

Background

What is ecotourism? How is it different from tourism? What are its elements? What is the definition of an ecolodge and of sustainable tourism practices? Finally, is ecotourism such a great thing, anyway? The word “eco” is fast becoming a global buzzword. The terms ‘ecotourism’, ‘ecotravel’ and ‘ecolodge’ are being used as popular sales pitches to boost tourism worldwide. Ecotourism poses many questions and challenges and remains, at present, a highly contentious concept.

Ecotourism needs to be seen more as a philosophy or as an approach where communities are part of the tourism initiative and thus, derive financial incentive to conserve biodiversity. Ecotourism, if practiced in an appropriate way, can provide local communities with a source of income. As important stakeholders, communities then also become protectors of the biodiversity and partners in conservation.

IUCN defines “ecotourism” as environmentally-responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, to enjoy, study and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present), that promotes conservation, has lower visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

Who actually benefits from ecotourism? Several case studies show that profit from this enterprise still, ultimately, goes to the state exchequer or the private entrepreneur and not to the local people. There is a strong lobby that feels ecotourism has alienated local communities and caused social and cultural degradation. On the other hand, its supporters quote examples where the biodiversity and local people have benefited from this activity.

Tourism is the world’s fastest growing industry and, in recent years, has played a fairly dominant role in the economies of developing countries. The tourism industry contributes 4.9 per cent to India’s gross domestic product (GDP) and has emerged as a major source of employment — a Ministry of Tourism study indicates tourism supports 46.87 million jobs (directly and indirectly) accounting for 8.78 per cent of the total jobs in India. With changing lifestyles, economies and more company-paid vacations, there has been an attitudinal shift in people towards travel and tourism with a positive incline towards vacationing. Greater media exposure has also increased environmental awareness and urban travelers prefer active, outdoor get-aways, with places of biodiversity value scoring high among favorite destinations.

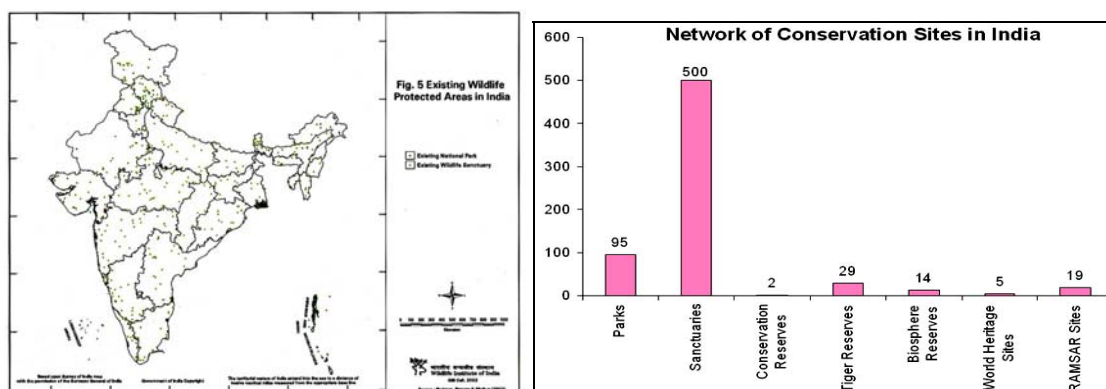
The concept of ecotourism has gained popularity in India only in the last few years. In terms of policy, however, the only document available at the national level is the **Ecotourism Policy and Guidelines 1998**,

not yet completely operational. Several states have formulated ecotourism policies, but each interprets and articulates the term according to its own understanding. Tour operators, NGOs and community-based organisations, hotel chains and high-end tourist resorts — all interpret the term “ecotourism”, as per their understanding and requirement. There is, thus, a pressing need for a comprehensive and common understanding and operational guidelines for the successful implementation of ecotourism in India.

At present, there are innumerable initiatives in the country being (wrongly) implemented under the ‘ecotourism banner’. There are also many genuinely good ecotourism initiatives that need to be recognised and shared with the wider community.

Biodiversity and potential for ecotourism in the context of India

India, with 2.4 per cent of the world’s area harbours 8.1 per cent of the world’s total biodiversity. It is one of the 12 mega-biodiversity countries of the world. India is equally rich in its cultural heritage. Traditionally, India has sought to protect its biodiversity through a Protected Area (PA) network. The network with over 600 Protected Areas covers approximately 4.8 per cent of India’s geographical area.



(Source: Envis of Wildlife Institute of India)

Some of these areas, besides being important for the conservation of biodiversity can also serve as potential sites for ecotourism initiatives, besides being models for forging the important link between conservation of biodiversity and livelihood security. The Ministry of Forests and Environment of India in 2000 had recognised ecotourism in PAs and other forests as one of its 12 major thrust areas. The India Chapter of the Pacific Asia Travel Association has formulated an action plan for “National Tourism Policy” forwarded by the Ministry of Tourism to the state government for review. There are also thousands of locations beyond the PA network where ecotourism initiatives are either underway or could be developed.

Seminar

Judging from the emerging relevance of ecotourism in India, CMS VATAVARAN, as part of its – Environment and Wildlife Film Festival (October 27-31 October, 2009), is keen to include a seminar on the topic “CMS Environment Seminar on Ecotourism - Relevance for India, Experiences, Challenges and Future Prospects”. The purpose is to highlight challenges from various quarters —stakeholders such as policy makers, marketing and promotion agencies, tour guides, scientists and researchers, and local communities whose livelihoods depend on biodiversity. The seminar will also present the opportunity to learn and forge the path ahead, from experiences of practitioners.

Themes and Topics

The seminar will throw open a discussion on the following themes and topics:

1. Potential sites for ecotourism
2. Sustainable models of biodiversity conservation and livelihood security
3. Tourism and climate change
4. Green operations
5. Parks and protected areas
6. Role of communities

It will also ponder on following thematic areas:

- Policy and guidelines
- Interpretation and education
- Marketing and media
- Financing conservation
- Certification/guidelines/code of conduct

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Representatives of tourism and ecotourism industry, state and central governments, wildlife sanctuaries, lake development authorities, national parks, tiger reserves, marketing and promotion agencies and policy makers, scientists and researchers, local communities and civil society organisations..

CMS Environment Symposium on Challenges in Conserving Natural Heritage

October 30, 2009, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi

Background

Natural heritage consists of terrestrial or aquatic features and is typically representative of a unique ecosystem, rich in species diversity, pristine wilderness area and aesthetic value. Such sites need to be conserved, regenerated and managed scientifically.

Among the risks to natural heritage sites are industrial pollution, ill-conceived economic development, increased traffic due to tourism, floods and other natural disasters, lack of management skills, and lack of awareness on the part of local communities. The CMS Environment symposium on natural heritage conservation will:

- Define the discourse on natural heritage
- Raise awareness on natural heritage, regeneration, sustainable use and conservation
- Offer solutions to long-term issues of site preservation, conservation and management
- Enhance cooperation to safeguard natural properties as well as unique landscape systems
- Bring together managers of natural heritage sites and regional and international experts to identify and determine actions necessary to ensure conservation of current and potential sites
- Highlight lessons-learned, innovative and sustainable methods for revenue generation, pitfalls, and methods for managing different stakeholders (local community, government, business, and international organisations)

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Government officials, non-government agencies, UN organisations, donor agencies and researchers, academicians, planners and consultants working on natural heritage conservation.

