

Why Tiger Tourism Will Never Save The Tiger

The protected forest areas of India, the big ones, have opened up to tourism in the last ten years in a way few would have foreseen. As India discovers the economic benefits of wildlife tourism and its potential in providing employment opportunities, Governmental encouragement has not been found wanting to the hospitality industry - loans, state-sponsored advertising, infrastructure support such as laying of metal roads in forest habitat and subsidised hospitality training have all been part of a heady cocktail meant to kickstart wildlife tourism and put India on par with the African continent in showcasing its wildlife to eager tourists. To crown it all, such tourism has been dubbed 'eco-tourism', a tribute more to the location of a resort rather than to the sustainable nature of its practices. The result: the last decade has seen hundreds of resorts that have mushroomed in the buffer zones and beyond of India's wildlife sanctuaries.

This tourism is not eco-tourism at all. I brand it 'tiger tourism'. The majority of tourists who visit the Project Tiger sanctuaries have but one objective: spot a tiger, take about a dozen pictures in those precious seconds and relive those moments, alongwith the sundry details of the 'encounter' to all who may care to listen. If there is no tiger to be seen, an elephant or two would be second best. But few other animals make the mark for the tiger tourist. At the end of an outing into the jungle, if he asks, "Saw something?", he is talking about the tiger.

The number of tiger tourists in India has exploded in the last decade. This explosion has not come without a cost; it is a price that is now beginning to sting. In the holiday season (accumulating to about three months in a year) and on weekends, particularly the three-day ones, hordes of tourists, wearing brightly coloured clothes and carrying adequate stock of chilled refreshment and snacks, descend on India's wildlife sanctuaries that harbour a number of critically endangered mammals, birds and reptiles. A fair percentage of these hordes have substantial disposable income and are looking for a comprehensive holiday experience - they'd like to live in or by the jungle, but would want the luxuries of a seaside or suburban resort. To cater to this human traffic and its increasing propensity to spend money, many resorts have built much above the basics -saunas, spas and swimming pools (when the elephants in the forest around the property have no water in their water holes), in addition to air-conditioning in the rooms and luxurious buffetts at mealtimes, necessitating the import into the protected area of truckloads of branded foodstuff. The majority of these resorts are enclosed by electric fences to separate its inhabitants from the denizens of the forest. Some of these properties sit on critical land, such as elephant corridors, or in close proximity to water holes, even as the owner-managers of these resorts attempt to build their credibility as wildlife lovers. All of this is legal, even encouraged by State Governments,

if the resorts pay their electricity bills on time and remit adequate taxes collected on 'sher darshan', hospitality and liquor.

A lot more that happens is expressly illegal. In many resorts all over India, 'special' meat is served to privileged guests - venison, hare and, rarely, bison meat being three examples. Many establishments blare music; on days such as New Year's Eve, these resorts would have you believe that the denizens of the jungle were in a celebratory mood - the music is loud enough to keep them miles away. Plastic, paper, glass and other waste is either burnt (releasing the pollutants into the immediate atmosphere), dumped into pits or thrown by the roadside, neither of which are desirable practices. There have many recorded instances of deaths of deer and other animals choking on plastic in India's protected areas, yet few resorts adopt the practice of transporting these wastes back to some possible point of origin, such as the nearest city.

An important point is that the average room tariffs in these resorts have more than doubled in the last three years. New ones promise to bill tourists between \$200 and \$500 per room night. At such demanding prices, resorts will be forced to offer unsustainable luxuries to guests (unsustainable, from an ecological point of view). Guests may not cross their fingers or weigh their luck to see the tiger anymore; they may demand it (economics, as you can see, is a dismal science).

The tourism industry, of course, has attempted to present tiger tourism as win-win, even for the tiger. More tourists, they would have you believe, means more revenues that can be diverted to the forest department for tiger conservation. Presumably, this will improve the protection mechanisms employed, resulting in better forests and thereby a further increase in tourists. A virtuous cycle. On paper.

This assertion, as well as the support provided by State Government tourism ministries, puts the Forest Department of a State in a bind. Government financial and political support for forest management has always been modest; in fact, most Forest Departments now are expected to generate tourism-related revenues by the levy of annual licence fees on resorts or taxes on vehicles. Where the Forest Department runs its own hospitality services, these are run as low-priced establishments ostensibly to help the middle class find accommodation in India's wildlife sanctuaries. The reality of course, is that these places are poorly maintained and hardly perform their objective; politicians and bureaucrats see these rest houses as extensions of their favourite watering holes in the city. Forest officers in most such situations are helpless and can do little. They are trained in wildlife protection largely and, to a lesser extent, in wildlife science. Why then should they shoulder the burden of hospitality, catering to a Government official's whims or to the average tourist?

Most Forest Departments I know have chosen to address this fix they find themselves in with a do-little approach. If there is a crisis, react if you must, else let things take their course. This approach, of course, benefits everyone except the animals in the forest.

That the resorts do not go by the spirit of conservation or, indeed, by the book is the first problem. Another is the sheer number of tiger tourists. Most of India's tiger sanctuaries have now become large open zoos, much in the nature of what has happened in parts of the African wildland. Jeeps criss-cross paths in the forests searching for wildlife, to ensure that the tourists have their money's worth. Term this a kind of tiger hunting and you wouldn't be far off the mark. (There are exceptions of course - in Bandipur, for instance, only about 10% of the 880 sq km park is open to the tourist, a necessary feature to ensure that animals have their privacy when they want it; this will hopefully never change.) When a tiger is sighted, what follows is mayhem: other vehicles are informed by wireless and those in the vicinity speed towards the location. In one particularly tragic incident some years ago, a tigress mauled a French tourist who was in the back of a vehicle that, alongwith others, had formed a ring around the animal, giving her little chance to escape. For a shy, retreating animal like a tiger, this is harrowing. The same animal, after its first attack on a human, could then become a danger to the poor people who live around the National Park and who cannot defend themselves adequately in the event of a surprise attack. To counter this danger, villagers will then ask their political representatives to campaign to eliminate the concerned animal. The long and short of this is that, what begins as a 'harmless' exercise to showcase a tiger to a tourist, might just lead to considerable bloodshed and the possible death of the same animal. The originators will never be punished quid pro quo, as surely they deserve to be for having created a problem in the first place.

In addition to 'tiger hunting', there is the another reason why many sanctuaries have now become large zoos: baiting of animals for the tiger, known to be done in the sanctuaries in Western and Central India. This is horribly unethical and cruel, is not allowed by law and will deprive, over a period, the species of its hunting instinct. Animals, particularly bull calves (since they are cheaper to buy), are tied at 'strategic points' in the forests. They are generally not well fed, for their calling must attract the star's attention. When the tiger kills the bait - a practice that is as unfair to the bait as it is cruel and sadistic - the tiger tourist is informed of his luck and taken to the location to photograph to his heart's content. Baiting has the informal approval of many in the Forest Department of the concerned states who are compensated well for looking the other way. Surely, this wasn't was tiger tourism was meant to do? Try convincing the calf that it is win-win for it to be attacked by a tiger, without a ghost of a chance of escape.

As India's forest cover shrinks and animals are forced to retreat further into their restricted habitat, we cannot anymore afford the luxury of tiger tourism. The best way to protect an animal is to protect its habitat, leave it alone and allow experts - experienced foresters, wildlife researchers and conservation-centric professional photographers - to work on capturing the essence of the denizens of the forest. If tourism must be a necessary evil, the Government must ensure that the wildlife tourism business operates with the most stringent of guidelines including (but not limited to) :

- ❑ Banning of motor boats in rivers inside the Sanctuary area
- ❑ Auctioning of permits to resorts to take in people annually. This will increase the revenues of the forest department, while allowing only a limited number to visit. To prevent the onset of corrupt practices that take advantage of the ensuing scarcity, surprise inspections by a central forest team must be built in to the costs of auction.
- ❑ Waste management within the site of bio-degradable waste & disposal of non-biodegradable waste outside protected areas, with severe punishment for those who violate the rules
- ❑ Water harvesting within a resort property & shutting down water-intensive facilities such as swimming pools in the dry seasons
- ❑ Banning of generators in buffer zones and protected areas
- ❑ Tourist education on forest bio-diversity, by trained naturalists to highlight the faunal biodiversity of forests in India, particularly in the lesser known forests. Badgers, otters, flying squirrel, marten are examples of animals most wildlife tourists know almost nothing about and their stories are no less fascinating than the tiger's. The film must now be the message, rather than human intrusion intended to get a 'first hand' look at an animal.
- ❑ Treatment of waste water and recycling, alongwith a 'no-detergents' policy
- ❑ Employment of local population (typically tribals) as naturalists
- ❑ A 'give back' program where resorts commit financially to forest department initiatives to reduce human-animal conflict.
- ❑ Enforcement of policies on liquor and playing music.

I wonder just how many resorts would agree voluntarily to complying with standards on these parameters, even though these are basic for a sustainable operation, and for justifying an 'eco-resort' tag. The reality is that, unless the hospitality industry is forced to comply, there will be transgressions. When these occur, the 'hero' the tourist comes to see, the tiger, will suffer the most from a brand of tourism that is as superficial in content as it is damaging on the forest.