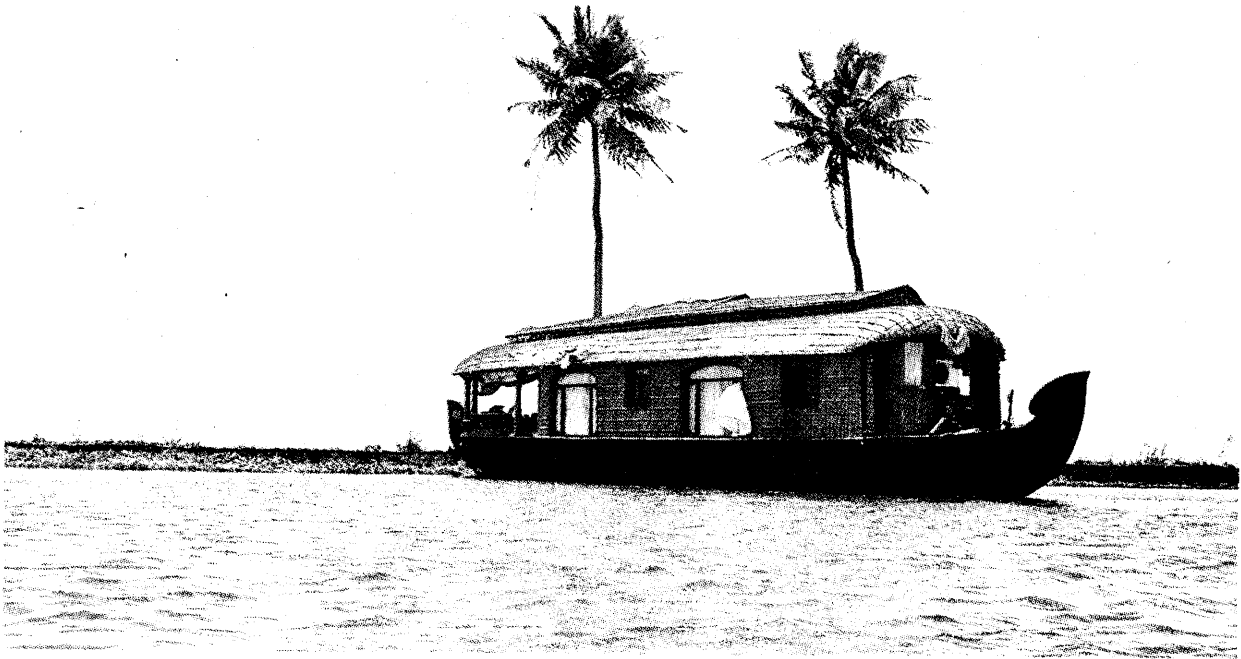


Pleasure trips prove a pain on Vembanad ecosystem



A houseboat sailing in the Vembanad backwaters. — FILE PHOTO

Lolling leisurely in a houseboat in Vembanad Lake is one of the delightful experiences offered by Kerala Tourism.

Tourists, both domestic and international, queue up for the joy ride and being pampered by Nature with its breathtakingly beautiful backwaters.

But these pleasure trips are leaving unpleasant impacts on the environment of the lake ecosystem.

The unrestricted operation of house boats is causing serious environmental impacts on the fragile ecosystem, including the dumping of toilet waste, plastic and oil pollution in the water body.

According to official figures, 493 houseboats are operating in the backwaters of Alappuzha, out of which 79

have not obtained the required licence from the Pollution Control Board. But the real number of the houseboats operating illegally would be much higher. Though known to all, the pollution issues caused by the houseboats have not been assessed till now, according to some experts.

Considering the gravity of the situation, the Directorate of Environment and Climate Change of the State government has decided to look into the environmental issues created by the houseboats. The directorate has sanctioned a research project to assess the effect of houseboats on the Vembanad Lake ecosystem.

N. Nandini Menon, a scientist of the Nansen Environmental Research Centre (India) and N.R. Menon, an

emeritus professor of the Cochin University of Science and Technology, are planning to take up a two-year-long study into the environmental issues plaguing the ecosystem.

The major pollutants discharged by houseboats into the lake include emissions and oil leakage from the outboard engines, plastic and other inorganic waste, sewage and other organic waste. Monitoring the pollutant discharge into the water body for a period of one year would help in assessing the carrying capacity of the lake with respect to houseboat tourism activities, according to Ms. Menon.

The study area includes the part of Vembanad Lake between Ponnameda to Thanneermukkom bund, along

which the majority of the houseboats ply. Monthly samples of water, sediment and biological material would be collected from these stations for one year.

Petroleum hydrocarbons in water and sediment, turbidity, organic carbon in sediment, pH, total and faecal coliform count and solid waste will be monitored. The phytoplankton, zooplankton and fish diversity of the region would be assessed to judge the organic health of the water body.

The data obtained from the field study would be used to measure the ecosystem health index of the region, according to the researchers. The social impact of the houseboats in the Kuttanad region will also be evaluated.

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