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Spatial Planning for Agro-Heritage Tourism: Integrating Spatial Characteristics and Stakeholder Perspectives in Kerala

Milna Jose
School of Architecture & Planning, Govt. Engineering College, Thrissur, Kerala, India

Abstract: ***Agro-heritage tourism is a form of tourism centered on traditional agricultural landscapes, local foods, and rural cultural practices.***
Such type of agricultural landscapes is globally recognized under GIAHS initiative by FAO. Kerala's agricultural landscapes are deeply rooted in traditional knowledge systems, biodiversity, and unique cultural practices, providing strong potential for the development of agro-heritage tourism as a sustainable tourism model.
Despite Kerala's rich heritage value, agro-heritage tourism in Kerala remains underdeveloped due to limited integration between the agriculture, culture, and tourism sectors.
Existing agricultural landscapes also lack coordinated spatial planning, adequate infrastructure, stakeholder alignment, and strategic marketing frameworks essential for sustainable tourism development.
Addressing this gap, the study first identifies the importance and tourism potential of Kerala's agricultural heritage systems and examines how spatial factors support agro-heritage tourism and how stakeholder perspectives contribute to community well-being and tourism development.
Using the spatial and stakeholder dimensions, the study reviewed international best-practice and analysed Kerala's own agro-heritage potential, along with relevant state policies and planning frameworks.
Based on these analyses, the study developed a multidimensional indicator framework integrating spatial and stakeholder dimensions to guide Panchayats and regional planning bodies in promoting sustainable agro-heritage tourism development in Kerala.
Keywords: Agro-heritage tourism, GIAHS, Spatial planning, Stakeholder integration, Sustainable tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

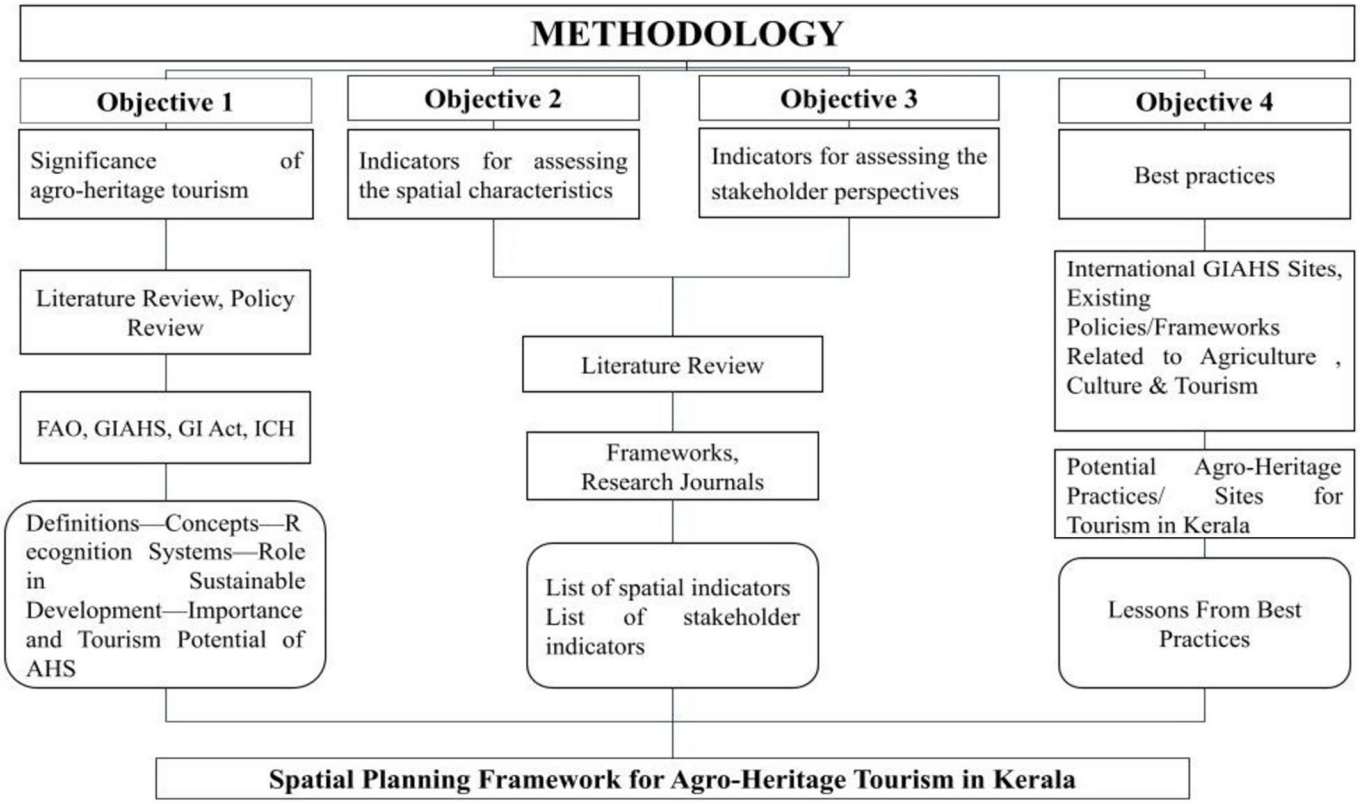
Kerala's agricultural landscapes, rooted in traditional knowledge, biodiversity, and cultural practices, offer strong potential for Agro-Heritage Tourism (AHT) as a sustainable, community-based model. However, AHT remains underdeveloped due to weak integration between agriculture, culture, and tourism sectors, along with limited spatial planning, infrastructure gaps, stakeholder misalignment, and inadequate strategic promotion.

Existing planning approaches largely overlook the spatial logic of agricultural heritage systems and the role of local governance. This study addresses four key questions: whether AHT is integrated into current spatial planning frameworks; what spatial characteristics influence its potential; what parameters shape stakeholder perspectives; and how spatial and stakeholder dimensions can be combined to strengthen planning approaches. The aim is to propose a spatial planning framework for agro-heritage tourism in Kerala by integrating spatial characteristics and stakeholder perspectives. The objectives include examining the significance of AHT for sustainable development, identifying spatial and stakeholder indicators, and evaluating best practices to develop a context-specific planning framework.

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II. METHODOLOGY

Figure 2.1 Research Methodology



III.LITERATURE REVIEW

Table 3.1 Definitions and Sources of Key Concepts Related to Agro-Heritage Tourism

Concepts	Definition	Source
Agricultural heritage	Historical practices and traditional knowledge systems related to food production.	*Agricultural Heritage. Sustainability Directory News, 2024.*
	Includes indigenous knowledge systems, traditional crop varieties, local breeds of livestock, water management techniques, and community-based farming models. Reflects the co-evolution of humans with nature, emphasizing harmony rather than domination. The scope ranges from seed-saving practices and organic fertilizers to spiritual and cultural rituals connected to farming cycles.	*Agricultural Heritage - Best Ag Notes*
Agro-Heritage Tourism	Attracted by traditional agriculture practices, flavourful food, and associated rural culture, visitors have experiences in an agricultural heritage setting within an attractive natural environment for education, experience, and recreational purposes. As a result, local communities should benefit through sharing their heritage with visitors.	*Tian, M., et al. (2016). Journal of Mountain Science, 13(3), 440-454.*

Table 3.2 Global and National Recognition Systems Related to Agro-Heritage Tourism

Recognition Systems	Definition	Source
Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)	Remarkable land use systems and landscapes that are rich in globally significant biological diversity evolving from the co-adaptation of a community with its environment and its needs and aspirations for sustainable development.	*Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), 2005.*
Geographical Indication (GIs) Tags	Sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities/reputations that are due to that origin.	*Geographical Indications: What do they specify?*
	An indication that identifies goods as agricultural, natural, or manufactured goods as originating/manufactured in the territory of a country/region/locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation, or other characteristic is essentially attributable to its geographical origin.	*The Geographical Indications Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999*
Intangible cultural heritage	Includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.	*What is Intangible Cultural Heritage? - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*

Recognition schemes enhance agro-heritage tourism by offering legal, institutional, and cultural recognition to traditional agricultural landscapes and practices. Programmes like GIAHS provide recognition to traditional farming systems that show distinctive characteristics of biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge, and sustainable farming practices. India has three GIAHS sites, including Koraput, Kuttanad, and Kashmir's Saffron Heritage. Geographical Indication tags offer recognition to region-specific products, thereby increasing the product's brand value and rural income levels. Intangible Cultural Heritage provides recognition to traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems. These approaches increase the recognition of traditional agricultural landscapes and practices, thus offering benefits to sustainable development and spatial planning.

Table 3.3 Spatial Indicators for Assessing Agricultural-Heritage Based Tourism

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Indicator	Measurement	Source
Physical / Natural	Terrain complexity	Relief Degree of Land Surface (RDLS)	Quantitative	Liu, G., & Doronzo (2020). *Sustainability*, 12(17), 6921.
	Biodiversity	Biological Abundance Index (BAI)		He, C., (2025). *Sustainability*, *17*(11), 4885. Whitesell, C.,(2015).*PloS one*, *10*(8), e0135595.

	Living/productive & Ecological space	Traditional Dwellings Living infrastructure Productive infrastructure	Qualitative	Zhang, Y., et al. (2024). *Heliyon*, *10*(9). Song, H., Chen, P., & Zhao, W. (2022). *Frontiers in Psychology.* Jasrotia, S. S.,(2023).*Business Perspectives and Research*, *11*(2), 173-189.
Cultural	Material/spiritual/institutional space	Traditional food, costume, architecture Traditional language, festival Formal & informal institutions		
Environmental	Conservation of traditional landscapes, ecosystems, and biodiversity	Planning regulations (A7) Crisis & emergency management (A13) Wildlife protection (D3)		Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), 2008 Yehong, S. U. N., et al. (2021). *Journal of Resources and Ecology*, 12(4), 543–554. Jasrotia, S. S.,(2023).*Business Perspectives and Research*, *11*(2), 173-189.
		Light & noise pollution (D11)	Quantitative	
	Resource & production	Water sources Water conservation methods		Gadakh, A., et al. (2025). arXiv:2509.09214. Agnoletti, M., & Santoro, A. (2022). *Biodiversity and Conservation*, *31*(10), 2231-2241.
		Land preservation Local crop yield		
Social	Government, villager, enterprise subject space	Demographic structure		Zhang, Y., et al. (2024). *Heliyon*, *10*(9). Lane, B. (1994). *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 2(1-2), 102–131.
		Management & Talent Scenic spot management	Qualitative	

Spatial indicators are physical, ecological, cultural, and infrastructural attributes that are quantifiable. These are used to evaluate the landscape's suitability for planning. Spatial indicators, as they are used in agro-heritage regions, provide information about the spatial arrangement of traditional agricultural systems, biodiversity, land use, water systems, and cultural heritage. Spatial indicators for agro-heritage tourism will be useful for identifying areas of high value, accessibility, development potential, and environmental limitations.

Table 3.4 Stakeholder Indicators for Assessing Agro-Heritage Tourism

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Indicator	Measurement	Source
Social	Infrastructure	Community infrastructure	Qualitative	Wang, M., et al. (2025). Sustainable

				Development.
	Relational	Community management Family & Neighborhood relationship		Scheyvens, R. (1999). Tourism Management, 20(2), 245–249.
	Educational	Educational resources Personal development opportunities Educate visitors about traditional agriculture Share agricultural heritage with visitors		Tian, M., et al. (2016). Journal of Mountain Science, 13(3), 440-454. Agnoletti, M., & Santoro, A. (2022). *Biodiversity and Conservation*, *31*(10), 2231-2241.
	Health	Community medical provisions		Wang, M., et al. (2025). Sustainable Development.
		Family member's health status	Quantitative	
	Governance & safety, Protection & rights	Destination management organization (A2) Safety and security (A12) Preventing exploitation (B7)	Qualitative	Slocum, S., & Curtis, K. (2017). Routledge. Mishra, S., et al. (2025). Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites, 62(4), 2430-2440. Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), 2008
	Accessibility	Local access (B5)	Quantitative	
Environmental	Community - Place Qualities	Natural environment Living environment Cultural conservation Tourism development pressure	Qualitative	Wang, M., et al. (2025). Sustainable Development. Zhang, Y. Heliyon, 10(9). Mishra, S., et al. (2025). Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites, 62(4), 2430-2440.
	Heritage conservation & Tourism Development	Conservation policy		
		Conservation Funds	Quantitative	
Economic	Destination planning, monitoring, and Land & asset transactions	Sustainable destination strategy (A1)	Qualitative	Yehong, S. U. N., et al. (2021). Journal of Resources and Ecology, 12(4), 543-554. Martínez-Graña, A., et al. (2020).. Sustainability, 12(10), 4154. Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), 2008
		Property acquisitions (A9) Economic monitoring (B1)	Quantitative	
		Monitoring (A3)	Qualitative	
	Livelihood &	Family income	Quantitative	Wang, M., et al. (2025). Sustainable

	benefits	Distribution of benefits	Qualitative	Development.
		Benefit to local community		Tian, M., et al. (2016). Journal of Mountain Science, 13(3), 440-454.
	GDP	GDP distribution	Quantitative	Liu, G., & Doronzo (2020). Sustainability, 12(17), 6921. Jasrotia, S. S.,(2023).Business Perspectives and Research, 11(2), 173-189.
Cultural	Tangible heritage	Geographical indications of agricultural products	Quantitative	Liu, G., & Doronzo (2020). Sustainability, 12(17), 6921.
		Buying agricultural products Accommodation in farmhouses	Quantitative	Farsani, N. T., et al. (2019). Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 24(6), 541-549.
		Enjoying agro-landscapes	Qualitative	
	Intangible cultural heritage	Local-flavour food Attraction to traditional rural culture Attractive natural agricultural setting Recreation	Qualitative	Tian, M., et al. (2016). Journal of Mountain Science, 13(3), 440-454. Agnoletti, M., & Santoro, A. (2022). *Biodiversity and Conservation*, *31*(10), 2231-2241.
		Number/distribution of traditional villages Number of years farming	Quantitative	Liu, W., Xue, Y., & Shang, C. (2023). *Heritage Science*, *11*(1), 1-21.
		Participating in planting & harvesting Participating in agricultural rituals/festive events Getting Experience in cattle feeding Learning to make handicrafts from agricultural products Learning to cook local foods using agricultural products	Qualitative	Farsani, N. T., et al. (2019). Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 24(6), 541-549.

Stakeholder indicators are qualitative and quantitative indicators that measure the involvement and capacity of different groups in agro-heritage tourism development. These groups include farmers, communities, tourism operators, and government agencies. The indicators measure factors such as community participation, effectiveness of governance, effectiveness of institutions in coordination, dependence of livelihoods, and awareness of heritage values. These indicators play a crucial role in identifying gaps and capacity limitations. They play a vital role in ensuring that agro-heritage tourism development is sustainable through the use of spatial indicators.

Table 3.5 Existing Frameworks/Policies for Assessing AHT

Framework / Policy	Governance Body	Key Focus/Criteria	Relevance to AHT in Kerala
Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), 2005	FAO (Scientific Advisory Group & local stakeholders)	i) Food and livelihood security, ii) agro biodiversity, iii) traditional knowledge, iv) cultures and v) landscapes	Recognition of Kuttanad to highlights significance of traditional systems like Pokkali, Kaipad, and Kole
Geographical Indications (GI) Act, 1999	Govt of India	The quality, specific characteristics or reputation of a product as linked to its geographical origin	GI-tagged crops, Pokkali, Navara, and Kaipad, can be used showcase state's agricultural heritage, which creates opportunities for branding.
Agriculture Development Policy, Kerala (2015)	Govt. of Kerala, Dept. of Agriculture Development & Farmers' Welfare	Policy 17: Pumping subsidies provided to the Kuttanad and Kole land farmers are to be routed through the Department of Agriculture.	Ensures coordinated management of Kuttanad and Kole wetlands through subsidies, pest control, and conservation efforts. Can incorporate into conservation methods of agro - heritage sites.
Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), 2008	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	Effective sustainability planning, maximizing social and economic benefits for the local community, enhancing cultural heritage, and reducing negative impacts to the environment.	Global standards for sustainable tourism with indicators on environment, culture, community, and tourism management, can guide Kerala's agro-heritage tourism
Kerala Tourism Policy, 2022	Govt. of Kerala, Dept. of Tourism	Heritage circuits, responsible tourism, livelihood integration, destination competitiveness	Can integrate agro-heritage sites into tourism circuits with a focus on local participation and sustainability

IV. INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

The Hani Rice Terraces in China and the Ifugao Rice Terraces in the Philippines represent globally recognized models of agro-heritage tourism, demonstrating how traditional agricultural systems can be integrated with conservation and tourism development. Both landscapes are designated heritage systems and reflect centuries-old indigenous knowledge, climate-adaptive farming, and strong community stewardship. The Hani system is characterized by a vertical ecological structure integrating forests, villages, terraces, and river systems, supported by strong state involvement and diversified agro-based tourism. In contrast, the Ifugao terraces emphasize indigenous governance, ritual-based farming traditions, and community-led management practices, with tourism centred on cultural landscapes and homestay experiences. Comparative analysis reveals that successful agro-heritage tourism depends on landscape quality, institutional support, infrastructure provision, cultural continuity, and balanced commercialization. These case studies highlight the importance of integrating spatial characteristics and stakeholder systems within a structured planning framework to ensure sustainability, authenticity, and economic viability.

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Table 4.1 Comparative Analysis of International Agro-Heritage Best Practices

Dimension	Indicators	Ifugao Rice Terraces	Hani Rice Terraces	Comparative Findings
Spatial	Terrain & Landscape Land Use Diversity Built Heritage Environmental Sustainability	Steep amphitheatre terraces; ancient irrigation Rice, heirloom varieties, woodlots Stone-walled terraces; traditional Ifugao houses High soil retention; traditional irrigation	Vast vertical terraces; multi-layered water system Rice, forests, wetlands, villages Cob-wall villages; mushroom houses Forest-to-village water-flow protection	Both use mountain-terrace morphology that creates unique scenic value Hani has clearer vertical zoning; Ifugao has more cultural forestry integration Both preserve unique vernacular architecture influencing tourism identity Both maintain climate-adaptive agro-ecological systems
Cultural & Heritage Value	Heritage Knowledge Traditional Practices Cultural Landscapes	Hudhud chants, rituals Communal labour (bayanihan) UNESCO-listed cultural landscape	Hani ethnic festivals “Forest -Village -Terrace -River” model UNESCO-listed cultural landscape	Strong intangible heritage drives cultural tourism Both maintain strong tribal governance shaping heritage tourism Both emphasize living heritage, not museumized.
Stakeholder	Local Communities Government Role Tourism Stakeholders NGOs / International Agencies	Strong indigenous-led stewardship National heritage programs Eco-tourism, homestays UNESCO, FAO GIAHS	Hani community-based farming groups Strong Chinese rural revitalisation schemes Cultural festivals, terrace hiking UNESCO, FAO, local co-ops	Both show tourism success only where communities lead Stronger state involvement in China Both have community-based tourism, but China is more commercialized. External agencies strengthen conservation & tourism branding
Tourism Infrastructure	Accessibility Visitor Facilities	Moderate; road access varies Homestays, community centres	Good access; well-developed trails Viewpoints, structured trails	Infrastructure development affects visitor volume China more advanced in visitor management
Economic Outcomes	Income from Tourism Value-Chain Linkages	Medium; controlled tourism Heirloom rice export	High, structured tourism industry Rice, tea, and craft products	Commercialization higher in Hani site Hani has diversified agro-products

V. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on identifying and analysing agro-heritage clusters in Kerala to understand their spatial and socio-institutional characteristics. It assesses key spatial attributes and stakeholder perspectives that are relevant to the development of agro-heritage tourism.

The research also reviews international GIAHS examples along with Kerala's existing agricultural and heritage practices to derive planning insights and contextual relevance. The ultimate scope of the study is to develop a spatial planning framework that can guide Panchayats and regional planning bodies in promoting agro-heritage tourism in a structured, sustainable, and culturally sensitive manner. However, the study has certain limitations. It relies predominantly on secondary data sources, including published literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. The spatial and stakeholder indicators developed are specific to the Kerala context and may require modification before application to other regions. The case study analysis is limited to selected agro-heritage clusters due to time and scope constraints. Furthermore, the research does not include a detailed economic feasibility assessment or cost–benefit analysis at this stage, as the primary focus remains on spatial and stakeholder planning dimensions.

VI. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Figure 6.1 Spatial and Stakeholder Dimensions for Agro-Heritage Tourism

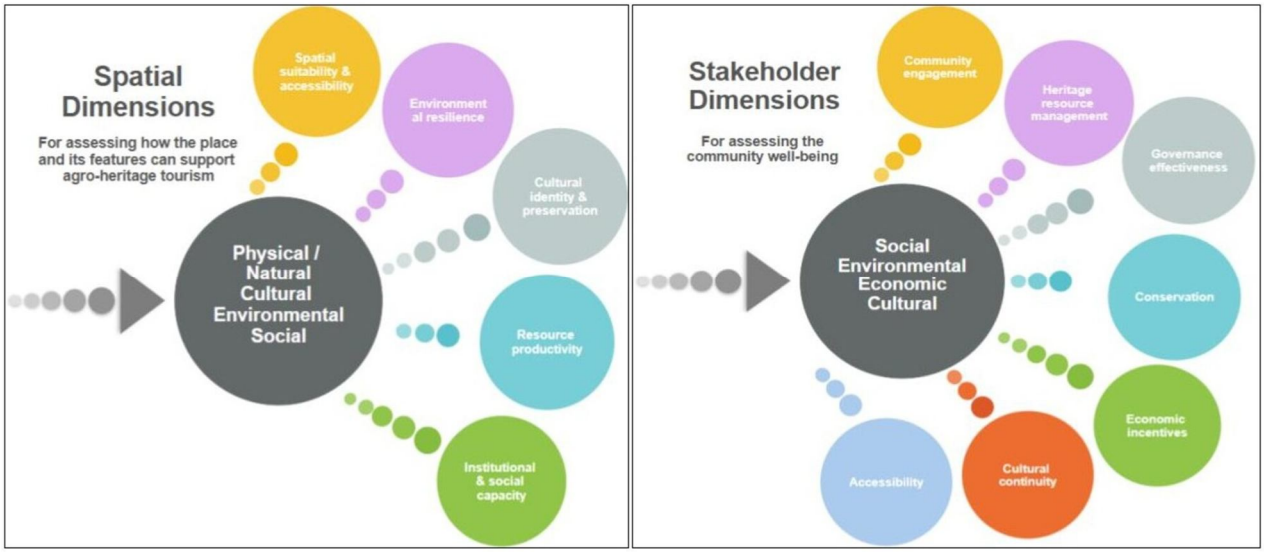


Figure 6.1 highlights the major spatial dimensions involved in the assessment of the suitability of the area for the development of agro-heritage tourism. Figure also presents the key stakeholder dimensions influencing the development and sustainability of agro-heritage tourism.

Figure 6.2 Stakeholders in Agricultural Heritage Systems Tourism

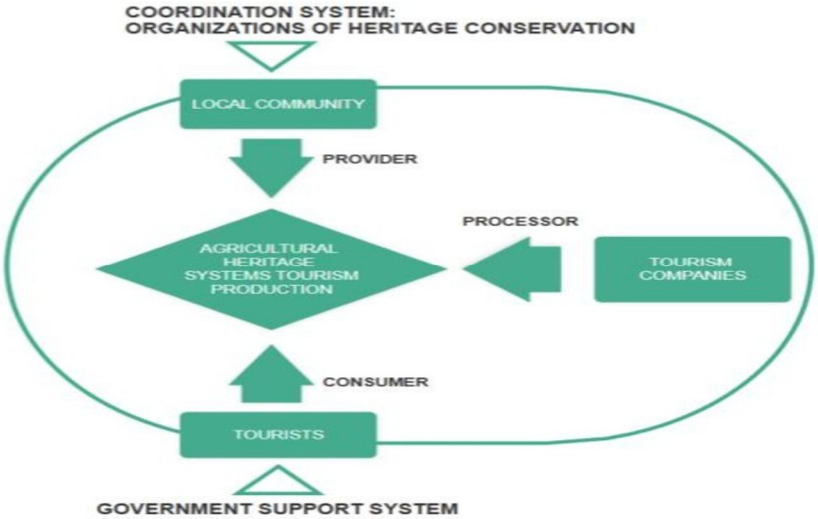


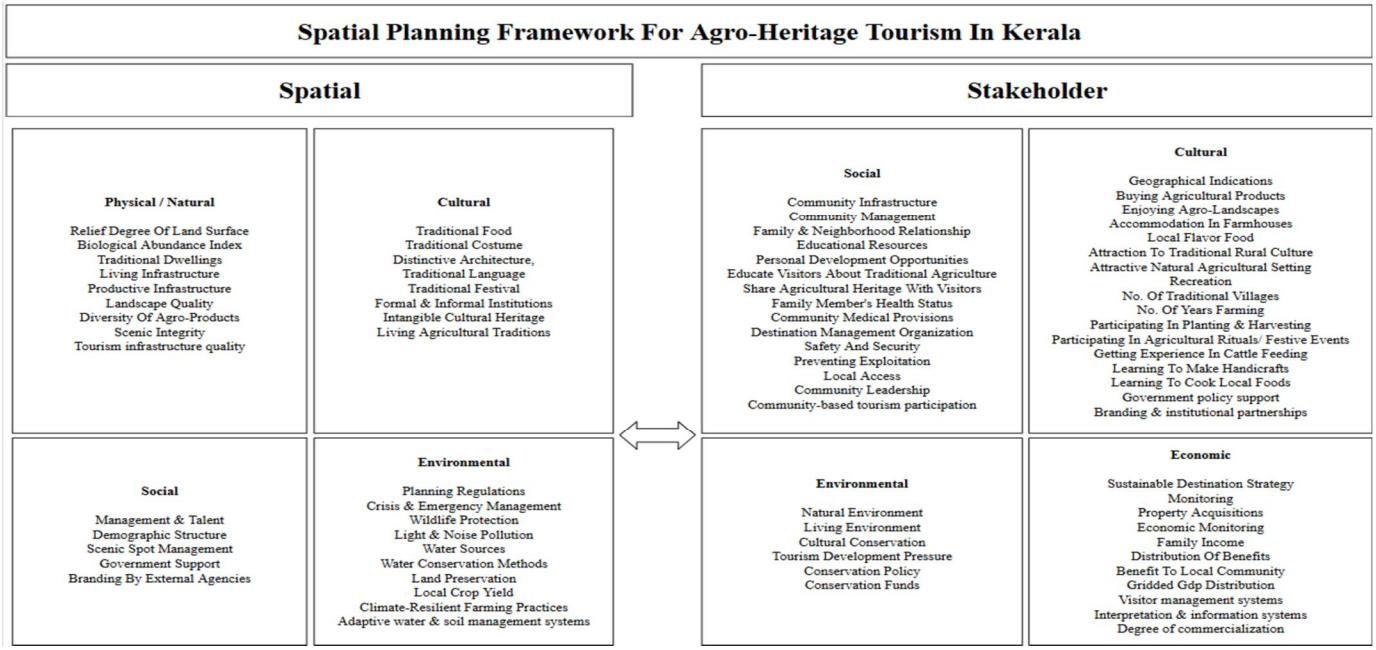
Figure 6.2 shows important stakeholders identified for Agricultural Heritage Systems Tourism

Table 6.1 Practices & Potential Sites Identified for Agro-Heritage Tourism in Kerala

	Saline Wetland Rice Cultivations			
Details	Kuttanad	Pokkali	Kole	Kaipad
Districts	Alappuzha, Kottayam & Pathanamthitta	Alappuzha, Ernakulam & Thrissur	Thrissur & Malappuram	Kozhikode & Kannur
Approx. Area (ha)	40,000	8,500	13,000	2,500
Cultivation Period	First crop (Puncha): Oct–Mar	Jun–Oct (Rice) / Nov–Apr (Prawn)	Nov–Aug	Jun–Nov
Special Features	Delta region of 5 rivers Below sea-level paddy fields Linked to Arabian Sea & backwaters High acidity, salinity & flood-prone soils	Rice–prawn rotational farming system Salt-tolerant Pokkali rice First GI-registered rice of Kerala Organic and climate-resilient	Central "Rice Bowl" of Kerala Wetland agro-ecosystem Major bird habitat (Ramsar site – Kole Wetlands) High-productivity paddy zone	Coastal brackish water fields Rotational rice–shrimp farming Naturally organic cultivation Traditional saline-tolerant varieties

VII. PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Figure 7.1 Proposed Spatial Planning Framework



VIII. CONCLUSIONS

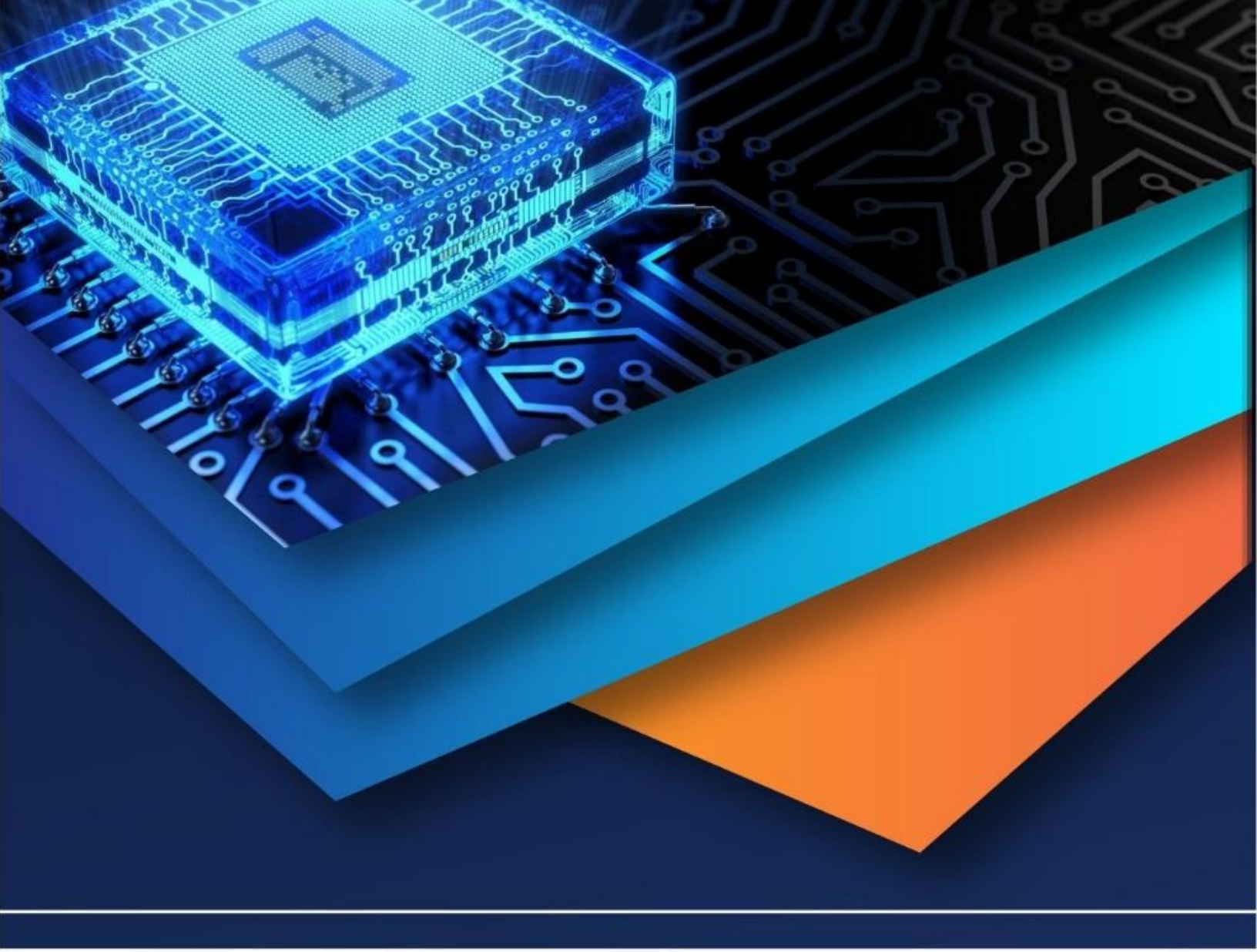
In this study, agro-heritage tourism is examined with respect to its spatial and stakeholder aspects. The findings of this study highlight that for effective agro-heritage tourism systems, it is crucial to ensure that there are good landscape quality, agro-biodiversity, cultural traditions, and climate-resilient agriculture. However, it is equally crucial that there is effective spatial asset development; otherwise, it will be difficult to ensure sustainability.

Also, it is proposed that by integrating spatial and stakeholder aspects, it is possible to develop a multidimensional spatial planning framework that could be used by Panchayats or other regional planning organizations to ensure that agro-heritage tourism is promoted effectively. It is crucial that sustainability of tourism is achieved by balancing landscape characteristics and governance systems. Although it is essentially a secondary data study, it is proposed that it could be used as a basis for future empirical validation.

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