

## **Tiger Tourism: Critical Issues, General Lessons**

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# **Tiger Tourism: Critical Issues, General Lessons.**

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Most modern tiger tourism (Cohen 2012) relies on national parks in India and Nepal. It is controversial, because it creates both negative and positive impacts, mediated through social as well as ecological mechanisms. Outside parks, tiger habitat and corridors have been taken over by tourist accommodation (Karanth and Karanth 2012). Inside parks, tourist vehicles drive too fast, and behave badly at sightings. Growth in impacts and infrastructure is associated mainly with domestic tourism (Karanth et al. 2012). Tiger conservationists attempted to ban tiger tourism in core areas of tiger reserves (Karanth and Karanth 2012). Because tourism funds anti-poaching measures, however, this would place tigers at greater risk (Buckley 2012, Buckley and Pabla 2012).

Several responses are possible. The first is tighter controls on tourist vehicles inside parks, and tourism development outside. The second is increased funding for voluntary programs to relocate villagers and livestock herds currently resident inside parks (Karanth 2007). Livestock grazing reduces food supplies for native herbivores; prey densities limit tiger populations (Karanth et al. 2004); and tigers which prey on domestic livestock may be killed.

The third response is to increase the area and connectivity of protected tiger habitat, by buying private landholdings or reallocating public forests to conservation, as in several other countries (Buckley 2010). Since public forests are used informally as a commons, reallocation to parks might need funds to buy out harvest and grazing, even if these occur through tradition rather than right (Karanth and Karanth 2012). This would still be cheaper than buying large numbers of small agricultural landholdings, typically 2 ha each. If acquisitions were to be funded by tourism, then tourism enterprises would need access to core reserve areas meanwhile, since these have the highest densities of partially habituated tigers easily seen by tourists (Buckley 2012).

Many critiques of tiger tourism focus on heavily visited national parks in Rajasthan, which I have not visited myself. My own experience is limited to Chitwan and Bardia National Parks in Nepal, and to Panna, Pench, Kanha and Badhavgarh National Parks in Madhya Pradesh, India. In Nepal, tourists search for tiger on elephant back (Buckley 2006, pp. 358-361). In Madhya Pradesh, they search in 4WD vehicles on designated roads, and on elephant-back once parks staff have located an accessible tiger. Accommodation is outside the park, and vehicle entry is regulated (Buckley, 2010, pp. 66-69).

There are two key aspects of conservation and visitor management at the Madhya Pradesh tiger reserves, which are also relevant to wildlife tourism worldwide. There are also many factors associated with local history and politics (Tiger Task Force 2005, WWF 2012), but these are less general in application. The first general lesson is about tourist behaviour. If we compare the behaviour of wildlife tourists in 4WD vehicles between the parks of Madhya Pradesh and those of their closest analogues in sub-Saharan Africa, some major contrasts emerge.

In African public parks, visitors drive their own vehicles, and vehicle jams are commonplace. This also applies in North American national parks. In African private reserves, visitors are driven slowly by expert guides, in radio contact. They approach individual animals under a strict protocol which minimizes disturbance to the animal and maximizes viewing opportunities for clients. This also applies in multi-property reserves such as Madikwe, and adjacent reserves with mutual traversing rights such as parts of the Sabi Sands. Since vehicles in Madhya Pradesh tiger reserves are driven only by approved drivers, a similar system could be established, with penalties for infringements. If necessary, this could include vehicle-mounted GPS and surveillance cameras, as well as radio reports by other drivers. Currently, there are indeed official protocols for drivers, but they are not followed, because there is no enforcement.

The second key lesson relates to the pivotal role of local village communities (Karanth and DeFries 2010; Karanth and Nepal, 2012). It appears that these local residents can act as gatekeepers for poaching, either letting poachers in or driving them out. As far as can be determined for the Madhya Pradesh tiger reserves, tourism revenue collected and kept by the State Government parks management agency is critical to funding livestock compensation and fence construction programmes for the villages, which in turn leads them to deter poachers (Buckley 2012, Buckley and Pabla 2012). Without continuing funds for these programs, villagers can switch quickly to encouraging poachers, as an indirect way to protect their domestic herds.

Similar interactions occur in a number of African, Asian and South American reserves, where icon endangered species of high value to poachers occur in public parks that are closely surrounded by communities dependent on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism. In some cases there are livestock compensation programs, snare and firearm handover schemes, and so on (Buckley 2003, pp. 212-215); in others, there are not. In Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, for example, puma have apparently been shot by mounted ranchers even inside the park itself, because they are seen as posing a threat to sheep in nearby estancias. This has occurred even though puma are legally protected. The total market value of sheep killed by puma each year is very small, and an appropriate compensation program might serve as a successful adjunct to anti-poaching patrols and enforcement. As noted by Balmford (2012) for Kaziranga National Park in India, however, conservation does require patrols and enforcement against organized poaching gangs, as well as good relations with surrounding communities.

Controversies over tiger conservation and tiger tourism in India recently reached India's Supreme Court, in the case of Writ Petition 12351/2010, Ajay Dubey vs the National Tiger Conservation Authority (Karanth and Karanth 2012). This has gone through several stages, but the most recent outcome as of 1 November 2012 is that tourism is permitted to continue inside the core areas of tiger reserves, but over no more than 20% of those areas, and subject to more stringent management protocols. If this can indeed proceed properly, then perhaps the Tiger Habitat Expansion Model proposed by Karanth and Karanth (2012) may have a good chance of success, in one form or another. In developing such an approach, the experience of other nations, enterprises and tourism subsectors will surely be relevant, just as the Indian experience is relevant to wildlife tourism worldwide.

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