximately 14 km wide at its broadest point. The total area drained by the lake is 15,770 sq. km, which accounts for 40% of the area of Kerala. Fed by 10 rivers including the six major rivers of central Kerala namely *Achenkovil, Manimala, Meenachil, Muvattupuzha, Pamba and Periyar*; it boasts of rich bio-diversity; for instance, it is home to about 150 species of fish. The estuarine nature of the lake, with its rich sediment deposits, makes it a good habitat for Shrimp. Mulletts, Catfish, and Pearl fish that are seen in abundance. In the 70's and 80's, it was the only breeding area of Night Herons. Three major varieties of Mangroves are identified in Kumarakom. The backwaters also has more than 70 edible species, which include Crabs, Oysters, Clam, Milk fish, Scampi, Catfish etc. The Vembanad Lake, the largest backwater in Kerala, is habitat for many marine and freshwater fish species and it teems with Karimeen (Pearl spot also known as (*Etroplussuratensis*) Shrimp (*Metapenaeusdobsonii*) common name *Poovalanchemeen*. In view of the sparkling rise and achievements, destination Kumarakom bagged the National Tourism Award for the year 2012-2013 for *Best Civic Management Award for Kumarakom Grama Panchayat*.

#### **Pathiramanal or '*Island of Midnight Sand*'**

Pathiramanal or '*Island of Midnight Sand*' is known as a place where the King of Kochi traditionally made a night halt on his journey to South Kerala. The island is also known as *Anantha Padmanabhan Thoppu* which was purchased by *Chevalier (Orders of Knighthood) ACM Anthraper*, from Bhemji Devji, Trust of Cochin and was under the private ownership of Thaimattathil Family until the late seventies. The 19.6 hectares of land supposedly surfaced from the lake out of an earthquake. Pathiramanal Island is 28.505 ha. It is about 1.5 km from Muhamma Boat Jetty and about 13km from Allapuzha. The island is 5km from Kumarakom and situated 4km North West. Maximum length is 550m (SW-NE), Maximum Width 450m (SE to NE), Perimeter 1800m,

Estimated area: 19.6 ha and distance to the nearest mainland is 810m. The bird sanctuary extends over 14 acres (57,000m<sup>2</sup>), and came into existence following the preservation efforts initiated by the Government. Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary is the first scientifically formed and preserved bird sanctuary in India. The Pathiramanal Island is home to about 180 species of birds and 30 species of butterflies. The backwater between the island and the Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary is a favorite haunt of migratory birds from Siberia and Europe. A good number of migratory birds flock to Kumarakom, more particularly Pathiramanal. During migratory season an avian fauna called the 'Siberian Crane'- a special visitor- can be spotted.

Tourism in Kumarakom largely revolves around the backwaters of the Vembanad Lake. Several luxury and budget resorts are lined up on the shore side of the lake which provides tourists with facilities for boating, yachting and angling, and panoramic views of the lake. The other major attraction is the Bird Sanctuary which can be visited by canoes arranged by local fishermen at the entrance to the sanctuary. The best time to visit the sanctuary is morning and evening. A two-hour rowing canoe trip is quite cheap, and is best undertaken in the evening or early morning to avoid the afternoon sun. Bird sanctuary in Kumarakom is the first destination in India to implement Responsible Tourism practices. Kerala Tourism was awarded for its path-breaking 'Responsible Tourism' project in Kumarakom, which has successfully linked the local community with the hospitality industry and government departments, thereby creating a model for empowerment and development of the people in the area while sustaining eco-friendly tourism. Apart from carving a niche image as a spellbinding ornithologists' paradise, Kumarakom is also famous for its food festivals, flower shows, and exhibitions of indigenous works. The tourists to Kumarakom are given a taste of the Kerala village life. The traditional works such as coir making, cashew production practices, and retting of coconut husks allures tourists and therefore is main ingredients of the itineraries. The diversified attractions of Kumarakom are bundled by tour operators are providing special interest tourism packages.

#### **An Overview of RT Initiatives of Kerala Tourism**

The Department of Tourism, Govt of Kerala organized a State level consultation on Responsible Tourism in association with International Center for Responsible

Tourism- India (ICRT) and EQUATIONS (Equitable Tourism Options) on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2007. Furthermore, a (SLRTC) State Level Responsible Committee which met during April, 2007 decided to take up implementation of RT initiatives in phases. The Kerala government has also selected Great India Tourism Planners and Consultants (GITPAC) to provide technical assistance. (<https://www.keralatourism.org/rt-keralaupdate.php>).

The Tourism Department has identified 114 Panchayats across the state as potential RT destinations. It has also taken in to consideration the classification of hotels and resorts based on global Sustainable Parameters. *Kudumbashree* was appointed as a consultant for Responsible tourism on practical aspects. Kumarakom has initiated programmes like fallow land cultivation, establishing rapport with hotel industry and local producers, Kumarakom has started two innovative Village Life Experience packages under Community Based Tourism Products called "*Village Life Experience and A Day with Farmers*". Besides, promotion of local artifacts, promotion of cultural and ethnic tourism underpinning fair trade in tourism and efforts to create a positive image by showcasing the cultural expressions and social life have worked wonders. Energy saving measures and resource mapping were also carried out as part of the RT Initiative at Kumarakom.

#### **The Responsible Tourism Paradigm in the Backwater Destination**

The current study is to examine how far the RT initiatives and the subsequent socio-environmental impacts have influenced backwater tourism in the wetlands of Kumarakom. The progressive and promising agenda of Responsible Tourism are investigated. The RT agenda envisaged minimizing negative economic, environmental, and social impacts; generating greater economic benefits for local people; enhancing the well-being of host communities; and improving working conditions and access to the industry.

Sometimes Responsible Tourism can be termed as a "Triple Bottom Line" (TBL) with spotlight on Economic Responsibility, Social Responsibility & Environmental Responsibility. (<http://www.ibrc.indiana.edu/ibr/2011/spring/article2.html>).



The concept of responsible tourism was mooted from 1996. Albeit, it was after the Cape Town Declaration of 2002 that a clear picture of responsible tourism including its aims and factors was devised. Kerala has emerged as one of the prime tourism trendsetters in the country. The quick and easy availability of natural resources, skilled man power, supportive entrepreneurial community, strong local self government, civil society organizations, multitude of micro enterprises, streams of professionals and academicians, and responsible media and responsive tourism industry provide the state an ideal setting to implement and practice responsible tourism. The first projects of responsible tourism in India were implemented in the State and it stands much acclaimed today. Inspired by the Second International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations concluded in Kochi, Kerala on the 24th of March 2008 the Kerala Declaration impelled a pro-active plan directed towards the stakeholders in tourism. The State Level Consultation Workshop was thus organized in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram. Responsible Tourism (RT) initiatives of the Government of Kerala were started on 7 February 2012. Mr. Harold Goodwin, Director, International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT), UK launched the Responsible Tourism Classification Standards. Responsible Tourism (RT) - an innovative and far-reaching concept of Kerala Tourism –completed its pilot program last year, with noticeable achievements. Being the pilot phase, it was then implemented only in four destinations viz. Kovalam, Kumarakom, Thekkady and Wayanad. Later on Kumbalangi in Ernakulum, Vythiri and Ambalavayal in Wayanad and Bekal in Kasargod were enrolled. Among these destinations Kumarakom evolved as the successful model for responsible tourism and was honored by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India for the best Responsible Tourism Initiative in Kerala. Based on recommendations of the State Level Committee which reviewed the experiences of Responsible Tourism during the pilot phase, Responsible Tourism is now becoming a reality, across the State. The RT Classification will be a self assessment module with four key parameters -sustainable management, socio-cultural responsibility, economic responsibility and environmental responsibility. The criteria for classification are developed in line with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC). Already 13 resorts at Kumarakom, the pioneer in RT and winner of the coveted UNWTO Ulysses Award for innovation and public policy in governance under the tourism category have

fetches a niche image for the destination. The government is working on the classification of home stays and houseboats. The seven existing RT destinations did a combined business of Rs. 3.50 crore during the last tourism season with Kumarakom alone contributing Rs.1.50 crore. The government targeted Rs.10 crore by the end of the tourism season in 2014. The social aspects focus on sustaining traditional livelihood by integrating practices like coir making, toddy tapping, pottery and net fishing into tourism packages and ensuring proportionate distribution of revenue among the community members. Promoting arts and culture by attracting tourists to watch traditional art forms in the natural settings rather than serving it in capsule form at the resorts they stay is another focus area. Responsible Tourism at Kumarakom started on December, 2007; but it was officially inaugurated on March, 2008. As the local self body holds the key position in the works, the hurdles in the formative stages were resolved and responsible tourism was effectively boosted. Moving towards the second year, responsible tourism at Kumarakom is slated to be a big success. As regards women empowerment, around 900 women directly involved in the production processes and made revenue within a small period of time. With respect to the employment opportunities, responsible tourism focuses on the economic participation of local people as direct owners in the business of tourism and not just as beneficiaries of charity. Local self bodies also succeeded in propping up profit oriented production and sales at Kumarakom. With the cooperation of the State Tourism Department and Grama Panchayat, 15 hotels and as many resorts joined the responsible tourism team over a period of time. In the year 2008, Responsible Tourism Destination Cell has been incepted synergizing the technical, economic, social, and environmental aspects and thus more core and augmented tourism services were made available. Under the leadership of *Kudumbasree nine Karshaka Samithis* were formed in Kumarakom and one in a nearby place *Manjadikkare*. The functioning of small scale *Kudumbasree* units of altogether 250 members, home stead farming performed by 512 families and *Karshaka Samithis* with 450 members' uplift the production and sales dynamics of responsible tourism at Kumarakom. To match demand and supply, an agreement was made with hotels and resort groups on the purchase of vegetables, fruits, eggs, meat and milk from the villagers. Specific arrangements are made for regular supply of quality items by the *Kudumbasree* units.

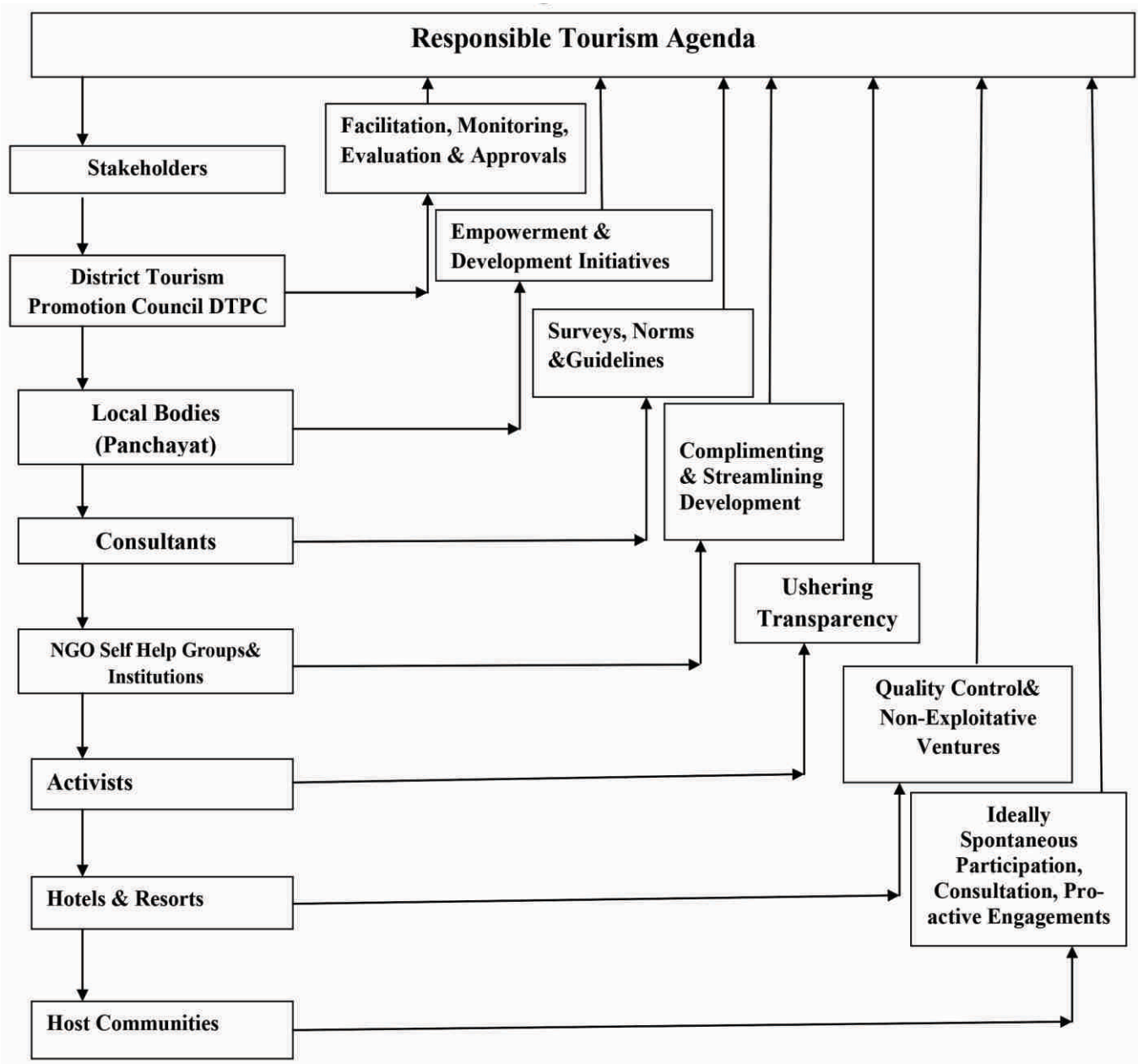
### **Inferences and Discussions**

Backwater tourism is indeed the USP of Kumarakom as evidenced by the success of RT initiatives, resource protection, and socio-economic development. The dying art forms are ardently revived, for instance coir making, souvenir making, making of cane furniture and lanterns, etc. Self-help groups are very active in Kumarakom and they are empowered to a very great extent. Most of the investments are found to be productive, but caution has to be exercised in the sanction of more projects. Decentralization, if ideally practiced can bring efficient results. Entrepreneurs in tourism can be locally drawn as they have both the potential and indigenous know-how. Industry players can capitalize on the RT initiatives and join together, pool in resources and effectively market the destination rather than making individual efforts. RT directives strongly recommend only eco-friendly projects in Kumarakom. It is essential for the long-term success of backwater tourism in the destination. The RT agenda should be fullproof to thwart any attempt to commodify cultural symbols and embodiments and violation of social and cultural codes and exploitation in myriad ways. Furthermore, displacement of host population for tourism projects should not be permitted at any cost. An entrepreneurial vision and management has to be further nurtured as part of the RT agenda. Moreover, the agenda must enhance its focus on micro enterprises which can infuse stability to the destination. Documentation of the resources of Kumarakom must become an integral part of the RT practices. Ethical conduct of business must be diligently monitored. Environmental auditing is a key part of RT agenda and it is necessary to give prospective directions. Visitor management strategies are to be well-designed in the RT agenda of Kumarakom. Permit system may be introduced to regulate tourist traffic. Appropriate local controls and positive checks can prevent socio-environmental exploitation. RT initiatives are designed to elevate tourists' experiences and have attained certain crucial goals. Responsible tourism agenda can ameliorate the capacity building endeavours of the destination.

### **Major Findings and Suggestions**

RT initiatives have helped Kumarakom as a destination to maintain its environment pristine and pollution free. The

service quality leaves much to be desired and hospitality aspects can be strengthened by offering adequate training to the host community. The use of motorized boats needs to be restricted in the areas in proximity to the wetland. Excessive tourism needs to be curtailed by making soft tourism the norm; preventing quarrying, construction works, depreciation of floral coverings, etc., in the wetlands. Care has to be taken to avoid filling of mangrove swamps. Construction of groins and piers, trampling, and collection of marine artifacts from the wetland hampers the sustainable progress and counteract preservation efforts. A conducive environment has to be maintained for the flocking migratory birds. The local bodies must ensure solid waste management. The resorts, hotels and ayurvedic establishments must not channelize their sewage outfall to the water bodies. Sewage management and effective treatment must be given due importance. The consultation of all stakeholders including the host communities is of paramount significance and so are capacity building programmes and skills development endeavours for artisans, weavers, craft-makers, taxi drivers, guides, resort staff, tourism police, etc. The tremendous opportunities for investments have to be tapped, though in a sustainable manner. Community Participation and holistic involvement along with synchronized decision making have to be at the crux of the RT action plans. Frequently organized skills development workshops can do a world of good to service delivery part and give ample fillip to tourism advancement of Kumarakom. Authenticity of tourism resource stewardship has to be attended meticulously. Tourist guides can be selected from the local community and given professional training. The planners and designers of Kumarakom have to put forward many innovative ideas to sustain the development by linking ecology, planning, and protection. Consultants must be engaged to conduct feasibility and technical viability studies including (EIA) Environment Impact Assessment. The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) needs to be determined in Kumarakom. RT initiatives have made tourism a social and environmental force in Kumarakom. Finally, the host communities can be actively engaged in pro-environment resource conservation ventures like organic farming and renewable energy conservation in Kumarakom.



**Figure - 2**  
**A Proposed Model Framework for Responsible Tourism Agenda in the Backwaters and Wetlands of Kumarakom.**

### Proposed Model Interpretation

While examining the contours of the study area in consonance with the dynamics of responsible tourism, the profound roles of stakeholders mooted to be very crucial, have surfaced. The District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) of Kottayam district is the premier public sector concern which may be empowered to invite tourism projects strictly conforming to the environment impacts- stated as within its ambit and as per the norms; identify the potential areas; design campaigns at the local level; approve the projects and award them to the investors based on merit; facilitate infrastructure development; and from the point of sanctioning the project, monitor and evaluate the overall functioning. The local bodies like Panchayat need to be empowered to innovate in the realm of tourism in staging novel eco-friendly practices and cultural forays, issue licenses to micro and small scale enterprises in tourism, and also advance the development initiatives. The dire need for in-depth technical and viability studies for eco-friendly tourism are highly essential, which can contribute to the blueprint of sustainable development. Consultants with requisite expertise could be engaged to conduct EIA and similar studies to unveil the multi-dimensional footprints of tourism in the backwaters of Kumarakom. The focused pragmatic groups, maybe the NGO's and local self-help groups can usher in newer conservation paradigms and ingrain the same with the ongoing plan. The stark role which may be donned by the activists with respect to accomplishing transparency in all socio-economic and environmental aspects of the tourism activities was quite obvious during the course of this study. The hotels and resorts need to lay ample stress on quality control ensuring the avoidance of green washing ventures which was found to deliver substantial impetus to the backwater tourism assets linked to the wetlands of Kumarakom. The destination has garnered steam owing to the thrust laid on tourism by the host communities. The nuanced approaches as regards destination planning and management undoubtedly warrant the pro-active participation; not a coerced one but spontaneous participation of the local residents. Engaging the indigenous vibes will definitely boost the facets of tourism in the backwater tourism haven.

### Conclusion

Wetland is fragile natural resources .At the same time it has a spectacular charm to be promoted as a tourism site. This is owing to the fact that wetland attracts migratory birds, is instrumental in the sustenance of myriad flora and fauna, and offers the apt background for lot of activities such as angling that amuses the tourist. Backwater tourism is deemed to be the USP of Kerala tourism and the districts of Kottayam and Alleppey are the focal point of backwater tourism offerings, Kumarakom a renowned tourism heaven in Kottayam possesses a significant part of the Wetland which is identified as Ramsar Site in the year November 2002. Backwater tourism gives ample fillip to the local livelihood activities. It is a prime revenue earner for the host community of Kumarakom in many fold ways. Concerns over tourism depreciating/adversely affecting the environmentally fragile wetland resources of Kumarakom arose from various quarters following which the place was designated as a Responsible Tourism destination. This study delves on the strides taken by Kumarakom in the realm of tourism by imbibing the ideals of Responsible Tourism. Sustainable Resource Management has received remarkable thrust due to the Responsible Tourism initiatives in Kumarakom. The Private sector enterprises are showing more sensitivity towards the ecological and environmental aspects while the local community proactively engages in offering tourist amenities without compromising on resource depletion. Yet, the monitoring mechanism needs to be strengthened to maintain consistency. The reviews pertaining to secondary data sources namely the study reports on Kumarakom indicate that it leaves much to be desired when it comes to enforcing and regulating development in favour of conservation of environment. Responsible Tourism can leverage environment education which can for a very great extent address such challenges as world over innovative and environmentally sensitive tourism projects, are gaining traction. The role of public sector agencies and NGO's would be to strengthen the arms of the host community.

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