

Ecotourism Issues and Concerns

Tourism is the world's fastest growing industry and in recent years, has come to play an increasingly dominant role in the economies of developing countries.

The industry contributed 4.9% to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and has emerged as major source of employment.

A Ministry of Tourism, Government of India study indicates that tourism supports 46.87 million jobs (directly and indirectly) accounting 8.78% of the total jobs within the country

The Conflict Tourism, Conservation and the Community



Environmental Impacts

Land, water and noise pollution are necessary fallouts of unregulated development in tourism locations.

Also due to unregulated tourism, the environment takes a toll bearing the brunt of heavy tourist traffic and use of natural resources often beyond its natural carrying capacity.

In Goa the water table has fallen far below the reach of the village wells since the deep wells of the hotels keep pumping up water for their pools and lush lawns.

Economic Impacts

There are many less favourable economic effects of tourism such as inflation, leakages and dependency.

Studies estimate that on an average, of every US\$ 100 spent on a vacation tour by a tourist from a developed country, only around US\$ 5 actually stays in a developing country destination's economy.

Socio-cultural Impacts

Tourism is linked to people and depends on people. However, the current tourism model is unable to develop into an economically and socially viable option for local communities.

Tourism has played a significant role in privatization of common resources in tourism destinations, displacement of people and forest dwellers from their homelands to make way for hotels and resorts.

Tourism-related activities have also made children vulnerable to sexual and non-sexual forms of exploitation.

There are also problems relating to health, drugs, crime and trafficking of people.

The negative impacts of tourism on the Jarawa community in the Andaman and Nicobar islands are noteworthy.



Ecotourism: What is it?

The recognition of the ill effects of tourism led to the need to develop an industry that was sensitive to the environment and that which could provide some benefits to the local community. This is how the concept of 'ecotourism' came into being.

The term 'ecotourism' was coined by a marketing agency that was promoting Costa Rica as a rainforest destination in the early 1970s

Perhaps the most over-used and misused word the world over.

Many buzzwords unfortunately being synonymously being used with ecotourism. These range from '*sustainable tourism*'; '*responsible tourism*'; '*nature-based tourism*'; '*green travel*' to '*cultural tourism*'.

A study in Vietnam shows that, 95 per cent of the country's sites are advertised as offering ecotourism, yet all these sites are based on nature holidays, not ecotourism.

Ecotourism (as often understood) is *not* the presence of exclusive resorts in exotic locales managed by enterprising 'outsiders'; nor is it a State or Centrally managed Government operation that results in the filling of state exchequers.



The first formal definition of ecotourism was given by the IUCN (the World Conservation Union), which states that ecotourism is:

"...Is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations."

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as, "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people".

Simply stated, ecotourism is, "environmentally responsible tourism", which should include:

- Travel to natural areas
- Minimal ecological, social and cultural impacts
- Education for the traveler/tourist for environmental awareness
- Direct financial and other benefits to the local community
- Respect for different cultures

Ecotourism, if carried out appropriately has the potential to help conserve the ecosystem where it is practiced as also provide local communities an alternate source of income and thus improve their livelihoods. It can thus be looked upon as a tool for sustainable development.



Ecotourism in India has become synonymous with tourism in protected areas and/or areas of significant ecological/wildlife values. Ironically, the kind of tourism that continues to be promoted and practiced is very much mainstream tourism, only the locations have become much more fragile.

However, besides the several thousand of initiatives that are being (wrongly) carried out under the ecotourism banner, there are a few that are worth discussing.

The Keoladeo National Park (KNP), Rajasthan

Perhaps the only park in India where in an innovative move there has been a conscious effort to involve local community members in tourism related activities by training and employing them as guides and rickshaw pullers.



Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim

The Yuksam-Dzongri-Goechcha La is a trekking trail located in the buffer zone of the Khangchendzonga national park. Large numbers of tourists trek on this route every year to enjoy the beauty of the mountains

In 1995 was launched a project called the Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism project, supported by USAID and led by the Mountain Institute and the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development.

The project has since become quite a landmark in the field of ecotourism. Over 400 people have participated in training courses to increase their capacity to generate income from ecotourism related enterprises. These included porters, vegetable growers, lodge and teashop operators, and guides.

Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala

Till about five years ago, this reserve faced the same problems of conflict with local people as many other protected areas in the country.

In the late 1990s, forest officials here used the GEF-funded Ecodevelopment Project to establish a unique ecotourism programme. Different Ecodevelopment Committees (EDCs) were formulated depending on the function and interest of the respective group.

Through the community-based ecotourism programme, hotels in the vicinity were contacted and requested to add forest treks into their itinerary for tourists.

Forest treks were conducted by the ex-poachers EDC and other tribal trekkers. EDC members also helped to patrol the forest at night.

Income generated from these activities goes into the respective EDC account. The community based ecotourism programmes are generating around Rs 60,00,000 annually and providing direct employment to more than 500 tribal families



Tso Moriri Lake, Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir)

Situated at an altitude of 4511 meters above sea level in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, lies the brackish water lake of Tso Moriri. This is one of the world's highest lakes and the largest brackish water body in the Indian Changthang region.

The Changthang plateau is inhabited by the nomadic *Changpa* community who moves with its livestock in search of grazing grounds in tune with the changing seasons. However, more and more *Changpas* are resorted to settled lives.

A permanent settlement of *Changpas* exists on the shore of this lake. This is the village of Korzok. Korzok has at present 23 settled households. The village also has a 300 year old monastery

As a result of the increasing interest of local people in deriving benefits from tourism, they have initiated ten home stays in the village this year.



Ecotourism activities in India today range from home stays to luxury hotel chains attempting to promote 'eco-friendly' practices in their hotels. Local people benefit from working as trained guides to running home stays themselves. There are examples of 'high end' tourism (particularly in coastal areas) with exclusive resorts that are 'eco-friendly' and hire a handful of local people as employees.

It might be then appropriate to look at this entire range, but have a set of guidelines or even certification that helps ascertain how whether the initiative can be called ecotourism.

Towards Ecotourism

- Tourism as only one of many alternate livelihood options
- Capacity Building
- Community Institutions for Benefit Sharing and other Functions
- Partnerships
- Code of Conduct/Environmental Guidelines
- Education and Awareness
- Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Ecotourism is a double-edged sword. It can do inordinate harm leading to ecological as well as cultural degradation. However, if planned and executed sensitively, it can actually be come a vehicle for conservation as also provide a livelihood option for local communities. The challenge lies in how best this is done.

