

Note on Ecotourism – to be read in conjunction with EQUATIONS Analysis of (Draft) Guidelines for Ecotourism In and Around Protected Areas issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests on

June 2, 2011

Tourism is complex and has social, cultural, economic and political implications for both the tourism destination as well as for the country.

Complicating this further is the concept of ecotourism, which stands for 'ecological tourism'. To understand ecotourism, it is necessary to unpack both these words.

Ecology

The term ecology was first introduced by a biologist Haeckel who defined it as "... the study of the economy, of the household, of animal organisms. This includes the relationships of animals with both the inorganic and organic environments, above all the beneficial and inimical relations that Darwin referred to as the conditions of the struggle for existence". The understanding of human ecology is subsumed within the broader term of ecology. The understanding of ecology in itself requires a multi-sectoral lens. The understanding of human ecology in particular would need to draw from anthropology, sociology, economics, geography and biology¹.

Tourism

There are 4 basic features of tourism: tourism is subject to commoditization, private capital alone is not sufficient and state intervention is needed to fulfil the vision for tourism (in the case of capitalist economies, this could be in the form of a mix of the public and private sector) and tourism necessarily sees privatisation. Further it has been established that tourism is a product which is subject to issues of consumption i.e. demand and supply².

Tourism is itself a multi stakeholder sector with those offering direct and ancillary services therefore requiring interconnectedness between the relevant ministries and departments at the centre and the state. Additionally, a large part of this sector is informal in nature making regulation a challenge as well as an imperative.

Tourism like all other sectors in the services industry is not immune to social and cultural hierarchies. Given the broad spectrum of stakeholders, very often their benefits are also in competition and at logger heads with each other.

The ecotourism that is being promoted by the guidelines are merely using nature as a tourism product, which does not make it ecotourism. With the suggestion that tourism be taken out of the parks and into the buffer areas, what is emerging is tourism which is rural and nature-based, and therefore could be termed as nature-based rural tourism, rather than ecotourism.

Political connotations of ecotourism

Ecotourism, today is largely interpreted as nature based tourism with the additional requirement of sensitivity and responsibility towards the delicate balance in nature. Ecotourism is also being used as a market-based conservation mechanism in the context of climate change and the UNFCCC as is evident in the REDD implementation mechanism in India, which is the Green India Mission.

Post 2006, when tiger reserves received directions to notify buffer and core, the total area of the tiger reserves have increased. This is also in consonance with the attempt to increase forest cover in the context of the climate change debate. In India, the mechanism that has been evolved is the Green India Mission, which aims at increasing the forest cover in the country to 20 million hectares. The proposed guidelines seem to be attempting this by stipulating that farms be converted to forests and that buffer areas be restored to wildlife habitats Act. To have its provisions potentially labelled as trade-restrictive might grant immunity to service providers in the tourism industry from performing their duties under this Act. It can be speculated as to what proportion of this investment in tourism is being or will be facilitated by the GATS. But undoubtedly its disciplines on domestic regulation might consider such regulation trade-restrictive and violating GATS commitments and possibly deny state governments their constitutional right to pass such regulations in the future.

There are several case studies³ which highlight communities' role in conservation. Yet the debate today focuses on private sector contribution for conservation in the name of ecosystem services that forests offer. It is infact this commoditisation of forests which is the problem and which ecotourism in its limited way furthers. Forests are more than carbon sinks and providers of ecosystem services. They are homes to diverse communities with a rich cultural heritage of conservation.

The guidelines clearly mention that they are meant for ecotourism ventures in and around protected areas. Herein lies the beginning of the problem. What about ecotourism in forest areas which are not reserves? Is there no need for sustainable tourism development in these areas?

Furthermore, as mentioned above the creation of protected areas mandates ruthless 'voluntary' displacement of communities who have for centuries been the custodian of the forests. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 reiterates and re-establishes this relationship between forests and forest dwelling communities. Yet the manner in which Critical Wildlife Habitats and Critical Tiger Habitats are identified and demarcated does not take this into consideration. Several forest based groups have highlighted the issues pertaining to this and we support their criticisms on the same.

The guidelines highlight 2 important linkages to ecotourism:

- a. Ecotourism and conservation
- b. Ecotourism and community development

We refute the above claims in this note. Ecotourism if conducted in a planned manner, can generate funds for conservation. However, it does not directly lead to conservation, which needs for more specialised methods.

In the context of livelihoods, ecotourism can only generate employment and for communities it is employment at the lower end of the hierarchical corporate ladder. There is a very important contradiction and difference between livelihood and employment.

Livelihood is a much broader sociological term rooted the concept of social justice where culture and identity form its basis and is dependent upon the landscape and ecology. It is connected with community and property rights indicating dignity, control, empowerment and sustainability apart from income generation.

Employment on the other hand is an economic term denoting work done and money earned. It is individualistic, governed by a set of rules between two individuals/entities where capital dominates and is irrespective of any location/landscape/ecology and pays for labour that produces and reproduces for consumption for another and does not consider the issue of sustainability.

Ecotourism and conservation

The following are some arguments made in favour of ecotourism's contribution to conservation:

- a. *Tourism generates funds for conservation related activities.*

EQUATIONS in an earlier paper had refuted this argument stating⁴:

Estimating the costs of regeneration and the sources of funds received by the Forest Department is a difficult task. Firstly, identifying and segregating different cost components is a challenge since administrative costs overlap various activities including conservation and management.

Secondly, identifying the source of resources is also a challenge. The Forest Department receives money from both the state and central governments. There are several crores of funds parked in CAMPA, the utilisation of which has been extremely low⁵. The Government of India is also receiving large amounts of funding from various International Financial Institutions for forest regeneration.

Fundamentally, the issue here is to examine if the income generated from ecotourism activities do go back to the Forest Department. Currently, all earnings from forests (NTFP, timber, entry fee etc.) go back into a common pool wherein all non-plan income of the state is parked, from where allocations for different expenses are made. There is

no way to ensure that the incomes from tourism are ploughed back to the Forest Department for regeneration work. Therefore the only direct benefit that is traceable is salaries people receive in case they are employed at tourism sites. This creates a rupture in the idea that ecotourism can be used as an income generation method for forest conservation.

b. Wildlife tourism creates awareness among the tourists who are visiting therefore building public support for conservation measures that the centre announces.

The nature of wildlife tourism in India, is centred around the big mammals. Guides in different National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries have shared that tourists are left unhappy and dissatisfied if a big mammal has not been spotted during a safari. For e.g in Kanha and Bandhavgarh, safari guides and drivers are focussed on tracking the tiger for the tourists and that tourists are not interested in learning about the flora and fauna of the forests.

Further, a rule exists that the distance between 2 jeeps during a safari should be a minimum of 500 metres. However, photographs in the media show that this does not happen.

Ecotourism and community development

The forests in the form of – protected areas, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries are the main tourism product in ecotourism. The creation of these areas have caused land alienation and displacement in large numbers. This change in land use pattern and land dispossession, lack of access to forest resources has led to social injustices like loss of dignity and livelihoods of the adivasis and other forest dwellers. Therefore, in stark contrast to the claim that ecotourism furthers community development, it in fact bases itself on a paradigm of forest conservation and protection, which has taken away the existing livelihoods of people.

Through the narration of several examples, the Encyclopaedia of Ecotourism, corroborates this understanding of ecotourism in the context of communities, which states⁶:

“Ecotourism, therefore, has not proven itself to be the godsend for local communities that is claimed to be by some supporters. This is a matter of great concern, given that the size and expectations of local communities, and hence the demand for resources, is continuing to increase throughout most of the world.”

Ecotourism and employment

It is true that tourism development generates employment opportunities for the local communities. However the owners of these establishments whether lodge owners or jeep owners are usually not from the region. They are more often than not from nearby cities/towns and sometimes are from as far away places like New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. The income thus generated from tourism is taken away from the region and into the bigger cities. There is also the issue of self-determination here. People who used to own land, have due to poverty been forced to sell out to the companies and become employed as guides and drivers if lucky, but usually end up working as security guards, gardeners, waiters at the restaurant etc. Therefore the mere generation of employment, though an often repeated argument, is highly overestimated as it does not counter the disempowerment and lack of dignified life that the adivasis experience.

The Madhya Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board (MPEDB) has conducted a study on employment generated by ecotourism in Bandhavgarh⁷. The study shows that though 62% of the people involved in tourism activity at Tala are local people, they are all largely involved in the unorganised sector of drivers, cooks, labour, guide and general business. 88% of the people of village Tala are involved in this work. All the managerial level work is therefore conducted by the outsiders. Further, in villages other than Tala, only 1% of the people are involved in tourism activities.

This trend is corroborated in the study conducted by Karanth, K & DeFries, R (2010) where they state that less than 0.001% of population living with 10 kms of a PA find employment in the tourism industry⁸.

Further, ecotourism is not a year-round activity since it depends on the tourism season. All tourism can contribute to, is an alternate means of income for a few months in a year. To shift the dependency of incomes of families on tourism, would be detrimental to their economic well being.

Ecotourism and Livelihood

Today, community-driven tourism initiatives are still playing a marginal role and do not receive the impetus they need from the government through schemes and incentives. In the absence of this communities will not be able to compete with big operators with the capacity to acquire large tracts of land and convert them into private forests, which are then promoted as tourism products in themselves. In fact, it is not mere schemes that are needed to ensure that tourism is community driven. What is needed is a change in the way ecotourism is envisaged – where communities are central to the venture and not mere profits of large tour operators and income for the nation. Furthermore, starting a tourism enterprise might not even be the interest of the community and the state would need to recognise and respect this.

As mentioned above, a change in mindset towards ecotourism and communities is in order. The definition of tourism as propounded by TIES includes community-welfare. Ecotourism would need to go beyond community-welfare to being community-centered if it wants to achieve its goal of conservation and community development.

End Notes

¹ Bates, D.G & Tucker, J (Eds.) (2010), “Human Ecology: Contemporary Research and Practice”, Springer, New York

² Shaw, G & Williams, A.M. (1994), “Critical Issues in Tourism”, Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts

³ Documentation of Consultation on REDD in India organised by NFFPFW and EQUATIONS on ‘REDD Realities in India: Will the forests and forest people survive?’, November 2010

⁴ ‘Community Involvement in Ecotourism’, EQUATIONS, December 2010

⁵ According to the MoEF website on CAMPA, income as on 31.1.2010 is Rs. 16,884,204,485 and the expenditure for the same period is Rs. 7,999,134 with a balance of Rs. 16,876,205,351. <http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/CAMPA-consolidated-income-expen.pdf>

⁶ David B, Weaver (Ed.) (2001), “ The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism”, CABI Publishing, U.K.

⁷ “Contribution of Ecotourism to livelihood: Bandhavgarh National Park”, MPEDB

⁸ Karanth, K & DeFries, R (2010) Nature-based tourism in Indian protected areas: New challenges for park management, Conservation Letters