

Tiger, tiger burning bright: is tourism a blessing or a blight?

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Short title: Tiger Tourism and Conservation

Summary

The number of tigers have declined from 100,000 a century ago to only c3,200 today and are thus a focus for conservation and last-chance tourism. However tiger watching tourism is seen as another pressure on their survival and thus India has been the first country to announce plans to reduce/regulate tourism in its tiger reserves. This has re-opened an international discussion on whether tourism is a positive or negative force for the conservation of flagship species. Using India as a case study, this paper sets out the arguments for tiger tourism in order to invite further academic and industry comment.

Key words: tigers, wildlife tourism, community involvement, conservation

Introduction

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (2011), **the world tiger population is at its lowest level on record, with possibly as few as 3,200 remaining in the wild. Although accurate population estimates are difficult to calculate, numbers are thought to have fallen by 95% since the beginning of the twentieth century when tigers could be found throughout Asia. Today tigers occupy just 7% of their former range (WWF, 2011). Three subspecies of tiger (*Panthera tigris*), the**

Bali, Javan and Caspian are already extinct (from the 1980s) and now there are very real concerns about the future of the Bengali tigers. Unfortunately, tigers have had a long history of persecution which began with hunting for sport and for 'pest' reduction. More recently their plight has been compounded by loss of habitat; 45% of which has decreased in the last ten years coupled with an encroaching human population. On top of this is the increasingly profitable trade in tiger parts for Asian medicine which drives poisoning and poaching often using inhumane methods to ensure the pelts are not damaged (Hill, 2010).

Despite its plight, the tiger remains a majestic, iconic and symbolic creature with a high tourist value. Referred to as 'striped gold' the tiger is the sought after subject of the tourist gaze and thus the economic benefits of tourism have provided a strong rationale for its protection. The country which receives the most benefit from tiger tourism and which has the most tigers is India. Here most tiger tourism takes place in only 10 of its 37 tiger reserves (Karanth and DeFries, 2010) However a tiger count conducted in February 2008 showed that India's tiger population had plummeted to 1,411 animals down from 3,642 in 2002 (Wildlife Protection Society of India, 2011); although conservation organizations believe that, in reality, there are much fewer than 1,411 given the prevalence of poachers and the current market value of tiger parts and pelts (WWF, 2011). Tourism is thought of as yet another pressure upon the daily life of tigers. As to how good tourism is for tiger conservation is currently open for debate. The National Tiger Conservation Authority in India are concerned that reserves are small and prone to disturbance from large numbers of tourists. This has led the Environment Ministry to call for regulations and a reduction in tourism development in the reserves, and for local communities living in core tiger habitats to be moved off of the land (Blakely, 2010; Francis, 2010; Matthews, 2009). Commentators, however, have noted that it "is abundantly clear that tourism can be good for tiger conservation" (Matthews, 2009a, p50). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that some of the densest tiger populations with the best breeding success occur within the tourism zones of the parks; that is not to say, however, that tiger tourism does not need to be better managed and regulated. Clearly it does.

Tiger tourism has received relatively little attention in the tourism management literature. Yet the recent discussions and controversies in India highlight the fragile relationship between tourism, conservation and biodiversity. Using India as a case study, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between tiger tourism and conservation. The paper considers the tourism product, the politics, the policies and the experiences of tour operators and tourists. It draws upon preliminary qualitative interviews with operators, tourists and the director of Tour Operators for Tigers, a business to business organisation which campaigns for responsible tiger tourism. Inherent in the discussion is the need to involve local communities, encourage entrepreneurship and to provide access to resources and alternative livelihoods for the tribal communities who live in or near the tiger reserves.

India is known as a 'mega diverse country' supporting high biological diversity (Mittermeier and Mittermeier, 2005). It has 590 protected areas (PAs) but these cover less than 5% of the total land mass. PAs are small, typically less than 300km squared and are extremely fragmented meaning that once outside of the reserve there are very few corridors to enable large mammals to connect with other protected areas (Karanth and DeFries, 2010). Out of these 590 protected areas, there are 37 tiger reserves which receive more than 1 million visitors each year (Tiger Task Force, 2005).

Whilst the establishment of protected areas and national tiger reserves is the most widely accepted means of biodiversity conservation (Sekhar, 2003), reserves in themselves are not the sole remedy as large carnivorous mammals such as tigers roam great distances and fight for new territories. Indeed, the effective management and protection of these eco-corridors is a critical factor in safeguarding and recovering a population of tigers (Sun, 2006). A high density of tigers in a relatively small space may be good for spotting tigers but is not good for long term survival of the species. At the last count in Bandhavgarh, there were twenty tigers within a 100km² tourist zone; four times the usual and natural density of tiger populations (Matthews, 2009). Breeding success in the popular tiger reserves is clearly a positive sign; however young tigers in search of new territory and gene pools wander into the buffer zones which are a few kilometers of mixed use land utilized by wildlife and people. Villagers and grazing cattle here are vulnerable to tigers and this is where the greatest conflict between the animals and local people occur. To date, tigers in the reserve at Chandrapur have killed 200 cattle and 69 people (Hill,

2010).

It is often also in the buffer zones and during periods where tourists are not in the reserves such as during the monsoon where poachers can practice their trade without detection from hoteliers, NGOs, tour guides, rangers and tour operators who police the popular reserves. According to Matthews (2009, p50), the presence of visitors offers four important benefits to tiger conservation. First they offer an “informal monitoring and anti-poaching programme”. Second, tourism helps to raise the status of a park thus increasing its ability to attract both international and government funding. Third, it “enhances the motivation and quality of a park’s rangers and management”. It also makes forest department personnel highly accountable and finally the economic benefit that tourism creates allows the forest reserve, and its wildlife to be valued as “a living ecosystem”.

Indeed, wildlife tourism is often perceived as placing an extrinsic value on wildlife resources; thus making an animal worth a lot more alive than dead. This is now the case with safari animals in Africa, whale watching, orangutans and polar bears to name just a few iconic species. This being so, it is indeed conceivable that the same might be true of tigers. Certainly the operators working in the industry perceive tourism to be the only industry which pays hard cash for standing, untouched, bio diverse forests. It is estimated that a tiger in a popular tourist reserve generates some US\$130 million in direct tourism revenue in her adult life or US\$ 785,677 per annum (Matthews, 2008, p45). Although it has to be said, that dead tigers have a direct value too: for body parts and bribes (i.e. forest officials turn a blind eye to poaching in return for substantial sums of money), and an indirect value countering loss of livestock, return of the forest for timber and a reduction in costs for guards to protect tiger populations (Turcq, 2010).

However, the most critical problem with regards to tiger conservation, other than poaching, is deforestation and this is a product of several complex factors to do with a fast growing economy, a high human population, unhelpful government structures, numerous conservation NGOs and high degrees of rural poverty. In his fieldwork conducted over three of India’s most promising tiger states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Assam, Matthews, (2009, p33) found overgrazed, denuded landscapes, chopped down and burnt out woodlands, countless plantations of teak trees, millions of cattle and goats, de-motivated, under-resourced forest guards and new poaching camps; above all, the never-ending pressure of humankind in a landscape where more than 850 million people survive on £1 per day and where environmental protection is near the bottom of a long list of government imperatives. Protected areas are thus under pressure from commercial interests as well as those associated with development such as road building and mining. Furthermore Francis (2010) reports that the Indian government’s failure to manage tourism responsibly has resulted in lodges being built in sensitive habitats, hotels blocking corridors between conservation areas and unregulated viewing which has resulted in disturbance to tigers.

The relationship between nature-based tourism and conservation in the literature is a highly contested and controversial topic with some research indicating a positive, symbiotic relationship. In principle, wildlife tourism can have positive effects on both wildlife species and their habitats through financial contributions (Pennisi *et al.*, 2004; Tisdell and Wilson, 2002; Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002) and non-financial contributions, socio-economic incentives and education (Higginbottom *et al.*, 2001; Orams, 1995; Budowski, 1976). However, the negative effects of wildlife tourism on individual species or wildlife in general dominate much of the literature. As Gauthier (1993, p8) exclaims: “while there are many advantages for humans in the recreational enjoyment of wildlife, I am hard-pressed to conceive of any advantages for the wildlife.” That said, once an economic value is placed on a particular species, there follows a greater incentive to protect it and the tiger is no exception. In their case, it is far better to have an economic value placed on them than for them to represent no value at all, and given that tourism is the mechanism which allows it to have a greater economic value through economic multipliers as a living species rather than on its skin or body parts, then tourism becomes a fundamental tool for its conservation.

Karanth and DeFries (2010) assess visitation and employment in India's most prominent ten tiger reserves. They report an average annual growth rate of 14.9% visitors between the years 2002 and 2008; a demand mostly driven by domestic tourism and India's increasing middle class. Indeed 80% are domestic tourists although this percentage varies enormously between reserves with 42% at Ranthambore, 83% at Sariska and 99% at Dandeli-Anshi, Bhadra and Mudumalai. Visitor numbers ranged from 5,137 – 566, 358. Periyar, Ranthambore, Kanha and Pench have seen sustained growth in this period which is facilitated by widespread publicity for the PAs as well as forest department officers who support tourism growth. Poor wildlife sightings and accessibility are the reasons why other parks are not so well visited. Tourism revenues are estimated to be US\$6,848 in Bhadra, the least visited PA, and US\$3,163,753 in Ranthambore; the park which is the most visited by international tourists who spend more on park fees and accommodation; overall the 20% of international tourists generate 50% of parks revenue.

The question is who benefits from this tourism spend? Quite often local communities are excluded. In 1991, Carriere wrote about the political economy and conservation in Central America. Here, in the name of environmental protection, environmental institutions saw environmental protection in isolation from the social context and converted Costa Rica's forests into "fenced-off green museums (for the rich) surrounded by starving peasant families" (1991, p24). Fennel (2008) explains how the biodiversity crisis, new ecological theories and dissatisfaction with government regulatory measures has contributed to biological and social systems theory which now underpins ecosystem management based upon the recognition that sustainability can only be attained through societal change. This new ecological paradigm places humans as integral components of complex ecosystems which should be managed by an "integrated management of natural landscapes, ecological processes, wildlife species and human activities both within and adjacent to protected areas" (Canadian Environment Advisory Council, 1991 cited Fennel, 2008, p114). In addition, returning people as part of the functioning of a PA's ecosystem would cease to delude people about the proper place of human beings in the natural world.

This shift in thinking is now widely recognised although unfortunately not always put into practice. In India, local people living around the PAs often end up paying for them either indirectly due to loss of access to resources such as fuel wood, fodder and other non-timber forest products, and directly through taxation or by losses from crop and livestock raiding by the wild animals that are being conserved (Sekhar, 2003). These costs have negative effects on local attitudes. Without seeing any benefits no amount of guards and policing will encourage local people to take part in conservation programmes (Fennel, 2008). The management of protected areas can not therefore be successful unless it includes local people's cooperation and support (Sekhar, 2003). Efforts to save the tiger are also set against the backdrop of India's extraordinary growth and the country's insatiable thirst for development. In such a human-dominated landscape, the dilemma is whether local villagers should have the right to graze their cattle versus the right of an iconic, predatory cat to roam freely.

For community-based approaches to work, local people must receive direct benefits such as biomass resources, park funds diverted to local villages by state agencies and direct revenues from wildlife tourism (Songorwa *et al.*, 2000). This requires a bottom-up political framework, namely the empowerment of local resource users and the development and strengthening of local institutions which can represent local community interests (Martin, 1997). In addition to this, activities designed to increase conservation awareness, the planting of fuel wood species, and the provision of alternative energy sources also help the PAs to be a success. Although it is difficult to find examples around the world where this has been successful there are some good examples in Africa (Shackley, 1996) and Nepal (Bajracharya *et al.*, 2005)

There is much research to suggest a direct contribution to conservation from tourism generated income (Tisdell and Wilson, 2002). However, Karanth and DeFries (2010, p11) claim that "tourism revenue in India has rarely been directed towards improving conservation efforts", and despite the growth in visitor numbers their findings suggest that <0.001% of people living within 10km of the park received direct income from tourism employment. This figure which is partly explained by the high human population also suggests that the direct economic benefits of tourism do not entirely reach local communities. Despite the evidence elsewhere that nature-based tourism can improve local livelihoods and promote

conservation (see Walpole and Thouless, 2005; Goodwin, 1996), in India wildlife tourism is restricted and mostly controlled by state and private agencies. According to Sekhar (2003), it has been slow to embrace nature based and wildlife tourism; there is no institutional framework to govern its development and therefore it tends towards self-regulation where product development, management and marketing are largely the responsibility of private sector operators.

Methodology

The first stage of this project involved undertaking a scoping study which draws key findings from the academic literature, published reports and recent media attention. This provided the necessary information and backdrop from which to begin preliminary data collection. In order to explore the main components of the relationship between tourism management, tigers and their conservation, an inductive qualitative approach to data generation is adopted as this provides an opportunity to discover and investigate the potential issues (Carson *et al.*, 2001). As Sekhar (2003, p340) suggests "linking tourism benefits to conservation is difficult where wildlife is highly endangered, pressure on biomass resources is high and stakeholders are many". Given that there are a number of stakeholders in the production and consumption of tiger tourism, this research used a theoretical sampling method to determine participants for in-depth interviews (Patton, 1990). This paper presents work in progress and therefore draws upon the data from five in-depth interviews from two wildlife tour operators (SMEs who specialise only in wildlife travel), a conservation pressure group (Tour Operators for Tigers) comprised of a consortium of Indian and international tour operators, and two tourists who have recently (within the last two years) been on a tiger safari in Ranthambore. Both these tourists fit a typical 'wildlife tourist profile' being over 40, well educated and affluent. All participants were based in the UK. A semi-structured discussion guide was produced for each stakeholder and included themes which loosely comprised 'product', 'tourist experience', 'tourism / PA management' and the local community.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a standard thematic approach (see Gill and Johnson, 1997; Jorgensen, 1989; Spradley, 1979). The thematic framework evolves by the culmination of *a priori* and *emergent* themes which then appear as subheadings in the results. First, the analysis begins with a description of a typical tiger tour as presented by the tour operators and the tourists who recounted their experiences. It then moves on to park management and local community involvement.

Findings and discussion

The 'tiger watch product'

Tour operators report a growing demand for tiger watching tours; a demand they feel is driven by "*television, the plight of the tiger and the ease of travel to these places*". They include India in the wildlife tourism portfolio due to "*its incredible biodiversity*" and the fact that "*there is no other country in the world where tigers are habituated*". "*Tigers are like gorillas. When we walked through the parks in the 1970s and the 1980s, we never saw a tiger until the 1990s when they started to become habituated, they started to become used to the volume of tourists rushing around in jeeps and on elephant backs and they started to lose their fear*". This is particularly the case in the three most visited parks: Kanha, Ranthambore and Bandavgarh which are the most popular parks for international visitors. Both operators organise game drives twice a day; early morning and evening. They also take part in 'tiger shows' whereby forest department workers and guides track tigers and then make every attempt to bring tourists on elephant back to where they are "*for a five or ten minute viewing at the tiger*". Tigers roam freely in the PAs and are tracked by the mahouts who use the alarm calls of other wildlife, smells and pug-prints to locate them.

Tours are offered between November and early January when the weather is good but tiger viewings are more difficult, and then again between February and April/May when the weather becomes very hot, vegetation dies right down, waterholes dry up and tigers become much easier to see. Both the tour operator and TOFT assert that "*Because of the high level of tourists there are no poachers... so in the areas visited by tourists there are lots of tigers. I say lots – it is relative but.. where there are tourists*

there are tigers because there are no poachers.” Although operators do not guarantee sightings, one asserts that their clients have *“never not seen tigers on one of our tours.”*

The tourist experience

The operators conveyed how busy the most popular tiger reserves are *“with 30,40 or even 50 vehicles going through”*. The pressure at Rathambore has instigated the adoption of canter jeeps which carry 30 or 40 people as opposed to the traditional Willis jeeps. A tourist explains that *“you had to be booked in since regulations seemed very tight; game drives only took place between 7.30am and 9.30am and then a similar two hour window in the late afternoon”*. These time restrictions were seen as a good thing as it supposedly *“minimised the impacts on the tigers”*. The use of large vehicles did not seem to spoil the tourist experience *“as much as we thought it would”* because they were *“totally open top and did not seem to restrict viewing”*. However given the large group size (16-20 people), they *“still preferred (and paid more for) the smaller jeeps which could get off the main routes”*.

Both tourists did see tigers; one saw one and the other participant saw two; neither had uninterrupted views and did *“not have long enough for us to take a photo”*. Therefore, *“more tigers would have been nice”* and *“we intend to go back and see more”*. Both were aware of the presence of several other vehicles which slightly detracted from their pre-trip vision of the perfect tiger experience. Guiding was seen to be very good and interpretation relatively so. Although mostly heavily orientated towards the single species, both tourists experienced other places and other wildlife.

Seeing how busy the reserves were with people and vehicles made these tourists aware of the potential impacts of being there. Any dissonance was countered, however, by the fact that *“I could see that the restrictions were being applied and that they were trying to manage the the number of tourists”*. When asked how they chose their tour operators, both of these participants (who may not, of course, represent the entire tourist population) claimed that *“it was very important that the operators demonstrated responsible practices as although they are in it for the business at the end of the day, it makes you feel slightly warmer and fluffier about it and more comfortable with yourself about what you are doing”*. Both tourists, however, were not convinced that their spend reached the local economy as there was no, or very limited, interaction with local people. These scant findings, however, highlight how regulations and responsible operating is as good for international tourists as it is for sustainable development. How much of India's emerging middle class, who represent the vast majority of tiger tourists, feel the same way is worthy of exploration given that wildlife tourism is relatively new to India's population are therefore tourists may not be as far advanced in their discussions of, or demand for, sustainable tourism products.

When asked what they associate with tigers two explicit emotional explanations emerge: first that they are *“large, majestic and rare animals”*, and second that they are a symbol of human encroachment; *“one of the examples that epitomises what we are doing to our environment”*; and *“representative of the health of the planet”*. Tiger watching tours are highly *“exciting”* and *“expectant”*, and when tigers are seen, there is *“surprise at its size”* and the overwhelming desire to share it with significant others. Desperate attempts are made to photograph the tiger so that there is some *“tangible evidence”*. On reflection about the entire experience, one of the participants exclaimed that it is *“about the whole thing”* *“It's about being in these places and seeing something that's representative of where you are”*. That said, travel and seeing such iconic species in their natural habitat *“brings the environmental crisis home to you. You just see when you are travelling (certainly by road) the amount of rubbish and the way these things are kept... and it is all related to conservation and the problems we cause”*.

Impacts and habituation

Beyond infrastructure development, rubbish and carbon footprints per tourist, there is little evidence from either the literature or these interviews that tourism is causing an increased impact on tiger population. Indeed, quite the reverse, tiger populations are only increasing in the regularly visited tiger reserves where they have sufficient protection. Outside the reserves the land is *“unloved and therefore not looked after”* (NGO) and this has a far greater impact on tiger conservation than tourism, as habitat loss and lack of sufficient corridors for over-populated tigers means that the increased tiger population is countered by *“too many tigers wandering into the buffer zones, killing cattle and people, and ultimately being killed themselves”*.

Habituation is usually referred to as a negative impact in the literature (Orams, 2002; Johns, 1996) because it risks animals becoming too accustomed to humans and is associated with the transmission of human diseases. However, all animals, including humans, adapt to their environment and for the tigers in India, habituation is seen as a natural progression. Tigers have adapted to the jeeps and the tracks and use them to gain advantage: *"a tiger gets on top of a tourist vehicle and thinks fantastic now I can see above the grass"* (TOFT). *"Tigers are the main users of the jeep tracks, not the jeeps. They use them as their highways. So if a jeep is driving along, and the tiger is coming towards it, the jeep stops and the tiger continues usually right past the jeep. They have got no fear of them"* (tour operator).

Park management

If tourism is as benign as these participants suggest, then its conservation is dependent on much wider issues. According to TOFT *"India now has everything it needs to save tigers. It has the laws, it has the scientists, it has the money, it has everything ... it just has appalling administration and terrible bureaucracy and corruption: bureaucratic intransigence and inability to look for solutions to these problems, and an acceptance of that"*. The way the reserves are managed by the state forestry departments therefore comes in for major criticism at the destination and policy level by both the tour operators and TOFT. Firstly, *"the forestry department make the big mistake of pushing all of the tourists into the same segment of the park. We have to stick within certain areas and so there are huge areas where tourists don't go and those areas are open to poachers often living on the other side of the parks where there isn't employment and obviously it is easy pickings for them"*. The solution is to have better park management within existing tourist hotspots as well as *"opening wider areas and a greater number of parks to tourists"*. *"You can only fit so many people into a tiger reserve. What I would like to see is people visiting all the tiger reserves"*.

The new focus on reducing or regulating tourism in the tiger reserves has meant that tour operators are being given a choice of zones. Each zone has a different price depending on the likelihood of seeing tigers with the best tiger zones charging the higher prices. The UK based tour operators claim that this is an unfair practice as all that it will do is reduce tourist demand, and therefore revenue for the parks which are substantially underpinned by international tourism: *"we are going to have to put all our prices up or offer people cheaper zones but clearly we can't really sell a holiday that says we are going to send you to the zone where you have a lesser chance of seeing tigers. Who will buy that?"* *"This is their first attempt to regulate tourism to reduce the impacts and to raise funds ... not for conservation no... I don't believe that any money goes to conservation but the prices for the permits are going up all the time"* especially for international tourists. Moreover, park revenues and direct economic benefit could be enhanced via an equal pay structure; *"if India wants to be taken seriously as a new destination, it cannot continue to discriminate against its visitors. The middle class of India are increasingly rich and are able to afford the same lodges that international tourists use"* (NGO).

The tour operators claim that the level of local employment in the parks and in the service sector is high. TOFT, however, recognise, that only a small number of people are directly employed as a percentage of the local population but claim that *"indirectly tourism brings a substantial amount of benefit: i.e. political interest in a place, media who oversee park operations, infrastructure, and above all accountability"*. This accountability brings with it a responsibility for conservation which in turn requires commitment and hard work from forest rangers, many of whom do not welcome the aggravation that this brings: *"park guides say that 'where there are no tigers, there are no problems'. So you know ... zip.... take it out and I won't tell anyone and that is a major, major problem because where the poor old forest guide has to get up in the morning and account for that bloody tiger, he's got a 7 day job, he has got communities giving him shit because the thing keeps taking out their dogs and they keep losing their cattle so actually if someone takes it out, it is much easier. So that is a problem"* and a situation also reported by a Hill (2010). Forest guides are very protective of their positions in the park and have a lot at stake if they are found to be incompetent. Each tiger death is a measure of this incompetence and for that reason, many deaths go unreported and a blind eye is turned to poaching (Turcq, 2010).

It is therefore apparent that tourism represents the least of the tigers' problems. The whole system of park management needs a complete overhaul. TOFT highlight the conflict between conservation and forestry where the reserves are owned and managed by the forestry department whose initial remit was

originally set up to make money out of forestry. Therefore “a forest officer who is running Karna national park will maybe look at a tree and go ‘that is worth 15,000 rupees.’ He won’t say that is really important because it has a giant Malabar Hornbill that lives in it and that is why we mustn’t chop it down - he will still chop it down because it is worth 15,000 rupees”. This continues despite the fact that tourism in pristine environments is a lot more lucrative than forestry. The result is considerable biodiversity loss inside and outside in the buffer zones of the reserves which are also forestry owned and managed. This is compounded by the degradation of the buffer zones, by over grazing and deforestation caused by local people who are not part of the land management process but who depend on its natural resources. Meanwhile, free economies and the lack of planning regulations mean that prime land right outside the PAs can be built and developed for second homes and leisure resorts. As TOFT explains: “you own 15 acres and you put your lodge on it and the guy next door says he is going to have a flats development. Then the guy next door to that buys it and puts a whopping great resort next to it so suddenly now where there were three farmlands you’ve now got mass conurbations”. Leisure and tourism is, of course, part of this drive for development.

Involving local communities

The forest itself, although being slowly encroached upon remains untouched as it is forestry owned. Here, however the regime is a top down process driven by the forestry department which has not sufficiently recognised the rights of local people to the land in and around the PAs; neither has it made biodiversity loss a priority issue. Each park is managed by the state rather than the federal government and the general feeling amongst the participants is that the forest workers should be employed and overseen by a federal department whose remit will be to better manage the biodiversity. To aid this, land in the already degraded buffer zones could have “massive planting to feed the undeniable demand for firewood so as not to degrade somewhere else”.

TOFT drew the analogy between renting a property and owning it: “where you have a stake in it and you look after the gardens and you do with it what you want to do with it. It is the same in forests and back yards for these guys. If you say you can do it, you can keep it, you can be in charge even if someone has to help them manage it. If they are somehow made to feel that it is theirs you will have a much easier job of conserving biodiversity”. The national parks in Britain were held as a model of good practice. Although often surrounded by urban populations, national parks are inhabited. They are “full of farmers, people doing bed and breakfasts, people doing walking trails. They are actually normal people who live in a lovely area. But they are all making their livelihoods out of the national park because people want to come. And we need to do the same with India”.

Finally, tiger tourism is currently directed only at the middle classes in India which is fundamentally wrong when it takes place amongst communities who pay the costs of the PAs but who are excluded from the products and experiences which they offer. There is no provision for backpackers, budget travellers or local people who want to visit or prosper from their tiger reserves. Operators see great potential for rest houses, home-stays and even camp sites within the parks where people can really be amongst nature and where the experience can be far more holistic rather than focused on a single species; something which is only experienced quietly on foot rather than in the back of vehicles. Moreover, it will be important for India to develop its new generation of conservationists; to enthuse local school children and “to turn cattle herders into wildlife guardians” who will eventually benefit from the tourist visits that their wildlife attract. This requires policies which value and support local entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

It is clear that tourism is here to stay in India, and elsewhere, and that demand for nature and wildlife is likely to continue along with an increasingly urbanised population. If policy makers start with the notion that tourism is potentially good for tiger conservation provided it is properly managed, then future discussions can begin from the point of finding solutions to its responsible management rather than merely highlighting the problems. At present tiger tourism in India occurs within a very difficult and complex social and political situation. The consensus is that the money generated from tourism seldom gets close to conservation and that corruption and apathy is inherent in the forestry department system. Industry participants in this study were critical of how nature-based tourism is managed in India; that the

mechanisms, policies, practices and laws associated with tourism and conservation do not meet in a way that is constructive. Operators are wholly in favour of more regulations, policies and enforcement founded in logical conservation-driven initiatives such as the employment of local people, direct incentives for local people (and forest rangers) to manage the wildlife properly, better audits of tiger numbers, greater accountability of forest workers, and pricing and visitation mechanisms that present fair trading. Tour operators are less enthusiastic about the proposed price zoning and the fact that visitors are only really encouraged into a handful of tiger reserves. In their opinion, it would be better to spread the positive (and negative) impacts over a greater number of reserves. This would allow greater protection of tigers and their habitats, and over time facilitate the protection of suitable wildlife corridors.

To conclude, this small, introductory study of tiger tourism in India has highlighted the potential benefits and pitfalls of this sector. It is hoped that the paper will invite comment and further research in the field of tourism and the conservation of flagship species. Given the high profile of tiger conservation, it is surprising that there is so little research undertaken in terms of economic, social and environmental impact studies which determine the positive and negative impacts of tiger tourism on tiger populations in a robust and scientific manner. Such data could help determine visitor management plans and tiger reserve carrying capacities. From the information that can be gleaned, there are several important messages for other destinations in the process of developing tiger tourism. First it is clear that it is an industry which needs to be very carefully planned, managed and regulated, that local communities must be included in the management and development mix, and that building planning restrictions should be sympathetically imposed to foster appropriate development and minimal environmental impact. The tourist experience should foster a much wider appreciation of the natural world rather than a myopic focus on a single species and that elephant and walking safaris might replace the burgeoning number of large tourist vehicles which congregate in the tiger reserves. The tourist experience should not necessarily be for the sole purposes of the middle classes but should also provide a mechanism for local people to engage and to be guardians of their wildlife. Finally, it asserts that if a country is serious about the conservation of its iconic species, then an holistic approach to the environment must be inherent and apparent to all concerned.

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