



## SPORTS TOURISAM IN KERALA- A STUDY ON TRADITIONAL SNAKE BOAT RACES

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### Abstract

Kerala, Gods own country situated on the tropical Malabar coast of southwestern India, has the privilege of tourism trendsetter in the nation is also well-known amongst tourists for its boat races. Boat racing is amongst the widely held water sports conducted during the monsoon period in some of the topmost lakes and back waters in Kerala. Being a sports-tourism product, boat races of Kerala needs sustainable and responsible tourism practices to reduce the multidimensional impacts on the host community and participants. For the sustenance of these cultural regattas as a unique tourism product of Kerala, it is mandatory to ensure the quality of facilities and services to the sports tourists. In this study, the researcher is highlighting the need for the sustenance of the boat races in Kerala as a sports tourism product by giving effective recommendations to reduce the negative impact. Also, giving special attention to identify issues of host community and the conduct of boat races in different tourism centers in the state. In this study, the researcher is adopting a historical descriptive, analytical and socio-economic approach method. Apart from literature, information has been collected through personal interactions with the officials of state tourism departments, local community members and stakeholders of the industry. The findings of the study shows that the lack of infrastructure facilities for the sports tourists at the venue, lack of government funding for the conduct of the event, issues of transportation to the venue, lack of support of

the local bodies, lack of planning and support from the tourism promotion council, environmental issues, and lack of quality services are the major issues related to boat race as sports tourism product in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Boat Races, Sports Tourism, Champions Boats League, Stakeholders and Government Polices.

### Introduction

Kerala is a prime high-end tourism destination in the Indian subcontinent and has been rated as "one of the fifty destinations to be visited in one's lifetime" by the National Geographic Channel. The State has so many attributes such as highest literacy, life expectancy and lowest maternal and child mortality rates. The state's most attractive sectors are its wonderful climate, backwaters, local cuisine, culture, arts and crafts, historic monuments, religious rituals and traditional accommodation facility. Kerala's vast coastlines made so many panoramic beaches. Year old Ayurveda treatment facilities, festivals, heritage sites are other major wonder of Kerala.

Although sport tourism is a relatively new concept, people traveling to participate and watch sport dates back to the ancient Olympic Games, and the practice of stimulating tourism through sport has existed for over a century. The term 'Sports Tourism' basically means tourism that is based on the theme of sports. It refers to a specific travel outside the usual environment for either passive or active involvement in competitive sport. Many people



prefer short or long vacation to break the monotony of life. However, as generation grows older, the definition of sport tourism shifts towards exploration. Countries such as US, the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Australia are popular for sporting events and attracts domestic and international visitors from all over the world.

As a unique tourism product boat races in the back waters of the Kerala is also getting popularity recently as a sports-tourism product for the sustainable tourism development of the state. Within the past five years, however, sport and tourism professionals have begun to realize the significance of boat races and sport tourism potential in Kerala. As part of responsible tourism, sport tourism product are to be strengthened by the government and also should invest more towards infrastructure development of sports tourism centers. Global sports tourism market demand has been negatively affected by the Covid 19 –outbreak. However, as things returned to normal, sports tourism expected to fully recover by 2022.

Over the years the snake boats have become an icon of pride of Kerala. Number of major and minor boat races are conducted on the land. Most of them occur during the Onam, (July to September) the harvest festival of Kerala. Each event has a unique beauty and is associated with a historical or mythical event. Though all the boat races are exciting, some of them are more popular and thus they attract huge crowds. During the boat races, the venues become places of great festivity and revelry. The boats of various types warring on the water, the vanchippattu (the rhythmic songs of the oarsmen) echoing in the atmosphere, the villagers roaring encouragement and the various art and musical performances make for unmatched pageantry. Villagers, irrespective of caste and

religion, take part in these boat races. The trials for the prestigious competitions are held a month before the races. Some of the famous boat races in the land are:

TABLE 1  
MAJOR BOAT RACES HELD IN KERALA DURING  
AUGUST SEPTEMBER

S.No	Name of Boat Race	Date & Place of Conduct of the race	District
1	Champakulam Moolam Boat Race	Race held in the month of June- July every year, at River Pamba, Champakulam	Alappuzha
2	Nehru Trophy Boat Race	The race held on the second Saturday of August every year at Punnamada lake	Alappuzha
3	Aranmula Boat Race	Race held on the day of the Uthrittathi asterism in the Malayalam month of Chingam (15 August and 20 September) at River pamba located at Aranmula region	Pathanmthitta
4	Paiyppad Boat race	The race held during the months of August or, September at Payippad River	Alappuzha
5	Kumarakaom Boat Race	The race held during the cmonth of August/ September in connevtion with Onam festival conducted at kottathodu in Kumarakaom	Kottayam
6	Kallada boat race	The race held on 28 days after Onam at Kallada River at Munroe Thuruthu,	Kollam
7	Kandassankadavu Boat Race	The race held on Thiruvonam day of the Onam and race held at Enamakal Lake and Conolly Canal in Kandassankadavu	Trichur
8	President's Trophy Boat Race	The race held on November 1st every year at ashtamudi lake	Kollam
9	Tripprayar Boat race	The race held in the month of September every year during onam festival at Conolly canal Tripprayar,	Trichur
10	Pamba boat race	The race held in Ulthradam, one of the most auspicious days of Onam at pamba river at Neerattupuram,	Pathanamthitta
11	Sreenarayana boat race	Annual boat race is organized in the month of September in Kannety (Pallickal) River, Karunagappally,kollam during the season of onam Festival.	Kottayam
12	Thazathangadi boat race	The festival is conducted during the Onam season at Meenachil River	Kottayam
13	Gothuruth Boat race	The race held in the month of September and the event takes place in one of the tributaries of river Periyar	Erenakulam
14	Pravam boat race	The race held on 28 September in the Muvatupuzha River at Piravam	Ernakulam



TABLE 2  
MINOR BOAT RACES HELD IN KERLA FROM JULY TO  
SEPTEMBER

S.No	Name of Boat Race	River /lake in which conducted	Place of conduct
1	Paravur Boat Race	Paravur river	Kollam
2	ATDC Boat Race	River Pamba	Alappuzha
3	Rajeev Gandhi trophy boat race	River pamba	Pulinkunnu
4	Neerettupuram Pampa Boat Race	Pamba river	Alappuzha
5	Kavanattinkara Boat Race	River Kavanar,	Kottayam
6	Kumarakom Arpookara Vanitha Jalamela	Kottathodu in Kumarakaoam	Kottayam
7	Mahatma Boat Race	River Pamba	Alappuzha
8	Kottapuram Boat Race	Muziris Kottappuram Waterfront	Kottapuram
9	Kodungallur and Kumaranasan Smaraka Jalotsavam	Pallana river	Alappuzha
10	Indhira Gandhi boat race	Kochi lake	Kochi
11	Kaithappuzhakkayal Boat Race	Kaithappuzha Lake	Ernakulam
12	Biyyam Kaayal Boat Race,	Biyyam kayal	Malappuram
13	Uthara malabar Boat Race,	Thejaswini Lake,	Kasaragod
14	EK.Nayanar Trophy -Malabar jalotsavam	Mangalassery, Kuppam river	Kannur
15	Kuppam Boat Race	Kuppam River,	Kannur District
16	Kattampally Boat Race	Valapattanam River	Kannur District
17	Madayi Boat Race	Pazhyangadi River	Kannur District

### Methodology

This study is done essentially by secondary data sources and observations during the research. The secondary data sources include previous journals, souvenirs, government publications, previous boat race news, magazines and different online articles. In this study, the researcher is adopting a historical descriptive, analytical and socio-cultural approach method. Apart from literature, information has been collected through personal interactions with the officials of state tourism departments, port department, irrigation department, local community members and stakeholders of the industry. All the information is collected from different source with a deep study to understand the boat races in Kerala. Study is done by understanding the historical importance of boat races in Kerala and various challenges facing the conduct of boat races and the present government policies and practices for the promotion of boat races in the state. Some

information has been also taken from the online articles and adventure activity sites.

History and importance of boat races in Kerala Historically backwaters in Kerala are prominent on the sports tourist trail as it is one of the major centers in Boat races. The backwaters in Kerala consist of Alappuzha, Kottayam, Trivandrum, Kollam, Kuttanad, Kozhikode, Kazaragod, Cochin and Kumarakom backwaters. Once the southwest monsoon starts to recede, the backwaters of Kerala come alive with spectacular boat races. Boat races are among the grandest traditions still alive and thriving in Kerala. People go to these events in large numbers to watch these snake shaped beauties go head to head in rhythm to the old boat songs sung in full volume. These snake boats or 'chundanvallam' are up to 100 feet long and bring the serene backwaters to life. There are various types of boat races played out every year in Kerala backwaters; each one has its individual story of derivation with a lot of mythological tales and traditions attached. Rendering to historical sources, boat races initiated as a means to resolve numerous arguments between the former kings and chiefs. Boat races have been a characteristic part of temple celebrations prepared by religious groups.

The snake boats are originally known as 'chundan vallam'. As per the old tradition King Devanarayana of Chembakassery, from Alappuzha lost a fierce battle at the hands of his rival over four centuries ago. Frustrated and furious, the king then decided to strengthen his naval prowess to teach his rivals a lesson. The king decided to turn to ancient texts for advice on how to strengthen his navy. Designed during the era of King Devanarayana of Chembakassery, the elegance and grace of the majestic boats



made it the pride of the people. Years after the wars came to an end, the boats continued to play a major role in the lives of the people. These boats are now used for boat races. Thus, from the pages of age-old wisdom and tradition was born the Chundan Vallam or the snake-boat of Kerala. Built according to the specifications of the Sthapathya Veda, an ancient treatise for the building of wooden boats, the Chundan Vallam is an excellent example of ancient Kerala's prowess in naval architecture. A typical Chundan Vallam is 138 ft long and can accommodate more than 100 oarsmen. Snake-boat, so called for its resemblance to the shape of a hooded snake, is the traditional naval boat of Kerala. The local populace called it by the pet name Chundan Vallam, because of the resemblance of the boat's prow to that of a bird's beak. Today, every snake boat represents a village and the boat races have today become an integral part of the cultural identity of the land. A single snake boat can occupy 100 oarsmen and thus a boat race is the largest team sport in the world

For boat races, two men stand in the central portion of the Chundan Vallam, which was once used to position the canon and beat the Odithatta (fire platforms) with poles and sing the Vanchippattu (songs of the boatmen) to maintain the rhythm of rowing. While the strongest oarsmen occupy the bow portion, the stern is manned by six well-built Amarackars (helmsmen) in standing position, who help to steer the boat. The person at the highest point of the boat is the chief oarsman. The largest team sport in the world, the Chundan Vallamkali or the snake boat race are of two types. One is the competitive type like the Nehru Trophy Boat Race and the other is the ritualistic type, like the Aranmula Boat Race. While the former is a

blend of fun, frolic and passionate competition the latter has more to do with devotion, rituals and prayers. Palliyodams are Aranmula's unique snake boats. Devotees of Aranmula Sree Parthasarathy temple regard it as the divine vessel of the deity. It is unique in its shape and structure that only the amidships portion of the boat touches the water.

5. Impact of boat races on host, participants, sports tourists and stakeholders and the sports tourism development in the state

In the back waters of Alapuzha, Ernakulam, Kollam districts of Kerala, the local community is strongly dependent on tourism related activities for their livelihood. One or two members from each family are presently engaged in tourism activities. This shift of employment from the agriculture sector to the tourism sector highly influenced the local community's perception of the traditional agricultural activities. Because of tourism development in the backwater area, happened the multidimensional impact on the region. To make boat races of Kerala a hallmark sports event and attracts international sports tourists the state has to adopt a strategic plan through implementing sports tourism promotion policies.

Domestic tourist arrival in Kerala in 2019 stood at 18384233 as against the figures of 15604661 during corresponding period in 2018, registering an increase of 8.07 per cent especially in Ernakulam, Alappuzha, idukki. districts. The state witness its highest foreign tourist influx in the 1quarter of the year with 35.99% of visits, followed by 29.5% in the last quarter. On the domestic front, tourist arrival are highest in the 4th quarter constituting 30.08% followed by 2nd quarter constituting 24.39% through the boat races in Kerala government should aim to hump up the tourism numbers during the boat race seasons



to make Kerala a round –the – year tourist destination. Despite the killer floods, the state had recorded a 6 per cent increase in both footfall and revenue in 2018. Looking the current trends we expect 10-12 per cent growth in both arrivals as well as earnings in the fiscal year.

TABLE 3  
KERALA TOURISM STATISTICS 2018-2019

Tourist Arrival and Earnings	2018	2019	% Variation over tourist arrival	% Variation over foreign exchange/revenue generated
No of Foreign tourist arrival to Kerala	15604661	1189771	8.52 %	
Foreign Exchange Earnings	8764.46 Cr.	10271.06 Cr.		17.19%
No. of Domestic Tourists in	15604661	18384233	17.81 %	
Total revenue generated (Direct and Indirect)	36258.01 Cr.	45010.69 Cr.		24.14%

Boat races are an integral part of the traditional festivals in the state during the harvest season. Snake boats are owned by 'karas' with each boat having anywhere between 100 and 1000 shareholders. Every year for the maintenance of 'chundans' remain on shore- taking care of any splinters, replacing the copper nails that hold the planks together, tightening everything up, coating the boat in a layer of fish oil, coconut shell, and carbon, mix with eggs to keep the wood strong and boat slippery in water- will continue to be done by the owners and shareholders. The village carpenters carries out annual repairs and people take pride in their boat, which is named after and represent their village. Rowers have had to forego their seasonal windfall while coping with decreasing income from their daily-wage jobs during the training and competitive season. Each year thousands of rowers and hundreds of boats from surrounding villagers come to compete for the honor of being the fastest boat in this region,

and are conducted by boat race committee in the villages. Most of the boat clubs that race the 'Chundans' has been under crushing debt. Boat clubs have had to push on their debt for a further year. Mostly because there's no real revenue in snake boat racing. Today, stakeholders, rovers and organizers of these traditional boat races in Kerala are facing various issues to sustain their traditional cultural festival of the region.

Now, private players have entered their own boats this lower demand and it is the stakeholders who approached the club to take their boat out and bring glory to their 'karas'. It is in this financial model that the CBL stepped in and the idea behind the league was to introduce a degree of financial stability to the stakeholders as well as boost tourism and in turn revenue to the state coffers. Earlier the snake boat race was not lucrative everyone was suffering losses. Presently, funding for the boat race in the state come from government of India, state tourism department, sponsorship and various other means like ticket sales etc,. The expenditure from government both in terms of money and effort, is considered as good investment. As a result the number of domestic and international sports tourist arrival in the state increases every year.

In the study, it is evident that the economic impact of boat race as a sports tourism product in the state arises primarily from the consumption of tourism products and services like travel, accommodation, restaurants, infrastructural facilities, transportation means, house boats, aquatic festivals, monuments and attracting events like Kathakali, Mohiniyattom etc. Not only this drives the economy that includes the tourist facing sectors but indirectly, it also supports the people working in allied sectors. The



investment by the government in supporting the boat races like Nehru trophy boat race every year is a strategic activity with clear eye on return aiming from an economic as well as cultural point of view. Boat races as sports tourism product has a significant economic impact. However, the exact impact of boat races is difficult to quantify.

The boat races have a major impact on the development of cultural tourism in the state. The boat race organizers are now popularizing the historic song Vanjippattu to attract tourists and trying to create the cultural image of Kerala in the minds of the tourists. These aquatic festivals not only give entertainments for the tourists but also the native people get ample opportunity for community oriented programs and events. The Boat Race is a symbol of the communal harmony prevailing in the state. During the boat race people of all castes and creeds, young and old, men and women irrespective of their age join together to sing and dance and make merry. What is lacking is a good management of the affairs relating the boat Race. The Government with the help of local bodies should make arrangement to address the issues facing the participating oars men, sports tourists and host community. Financial support and its proper management are to be given priority by the state government. The study found that in the existing situation the government should take further step to setup state-of-the art infrastructural facilities to attract foreign as well as indigenous tourists to witness these fascinating boat races for further boosting tourism in the state.

Boat races and major issues of sports tourism About 75000 foreigners are coming to the state to watch the boat race every year and an increase of 40 per cent has been recorded recently. In the study, it was noticed that

following issues are noticed by the researcher in this study for corrections.

Boat Race is not effectively advertised through Internet, International Channels, visuals and other relevant media which attract foreign tourists extensively.

The participating Boat Clubs cannot meet their expenses for the practice with the bonus given by the boat race Committee. They are also reluctant to participate in the competition mainly due to the insufficient amount provided to the winners.

The government is not taking any initiatives to form an effective boat race Management Committee with the Government nominees for its smooth running.

The uncomfortable seating arrangements in the galleries and the poor basic facilities such as latrines, toilets etc in the permanent stadium, poor management of the boat race by the boat race Committees.

The participants and stakeholders complained about the poor support that they receive from the government in the areas such as bonus for the participating boats, benefits for the oarsmen and cash prize for the winners.

The state has ample opportunity for sports and adventure tourism. The government should promote the sports tourism through an organization of the state tourism promotion council to resolve the day to day affairs properly.

The host community is facing the problems such as management of crowd, pollution, water scarcity, environment degradation, local transportation facilities, infrastructure facilities, proper support to the boat clubs for the maintenance of the boats and training the oars men.

The government should give financially assistance to all the oars men to support their lively hood.



Efforts are to be taken to minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people.

The state tourist agenda should promote ecologically sustained tourism, which focuses on the local culture, volunteering and personal growth of the local population.

### Conclusion

The study has been done in an exploratory way and the main purpose of this study is to understand the different boat races held in Kerala and the impact on the host community, participants, sports tourists and stakeholders. Boat races are sports in which physical and mental preparation is necessary for doing it. The new trends in sports tourism activity played an important role in the tourism to attract more and more visitors. This activity's positive part is that it is environment friendly. Kerala tourism products like boat races attract a large number of domestic and international visitors which boosts the tourism in the state and their involvement in tourism provides a positive impact on the economy of Kerala. The Government of Kerala is also focusing on traditional boat races to promote and develop it on a higher level so that visitors get more relaxation and enjoyment.

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