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WILDLIFE TOURISM: BOON OR BANE?

Every year, for thousands of men and women, there comes a time of great endurance and expectation- a pilgrimage of sorts. They will venture out during the favourable hours of dawn and willingly brave chilly draughts and searing heat, for one chance sighting of that being under whose auspices this journey has been undertaken. But make no mistake. This creature in question does not belong to any meta-physical or spiritual realm. Made of flesh and blood, this being is mostly the tiger or in some cases the rhino, bird, snake or bat. With binoculars and cameras, the faithful shall seek it out and preserve those memories for posterity...Or until their next journey. For the fervour that governs these journeys may rival that of the pious on their annual pilgrimages. Their rewards for their devotion lie in merely seeing and knowing that these animals are living as they should in the free state in the wild.

But many would quickly to point out that in their zeal to set eyes on their favourite animal/bird/reptile, these well-meaning visitors might do more harm than good to the country's already jeopardized natural heritage. So then, is wildlife tourism a boon or a bane?

In order to answer that question, it is important to first explore the concept of wildlife tourism. Wildlife tourism entails the visiting of forests in order to see animals, birds, etc. in their natural habitat. For some people, visiting a national park or seeing some exotic animal is just another item on a checklist. For others, a 'wildlife holiday' is about being in and experiencing the wilderness. Either way, the value of wildlife tourism is gauged by its contribution to the conservation of a species or ecosystem, in whose name it has been undertaken.

Wildlife tourism is one of the fastest growing spheres in the world today. In some countries, this sector is one of the largest contributors to the GDP. Likewise, in a country like India, where more than one million people live in and around protected areas (PAs) and depend on the forest for sustenance, wildlife tourism throws up a number of livelihood opportunities. In Periyar Tiger Reserve, former poachers have abandoned their trade and work with the Forest Department as guides and guards. In Ladakh, the advent of home-stays has ensured that locals benefit from tourists who travel there to see the snow-leopard. There is no denying that wildlife tourism, if practiced responsibly, will include activities that enhance, not exploit, the ecosystem and biodiversity of the region while ensuring that the local people benefit directly from tourism and its related activities. Tourism also benefits conservation. Tourists and visitors that throng forests and PAs to view wildlife may double up as watchdogs and help the forest department in monitoring these populations through records in the form of videos, photographs as well as their observations. With anecdotes, photographs and videos, these ambassadors of animals will be able to garner much-needed support for the cause of conservation.

Moreover, this influx of visitors results in added attention to the region, which perhaps

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encourages the Forest Department to intensify protection measures while establishing sound management practices in those areas that fall under their jurisdiction.

What then, could be the problem with an industry that promises much-needed support to conservation?

Lots, apparently! For example, in 2010, following the well-meaning efforts of a nation-wide campaign to save the tiger, tourists flocked tiger reserves in droves, all with the intention of laying eyes on the 1411 animals that had caused such a furore. Several were left disappointed, because someone forgot to tell those wild animals that they were in fact, specimens on display. This writer was left bemused by the host of reactions that the non-appearance of the tiger elicited. “We saw pug-marks but have heard that the Forest Department cheats people by imprinting them manually!” said one flabbergasted visitor to Corbett Tiger Reserve. Another couple that visited Bandhavgarh were raring to dash off a complaint to the authorities because “We were given the same routes for two days but saw no tigers, while everyone saw them on the other routes. How can they make us pay so much when we don’t see any tigers?” Never mind that the tiger is a solitary, shy creature or that routes are assigned arbitrarily to distribute tourist pressure. These statements point out the lack of awareness among visitors as well as the fact that as far as tourists are concerned, their holiday has very little to do with conservation!

Tiger Reserves (TR) and other PAs were designated for the protection of a particular species. Given the problems that beset conservation in India, this in itself is a mammoth task and shouldn’t be expected to pander to the demands of tourists who believe that their money’s worth lies only in spotting the big cat. Even those that do manage to spot the animals of their choice, believe that the deed being done, there is nothing more that deserves their time and attention. But tourists themselves cannot be blamed. Guides and drivers too must take the effort to cultivate the tourists’ interest in other flora and fauna that are found in the region. Even so, there are some that have tried but in vain!

As a driver who has worked in many PAs in Madhya Pradesh was asked, “*Ab kya karna hai? Kya patthar dekhein?*” (What is there to do now? Do we look at the rocks?). How, he laments, do these tourists expect to enjoy their holidays if they don’t enjoy the jungle as a whole? Nevertheless, they descend upon these reserves in hordes. In Bandhavgarh, for example, a total of around 40,800 people visit the reserve annually. In more popular parks like Ranthambhore and Corbett, this number is believed to shoot up to a lakh. Suddenly, tourism has become the golden egg but the beleaguered goose is wildlife itself, which is well on its way to being cooked.

This sheer number of people has resulted in the sudden proliferation of resorts and hotels around PAs. While everyone wants to jump the resort/hotel bandwagon, few are willing to account for the problems that it brings in the form of over-utilisation of resources, waste disposal, noise pollution, fragmentation of wildlife habitat etc. There is very little that the Forest Department can do because land around the PA is mostly agricultural or revenue land and does not come under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department.

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Tourism for Conservation

But tourism doesn't have to be conservation's ugly step-sister. In fact it can be its greatest ally or even defender. This can be achieved in the following ways:

1. By ensuring that conservation is made profitable to all the stake-holders involved.
2. By regulating the manner in which tourism is conducted.
3. By undertaking conservation measures, keeping tourism in mind.

Profiting from the business of wildlife conservation is not profanity. Ask Africa. A report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) states that East Africa (comprising Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) earned more than USD one billion in forex receipts, a significant number accruing from wildlife tourism. In Kenya, the revenue earned from wildlife tourism is believed to be one hundred times more than that received through wildlife activities that are unrelated to tourism. In South Africa, wildlife tourism is the second largest contributor to the country's GDP.

Closer home, Machli and B2, popular tigers at Ranthambhore and Bandhavgarh TRs, are said to have generated more than USD 130 billion together, within the period that they dominated the tourism zones of their reserves. India's flora and fauna are clearly capable of attracting visitors-it's time they were made to pay. The average Indian family of four spends a minimum of INR 30-35,000 on hotel accommodation on a 3-day trip to a national park. In contrast, the same family may crib about having to spend INR 3000 at the park itself!(including vehicle entry fees and guide charges for two safaris). In fact, these figures are applicable to few parks in India. Most PAs in India seldom charge more than INR 100 per head as entry fees! Keeping in mind the spending power of the average Indian family, there is no reason the park shouldn't hike their fees. In most cases however, this money never reaches the PA and is instead routed to the state exchequer. Therefore, the government must ensure that these fees as pumped back into the management of the PA. Concessions and waivers should be given only to local people, so that they may view the tiger or elephant in the adjoining forest as more than a threat to their lives and livelihood. Having said that, if charges are going to be raised, then the PA authorities must ensure that guides and drivers are adequately trained so that tourists get their money's worth and leave the PA, armed with greater knowledge and insights.

Needless to say, these stakeholders should include the people i.e. 'locals' that live in and around PAs. If they were to benefit from tourism, they would view wildlife as more than crop-raiders and cattle-lifters. In fact, as is the practice in Ladakh and Velas, the concept of homestays may be introduced wherein villagers host tourists in their homes while providing basic amenities for a modest fee. While it ensures a greater degree of the locals' involvement in tourism, it also minimizes the negative impact(s) of tourism in relation to wastage of resources and their disposal. Larger establishments such as lodges and resorts should consider hiring and training locals in their businesses or put into place systems that ensure that locals reap a share of the profits.

The second step is to ensure that all tourism around a PA is eco-tourism. This would necessitate formulating a strict set of rules and regulations, which are legally binding

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upon all tour operators. Again, there are lessons to be learnt from Africa. Here, a few operators manage a network of private reserves, which offer opportunities for both tourism and have immense conservation value. While they prevent land from being used for non-conservation related activities, these private properties or “private concessions” as they’re called, provide space for excess populations while also functioning as sites of captive-breeding programmes. In Africa, rules indicate that the built-up area must be minimised while properties must not be fenced/barricaded to ensure that animals have the right of way. Cut to the situation in India where resorts and hotels, of all manner and kind are found at every turn. As mentioned earlier, this sheer number imposes pressure on the region’s resources and also hinders the movement of animals. Needless to say, this also contributes to increasing human-animal conflict.

The lack of such eco-friendly facilities with minimum impact on the environment can be attributed to the lack of will among the industry as well as the lack of a framework vis-a vis ecotourism. Regarding the first, there are ways in which hotels can minimize their ecological footprint such as using renewable sources of energy, growing vegetables and cereal organically, using bio-fuel plants etc. However, most hotels do not tread the eco-friendly path because there is no demand. There is also the cost factor to consider- investments are high and they are expensive to run. Taking these issues into cognizance, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) did issue draft guidelines outlining the same but the effectiveness can be gauged only after they become legally binding. In the meantime, hotels and resorts can do their bit by raising awareness among their guests through sessions about the park and its problems, community initiatives etc. Activities that minimise the pressure on the park such as nature trails around the campus may be held.

Lastly, we must consider a policy, which ensures that conservation and tourism are not mutually exclusive. For example, park directors must have a say in the construction and development of lodges around PAs. Another way to gauge the impact of tourism will be to study the ways in which it affects the animals. For example, it is believed that tigers in Ranthambhore have adapted to the presence of jeeps in their midst and use them as cover when hunting. This indicates that tourism doesn’t overtly harm tigers. Dolphins are believed to be sociable animals and are popular subjects of wildlife tourism. In fact, dolphin-watching is a popular activity abroad. However, have we considered how the shy Irrawady dolphin will respond to tourist-boats converging around it? In Chilika Lagoon for example, a number of these cetaceans are killed as they come under the rudders of motor boats used by fishermen and tourists. In this case, the use of smaller, traditional wooden boats may solve this problem.

Simply put, the success of wildlife tourism depends on the reactions and adaptability of the species in question to manner in which tourism is conducted. If studied, these factors can go a long way in effectively managing tourism.

Constructive Interference with Nature

Following a system of constructive interference with nature may also herald

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well for both conservation and consequently, tourism. For example, there are a number of PAs in India where tiger populations are concentrated within small areas that are visited by tourists in large numbers. Since tigers are solitary, territorial creatures, an increase in numbers will either result in several instances of in-fighting or human-animal conflict, as the tigers move out of the park in search of new areas. This doesn't do much for the cause of tiger conservation. Instead, the park management may consider determining the carrying capacity of the parks with respect to the number of tigers they can hold. In the event that there is an increase in numbers, these surplus tigers may be translocated to other PAs, which have viable tiger habitat. This will lead to a consequent rise in tourism in these areas, thus reducing the pressure off certain key areas. Again, it must be stressed that the behaviour and response of these animals must be studied and gauged before undertaking such activities.

These are just few of the ways in which tourism and conservation can be made to work in tandem. However, this entails a complete overhaul of our current approach to both tourism and conservation. While conservationists must stop viewing tourism as Frankenstein's monster, the tourism industry should not label every restriction on their activities as draconian. However, it must be emphasized that both are dynamic activities and hence must be continually monitored and managed, thus ensuring the long-term viability of both.

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