

The Need for Eco-Orientation: Unwarranted Tourism, Unsustainable Development and the Erosion of Wayanad's Ecological Inheritance

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Abstract

The Wayanad landslide is more than just a geological event; it's a clear and tragic sign of serious problems caused by unsustainable development, especially the unchecked growth of tourism in fragile ecological zones. This paper examines how economic growth driven by a form of development focused on tourism revenue can harm natural systems, making them vulnerable to disasters. By critically analyzing the social and economic factors behind the surge in tourism in Wayanad, the paper argues that the landslide serves as a strong warning against development models that ignore ecological limits and favour short-term economic benefits over long-term environmental health. Ultimately, it advocates for a completely new sustainable development approach—one that protects ecological integrity, supports local communities, and strictly limits forms of tourism that threaten the natural resources vital to the land's prosperity.

Key words: Development, Sustainability, Eco-tourism, Wayanad, Landslide, local knowledge, economic growth

Development: Tourism as Panacea?

'Development' is arguably the most talked-over and sought-after 'entity' in the contemporary world. Governments everywhere in the world proclaim 'development' as one of their key agendas. As the economist H.W. Arndt once stated, 'development' seems to have "come to encompass almost all facets of the good society, everyone's road to utopia" (*Economic Development 2*). It designates a positive change towards the prosperity and material well-being of a society. Professor Gilbert Rist contends that 'development' itself is a buzzword whose actual meaning is elusive, but which takes on a multitude of positive connotations with the underlying assumption "that ... tomorrow things will be better, or that more is

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essentially better" ("Development" 485). The normative and moral appeal of the lexicon of development is so powerful that, despite its previous failures and destructive upshots, it continues to evoke hopes for a future Utopia.

Beneath the veneer of universal aspiration and optimistic projections, the concept of 'development' is increasingly subjected to critical scrutiny. Though its foundational assumptions have always been questioned, scholars from diverse disciplines have particularly equated it with Western models of industrialization and consumerism. This limited assumption often overlooks the ecological boundaries of a finite planet, leaving power in the hands of a few 'privileged' ones. Development becomes a promise for "more," an act done at the expense of others through extraction, exploitation, and imposition. Consequently, the very idea of a singular, universally applicable path to development is being deconstructed, giving way to a more nuanced understanding of diverse, context-specific aspirations for well-being that extend beyond mere material accumulation.

Scholars, scientists, and activists across the world vociferously argue that chasing the chimera of development is unsustainable and irrevocably damaging to Earth's ecosystem. It has resulted in depletion of Earth's vital resources and the pollution of water, air, and soil beyond recovery. Due to the impact of collective human activities like burning of the fossil fuels on an unimaginable scale during the last one and half century and primarily during the last fifty years, the earth is said to have entered a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene, 'the age of humans' in which the humans have become geological agents, capable of intervention in the geophysical foundations of the planet. This has harrowing implications as life on earth is dependent upon a delicate balance of what planetary scientists call 'the planetary boundaries' such as mean temperature, biodiversity, stratospheric ozone layer, ocean acidification, phosphorus and nitrogen cycle, availability of freshwater, forest cover, etc., and any imbalance in them poses great risk for the existence of life on earth.

The current change in climate has been referred to as "a civilizational wakeup call," which must be responded to with full conviction and without any delay, as it would be too late to stop its harrowing consequences (Klein 25). Klein posits that such a response must dethrone the ideology of 'market fundamentalism' as it is this ideology which has led to breaking all the previous records of carbon emission on the one side, and on the other, systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change (18-19). Climate scientists began to unambiguously warn about the global warming

caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions in the late 1990s, before the consolidation of neoliberalism at the global level. The first UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, commonly known as Rio Earth Summit, recommended reducing carbon emissions by 2 percent every year until 2005. But thanks to the vehement lobbying of neoliberal think tanks and global warming denialists, the world went in an opposite direction which has brought it today to a much grim situation where immediate "revolutionary" changes in the fossil-fuel based economic model are required to be of any effect (Klein, *This* 55-56). As the climate scientist Michael Mann puts it, "There's a huge procrastination penalty when it comes to emitting carbon into the atmosphere" (qtd. in Klein, *This* 55).

The dominant discourse on development, particularly within regions possessing significant natural and cultural capital like Wayanad, advocates tourism and commercialization of resources as a panacea for unbridled economic growth and social upliftment. This seductive proposition, however, frequently disregards the inherent ecological vulnerabilities of such areas and the inherent dangers lurking in unchecked tourism that might inevitably result in environmental degradation. The allure of increased revenue, job creation (often precarious and low-paying), and infrastructural development can blind policymakers and stakeholders to the long-term ecological costs associated with a rapid and often poorly planned influx of visitors. This paper posits that the Wayanad landslide, in its devastating immediacy, compels a critical reassessment of this seemingly benign development trajectory, forcing us to confront the uncomfortable reality that certain forms of tourism, particularly when they disregard ecological carrying capacities and local contexts, can actively undermine the very foundations of sustainability.

What happened in Wayanad?

Situated high in the Western Ghats, Wayanad offers its visitors a perfect blend of mist-laden peaks and plunging valleys. Often swathed in ethereal clouds, its hills are carpeted with tea and spice plantations, their fragrant breezes meandering through the dense forests. Gurgling streams, crystalline lakes, deep ravines, lofty ridges- this rugged terrain is home to a rich biodiversity, a sanctum sanctorum where ancient trees stand sentinel over a land steeped in natural grandeur. Wayanad's attraction as a tourist destination stems from this confluence of ecological endowments coupled with a rich socio-cultural heritage. Historically, Wayanad bears the imprint of ancient civilizations, evidenced by prehistoric rock engravings

that offer tangible links to early human occupation and societal structures. The synergistic interplay of these natural and cultural elements positions Wayanad as a compelling site for both leisure and scholarly exploration.

On July 30, 2024, a catastrophe of harrowing magnitude descended upon Wayanad. Unleashed by relentless torrential rains, birthed a monstrous landslide, which violently reshaped the very fabric of the district. The once-tranquil villages nestled within Meppadi panchayat – Punjirimattom, Mundakkai, Chooralmala, and Vellarimala – were brutally consumed by surging rivers of mud, colossal boulders, and splintered debris, transforming idyllic hillsides into chaotic expanses of raw destruction. The singular vital artery, the bridge that tethered the community of Mundakkai to Chooralmala and the wider world, was summarily obliterated, severing the fragile threads of communication and trapping bewildered residents within a terrifying isolation. The landslide's ravenous maw swallowed the Vellarmala Government Vocational Higher Secondary School, a poignant symbol of community and future, and laid waste to the encompassing terrain, leaving behind a raw, agonizing scar upon the earth – a desolate tableau painted in the somber hues of ochre, russet, and umber.

The aftermath of this cataclysmic event unfolded as a tableau of profound human suffering and ecological devastation. The sheer volume of displaced earth—estimated at several million cubic meters—transformed familiar contours into an alien, treacherous landscape, making rescue efforts exceptionally arduous (Yunus et al. 2025). The obliterated bridge, a symbol of connectivity, became a chilling testament to the landslide's force, rendering entire communities incommunicado and exacerbating the initial chaos. Beyond the immediate physical destruction, the emotional and psychological toll on the survivors is immeasurable; homes, livelihoods, and communal bonds were not merely damaged but profoundly fractured, leaving behind a pervasive sense of loss and uncertainty about the future (Das 2024).

The destruction of Vellarmala Government Vocational Higher Secondary School does not merely denote the loss of a building; it signifies a profound disruption to the community's future and aspirations. Be it Wayanad or any other region, schools are not just educational institutions; they serve as hubs for community gatherings, act as emergency shelters, and serve as symbols of collective progress. The obliteration of a school, particularly in a region already grappling with socio-economic challenges, compounds the long-term recovery efforts, potentially displacing educational opportunities for an entire generation and further entrenching cycles of vulnerability (Sphere

India 2024). More than a geological phenomenon, the landslide here left indelible marks on the collective psyche of the region, embodying a raw, unhealed wound.

This tragic incident, however, demands a deeper examination of the intertwined vulnerabilities of human settlements and natural ecosystems in highly sensitive geographical zones. It serves as a grim forewarning against the complacent acceptance of development models that fail to adequately account for environmental fragility and climate change-induced hydrological shifts. The Wayanad landslide is a salient case study in the urgent need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of land-use planning, disaster preparedness, and resilient infrastructure development in regions inherently susceptible to such catastrophic events. The memory of July 30, 2024, will undoubtedly persist as a poignant reminder that the pursuit of progress must be meticulously aligned with the imperative of ecological stewardship and human safety (Petley 2024).

Unsustainable tourism and its aftermath

The Wayanad disaster inherently stems from a false development strategy that focused on a set of unsustainable tourism promotion practices. The catastrophic landslide underscores a fundamental breach of the concept of "ecological carrying capacity" (E.C.C), defined by the World Tourism Organization as the maximum number of people that can visit a destination without causing irreparable damage to the physical, economic, and socio-cultural environment, or an unacceptable decline in the quality of the visitor experience (UNWTO 2004). The concept of "carrying capacity" has often been disregarded in the relentless pursuit of increased tourist numbers. Consequently, the very attractions that draw tourists – the pristine landscapes, the biodiversity, the tranquility – begin to degrade, ultimately undermining the long-term viability of the tourism industry itself. The landslide can be interpreted as a catastrophic consequence of exceeding these ecological limits, a violent manifestation of the accumulated pressures exerted by unsustainable land-use practices driven, in part, by the demands of an ever-increasing and often ecologically insensitive tourism sector.

The surge in tourism in Wayanad, while undoubtedly generating economic activity, inevitably brought with it a significant and often detrimental ecological footprint. Unregulated construction of resorts and homestays, often encroaching upon forest areas and agricultural lands, led to habitat fragmentation, soil erosion, and increased pressure on water resources. The influx of vehicles resulted in air and noise pollution, while improper waste

disposal caused the contamination of land and water bodies. Moreover, the very activities promoted by tourism, such as trekking in sensitive areas without proper guidelines or the commodification of local cultural practices, degraded the natural and cultural capital that initially attracted visitors (Butler, "The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution and Implications for Management of Resources").

The pursuit of immediate economic gains through intensified construction and road networks gradually eroded the region's natural resilience. Given Wayanad's location within the ecologically fragile Western Ghats, a designated biodiversity hotspot where even minor environmental perturbations can trigger cascading ecological failures (Gadgil 2011), such measures would invariably result in unforeseen consequences. The incident compels a re-evaluation of development paradigms that prioritize quantitative growth metrics over qualitative assessments of environmental health and community well-being.

As a direct consequence of a radical shift in the use of land, that has consistently prioritized short-term economic gains over long-term ecological stability, the area has become prone to extreme vulnerability. The conversion of biodiverse natural forests into monoculture plantations, such as tea and coffee, while economically profitable, has significantly altered the hydrological regime of the region. Forest ecosystems, with their multi-layered canopy and intricate root systems, act as natural sponges, effectively intercepting rainfall, promoting infiltration, and minimizing surface runoff (Manoj and Lal 2020). The removal of this protective cover exposes the soil to the direct erosive force of torrential rains, leading to accelerated soil degradation and increased susceptibility to shallow and deep-seated landslides (World Weather Attribution 2024). The enormity of the monsoon rains in Wayanad, a phenomenon invariably linked to climate change, then becomes the ultimate trigger, pushing an already compromised landscape beyond its critical threshold.

Furthermore, the Wayanad disaster throws light on the inherent contradictions arising out of a nexus between global tourism trends and localized environmental vulnerabilities. The unbridled expansion of tourism infrastructure- the proliferation of resorts, homestays, and ancillary services, often situated in precarious, landslide-prone areas and involving extensive earthworks and the removal of vegetation, directly destabilizes the terrain. These interventions disrupt natural drainage patterns, create artificial load on vulnerable slopes, and introduce impermeable surfaces that increase surface runoff, thereby augmenting the hydrostatic pressure

within the soil layers (Rajendran and Rajendran 2017). The rising demand for "experiential" and "eco-friendly" travel often results in a commodification of natural landscapes that damages delicate ecosystems. The paradox lies in the fact that the very beauty of Wayanad, which draws tourists, is simultaneously being undermined by the unsustainable practices employed to accommodate them. This highlights a critical failure in land-use planning and regulatory oversight, where the pursuit of 'development' proceeds without adequate consideration for the inherent ecological sensitivities of the Western Ghats. The "job creation" and "revenue generation" arguments, while superficially appealing, often fail to account for the precarious nature of employment in the tourism sector and the externalization of environmental costs onto the local populace, who bear the brunt of ecological disasters. The landslide, therefore, is not merely a natural calamity but a socio-ecological one, deeply intertwined with human decisions and systemic failures to respect ecological limits.

The catastrophe that happened in Wayanad calls for a revamping of existing development policies in ecologically vulnerable regions. A dynamic policy framework for holistic development must be implemented, one that takes into account ecological carrying capacity assessments, promotes reforestation practices that enhance soil stability, and curtails the construction of buildings in delicate and vulnerable areas. Additionally, all stakeholders and visitors must be educated on the ecological peculiarities of the region and thereby urged to embrace an 'eco-tourist' approach; a form of tourism that is nature-friendly, sustainable while simultaneously beneficial for the local communities. The lessons from Wayanad are unambiguous: genuine prosperity in fragile landscapes is inextricably linked to ecological stewardship, and any deviation from this principle risks catastrophic consequences (Gadgil and Guha 1995).

A Fine Balance: Ecology, Development, and Catastrophe

The delicate balance between ecological fragility and development imperatives in Wayanad created a landscape inherently susceptible to the kind of catastrophic event witnessed in the landslide. The region's steep slopes, high rainfall, and underlying geology already present natural challenges. However, decades of deforestation, often linked to agricultural expansion and the clearing of land for tourism-related infrastructure, have significantly destabilized the soil structure and reduced the natural capacity of the land to absorb water. Unregulated construction on unstable slopes further exacerbated this vulnerability, creating conditions ripe for landslides during periods of intense rainfall.

The situation at hand requires a revamping of simplistic notions of development that prioritize economic growth in isolation from ecological considerations. A paradigm shift towards a truly sustainable development, a more responsible and ecologically conscious approach, would diminish the impact of the consequences at hand. This new development paradigm should necessarily be in alignment with the inherent interconnectedness of human well-being and environmental health. It must, most importantly, acknowledge that ecological degradation ultimately undermines long-term economic prosperity and social stability (WCED, *Our Common Future*). Thrust must be given to rudimentary economic indicators that integrate the principles of E.C.C., community resilience, and environmental justice. This invariably necessitates a stringent regulatory framework that impedes construction in ecologically sensitive zones, revamps existing tourism infrastructure, and collaborates with local communities to co-create development pathways that prioritize ecological integrity and sustainable livelihoods over short-term financial gains. The Wayanad landslide serves as an urgent and tragic reminder that the pursuit of "utopia" through unchecked development can, in fact, lead to dystopian consequences, urging a profound reorientation in humanity's relationship with the natural world (Shiva 2005).

Sustainability redefined: Measures to be taken

The tragic events in Wayanad necessitate a radical reimagining of sustainable development in ecologically sensitive regions. This requires a fundamental shift away from a tourism-centric development model that prioritizes visitor numbers above all else, towards a more holistic and ecologically conscious approach. Such a paradigm must prioritize the long-term health and resilience of the ecosystem, empower local communities as stewards of their natural resources, and rigorously regulate, if not outright curtail, forms of tourism that demonstrably contribute to ecological degradation.

This reimagining could involve several key strategies:

Implementation of strict rules regarding ecological zoning: Ecologically sensitive zones where development, particularly tourism-related construction, is severely restricted or prohibited, should be identified, delineated, and set apart.

Fostering community-based ecotourism: Priority should be given to forms of tourism that are locally owned and managed, which directly benefit

local communities, and are designed to minimize environmental impact. While celebrating the region's natural and cultural heritage, this approach emphasizes smaller-scale, low-impact tourism that fosters genuine cultural exchange and ecological awareness (Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?*).

Ecological Restoration and Conservation: Investments should be made in projects that actively restore degraded ecosystems. Reforestation initiatives and the protection of critical habitats should be prioritized. This can enhance the resilience of the landscape to natural hazards and provide long-term ecological benefits.

Diversification of Livelihoods: Local communities should be encouraged to move beyond an over-reliance on tourism by supporting and promoting diverse and sustainable livelihood options, such as sustainable agriculture, forestry, and small-scale enterprises that are in tune with local ecology.

Empowering Local Knowledge and Participation: Attempts must be made to recognize and value the traditional knowledge practices of local and tribal communities, actively involving them in decision-making processes related to development and conservation.

Beyond these specific strategies, a broader policy framework must be formulated to mitigate the true environmental costs of development; a framework built on environmental impact assessments (EIAs) that are genuinely independent and transparent. Furthermore, it must be ensured that the recommendations given are legally binding, rather than merely advisory. Financial measures such as ecological taxes on unsustainable practices and subsidies for nature-friendly initiatives can accelerate development through sustainable pathways. Action must also be taken to curtail political interference and vested interests that prioritize short-term economic gains over the long-term well-being of the region.

Furthermore, effective implementation of these strategies necessitates significant investment in capacity building at the local level. Local communities must be given proper training in practices such as sustainable tourism management, entrepreneurial skills, and ecological restoration techniques to promote diversified livelihoods. Simultaneously, strengthening local governance structures, ensuring transparency, and fostering accountability are integral to putting an end to unsustainable development practices. In short, development in Wayanad, or any ecologically fragile zone for that matter, must be grounded in a holistic approach that is not dictated by external market forces but shaped by the collective wisdom

and aspirations of its inhabitants, grounded in a deep respect for its unique ecological heritage (Chambers 1997). The Wayanad landslide serves as a poignant and urgent call for this radical transformation, reminding us that genuine progress is inextricably linked to ecological integrity and social justice.

Finally, Wayanad's development trajectory must be placed within the larger context of systemic issues of climate change. Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and developing early warning systems for extreme weather events have become indispensable components of a truly sustainable future for Wayanad (IPCC 2021). Wayanad must follow a development trajectory that should be propelled forward with a collaborative effort between local communities, regional authorities, national governments, and international organizations; a development pathway framework that can navigate the complexities of environmental change while fostering equitable and resilient development. Recovery from the collective trauma of the landslide and fear of future disasters is the issue of the hour. These can be achieved only through a fundamental paradigm shift, adopting a mindset that unwaveringly proclaims man's symbiotic relationship with nature.

Conclusion: Learning to be "environmentally oriented"

The Wayanad landslide stands as a stark and tragic testament to the profound consequences of development paradigms that prioritize short-term economic gains, particularly through unsustainable forms of tourism, at the expense of long-term ecological integrity. It serves as a visceral indictment of approaches that fail to internalize ecological limits and disregard the delicate balance of nature. Moving forward, a truly sustainable development trajectory for ecologically sensitive regions like Wayanad demands a radical shift in perspective. It requires us to be, as American eco-critic Lawrence Buell puts it, "environmentally oriented", a move away from the seductive allure of unchecked tourism towards a more holistic and ecologically conscious approach (*Environmental* 7-8). It is an approach and a way of life that prioritizes the health and resilience of the ecosystem, empowers local communities, and rigorously regulates human incursions. A rethinking of development in the face of the climate crisis should not be merely stuck at the level of discourse; instead, subsequently be translated into practice through the above-mentioned methods.

The cracks beneath the canopy of Wayanad's once-pristine landscape offer a profound, albeit painful, lesson: genuine and lasting prosperity can only

be built upon a foundation of ecological sustainability, where the well-being of both people and planet is inextricably linked. The alternative, as the landslide so tragically demonstrates, is a future marked by increasing ecological vulnerability and the devastating consequences of our unsustainable choices. □

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