

THE HINDU

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Freeing themselves from COVID-19-induced lockdown curbs, some ecotourism centres, including Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR), are hoping to receive visitors soon.

Hiked fee, health check-ups, and strict physical distancing norms are awaiting tourists at these centres, where they could once stroll freely.

The lockdown culminated in huge revenue loss and denial of livelihood options to

hundreds of workers engaged by the Eco Development Committees (EDC) and Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS).

Employing tribespeople

The nearly 60 ecotourism centres of Kerala together employ around 5,000 persons, including tribespeople.

With the closure of ecotourism activities, the service of a large number of persons, who were otherwise dependent on tourism for their livelihood, were used for forest protection activi-

Lockdown results in revenue loss, denial of livelihood to workers

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ties, including fire protection, said a senior forest official. The employment of around 50 persons in the PTR for supporting tourism activities had to be limited to 15 days a month.

An order from the Chief

Wildlife Warden is required for resuming the activities, said K.R. Anoop, Field Director of the Reserve.

4,000 people a day

The PTR is one of the top revenue earners in the State with an average annual income of ₹13 crore.

During the peak season, the reserve attracts up to 4,000 people a day. Once the operations are resumed, strict procedures would have to be put in place for the visitors as well as employees, Mr. Anoop said.

The park administration has sought revision of boat and bus fares and entry fee as they can be operated only with half the capacity. A government order revising the fares is awaited.

Thermal scanners and steps for disinfecting the vehicles coming into the reserve have to be introduced. The employees should be provided with Personal Protective Equipment, which is cost-intensive, he said.

Besides the EDC and VSS, there are a few local bodies such as Kumily, Munnar and

Sultan Bathery that depend heavily on ecotourism centres for its revenue. The lives of millions of traders, workers, hoteliers and tourist vehicle operators of these local bodies have been in a quandary.

The Forest Department would review the situation in these centres, said Surendrakumar, Chief Wildlife Warden. Incidentally, the National Tiger Conservation Authority had issued an advisory to the tiger reserves which were planning to resume operations.