

The Rise of Aquatourism in India: Integrating Conservation, Culture, and Community Development

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Aqua tourism (or aquatic tourism) is a branch of sustainable tourism that focuses on water-based environments, aquaculture systems, and aquatic biodiversity. Aqua tourism is specialized tourism focused on water bodies and aquaculture. While normal tourism is general tourism on land and culture-based attractions. Aqua tourism combines recreation + education + conservation, making it a sustainable tourism model within the Blue Economy framework.



History of Aqua Tourism

The concept of **Aqua Tourism**—also known as **Aquatic Tourism** or **Water-based Tourism**—has evolved over centuries, paralleling human interaction with aquatic environments for livelihood, transportation, and recreation.

Ancient and Early Developments

Human civilization has always been closely linked to water bodies. In ancient times, rivers, lakes, and seas served as major hubs for **transportation, trade, and livelihood**.

- **Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (around 3000 BCE):** The Nile and Euphrates rivers were used not only for irrigation and trade but also for **religious and leisure activities**, marking the earliest forms of organized water-based recreation.
- **Greek and Roman Civilizations:** Historical evidence indicates that **boating, fishing, and seaside bathing** were popular among the elite classes. Public baths and coastal resorts became centers of social life, representing early aquatic leisure culture.
- **Asian Civilizations:** In India, China, and Japan, rivers such as the Ganges and Yangtze held **spiritual and recreational significance**, with rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages around water bodies that indirectly promoted early forms of aqua tourism.

Medieval to Pre-Modern Period

During the medieval period, water-based activities were largely functional—used for navigation, fishing, and trade. However, by the 17th and 18th centuries, with the rise of European colonial expansion and maritime exploration, interest in marine environments increased.

- **European Seaside Tourism:** By the 18th century, coastal towns in Europe (e.g., Brighton in England, Nice in France) began to develop as health resorts, promoting sea bathing for therapeutic purposes.
- This era marked the transition of water bodies from utilitarian spaces to recreational destinations.

Types of Aqua Tourism

a) **Water-Based Adventure Tourism:**

Activities include boating, rafting, kayaking, snorkeling, scuba diving, parasailing, and jet skiing.

b) **Aquaculture-Based Tourism (Farm Tourism):**

Visitors experience fish farms, shrimp ponds, and crab fattening units, learning about breeding, feeding, harvesting, and aquaculture practices.

c) **Eco-Aqua Tourism:**

Involves visits to mangroves, wetlands, estuaries, and coral reefs for activities like bird watching, turtle nesting, and dolphin viewing.

d) **Cultural and Recreational Aqua Tourism:**

Showcases traditional fishing, seafood festivals, and boat races, reflecting the heritage of coastal communities.

Significance and Benefits of Aqua Tourism

a) **Local Economy Boost**

It enhances **local economies** through sustainable activities such as aquaculture-based tourism, boating, and eco-farm visits. These activities generate employment and promote rural development by increasing demand for local products and services.

b) **Sustainable Use of Resources**

Aqua tourism promotes the **responsible and long-term use of aquatic ecosystems**. It encourages practices that conserve biodiversity, prevent pollution, and protect sensitive habitats like wetlands, mangroves, and coral reefs.

c) **Visitor Education**

It provides **educational value** by increasing awareness about aquatic biodiversity, conservation, and sustainable aquaculture. Guided tours and interactive experiences help visitors understand the importance of maintaining aquatic ecosystem balance.

d) **Alternative Income Sources**

Aqua tourism creates **additional income opportunities** for coastal and inland communities. Locals can engage in services such as guiding, boating, homestays, and fish-feeding experiences, reducing dependence on traditional fishing alone.

Aqua tourism in India

The Department of Fisheries under the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) has data showing 11 “Integrated Aqua Parks” that are physically established in different states. There are 5,365 water parks in India (as of mid-2025). These are somewhat related (recreation + water) but many are amusement parks with slides etc., not necessarily eco-tourism / aquaculture-linked facilities. The government is investing substantial funds (e.g. “Cruise Bharat Mission”) to increase river cruise circuits, terminals, etc., which will increase aqua-tourism infrastructure.

Different states or sources will classify “aqua-tourism facility” differently. For example, does a boat ride facility count? What about a fish farm with visitor access? Many smaller facilities (boat rides, local water sports centers) are unregistered or not part of central databases.

Popular Water Parks (Aquaparks) in India

- **Adlabs Aquamagica (Imagicaa Water Park)** – Khopoli, Maharashtra
- **Ocean Park** – Hyderabad
- **Nicco Park & Wet O Wild** – Kolkata
- **Appu Ghar Oysters Water Park** – Gurugram, Haryana
- **Aquatica** – Kolkata
- **Queens Land** – Chennai
- **Funtasia Water Park** – Patna, Bihar
- **Maniar’s Wonderland Snow Park & Water Park** – Ahmedabad
- **World of Wonder (WOW)** – Noida

- **Wonderla** (Bengaluru, Kochi, Hyderabad)

Some of the major ones

Njarakkal Fish Farm (Njarakkal Aqua Tourism Centre)

- **Location** - Vypin Island, Ernakulam; ~44 acres water body; 3 culture ponds + nurseries; heart of aqua-tourism for Matsyafed.
- **Attractions** - Boating (pedal, row, coracle, water cycling, solar boats), angling, eating fresh fish, relaxing huts & bamboo huts, floating huts, fish jumping, walking around bunds, mangrove surroundings.
- **Current Issues** - Decline in visitors; facilities deteriorating (walkways, huts etc); competition/private water-tourism spots; weather damage etc.



Malippuram Fish Farm

- **Location** - Near Njarakkal; ~46 acres; part of Vypin / Elankunnappuzha Panchayat; close to Chappa Beach.
- **Attractions** - Similar set-up: boating, fish ponds, mangrove walk, seafood restaurant, pedal/row boat, fish jumping experience, huts, scenic backwater ambience.
- **Current Issues** - Some reports of mismanagement or not using full potential; infrastructure may need improvements.



Palaikkari Fish Farm (Chembu near Vaikom)

- **Location** - Kottayam district, near Vaikom; large “padasekharam” (~125 acres) including ponds and bund land.
- **Attraction** - Boating (pedal etc.), huts/swings, fish meals & snacks, seafood, welcome drink etc; relaxing farm experience, scenic view, possible stay or day-visit.
- **Current status** - Under development/upgrades; tariffs and package details known; maybe less busy than coastal ones

Vaikom Aquarium (Public Aquarium by Matsyafed)

- **Location** - Vaikom, Kottayam district; also, public aquarium section.
- **Attraction** - Exhibition of ornamental fishes; training in aquarium management; sales of ornamental fish and aquarium accessories.
- **Current status** - More specialized; not as much on boating or backwater farming but more aquarium culture etc.



Government Initiatives Promoting Aqua Tourism

1. Investment of ₹45,000 crore in River Cruise Tourism by 2047

The Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways has committed about ₹45,000 crore for developing river cruise tourism in India by 2047. Out of this, ₹35,000 crore is earmarked for cruise vessels, and ₹10,000 crore for cruise terminal infrastructure. Targets include increasing river cruise circuits, increasing number of terminals (from 15 now to about 185 by 2047), and expanding waterways used.

2. River Cruise Tourism Roadmap & “Harit Nauka” Guidelines

Along with the investment, the government has launched a River Cruise Tourism Roadmap, 2047 and Harit Nauka guidelines for green / sustainable inland vessels.

3. MoU between IWAI and Jammu & Kashmir Government

Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Jammu & Kashmir government to develop river cruise tourism on three National Waterways in J&K (Rivers Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi). Under this, ten floating jetties + land-side infrastructure (waiting halls, etc.) will be built; navigational aids, hydrographic surveys, dredging where required.

4. Cruise Bharat Mission / New Circuits, Terminals

Under “Cruise Bharat Mission,” plans are in place for developing 51 new river cruise circuits across 47 national waterways by 2027.

Also, increasing cruise voyages: e.g. 443 voyages in 2024-25 on national waterways (versus 371 previous year) indicates growth.

5. Yamuna Boat Tourism in Delhi

An MoU between five departments (Central & Delhi govt) to introduce boat tourism / ferry services on a 22 km stretch of the Yamuna (from Sonia Vihar to Jagatpur).

Features would include hybrid/non-polluting boats, jetties, navigational aids, shore facilities.

Conclusion

Aqua tourism represents a sustainable and innovative approach to utilizing aquatic resources for recreation, education, and livelihood generation. It harmoniously blends economic development with environmental conservation, offering visitors an opportunity to experience and appreciate aquatic ecosystems while supporting local communities. By integrating aquaculture, eco-tourism, and cultural activities, aqua tourism not only enhances public awareness about aquatic biodiversity but also provides alternative income sources for rural and coastal populations. Government initiatives, such as the establishment of Integrated Aqua Parks and Blue Economy programs, further strengthen its role in national development.

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