Forests, Communities & Tourism
Over the past 8-10 years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of ecotourism enterprises at well established existing destinations like Kanha, Bandhavgarh and Corbett. Further, newer destinations like Satpura and Tadoba – Andhari have also emerged over the past 2-3 years and continue to do so.

Ecotourism is increasingly being seen as a driver for the eradication of poverty through economic development of communities. Impacts of ecotourism are seen in its multiplier effects, ability to create livelihood alternatives, governance and land use patterns. Ecotourism is also believed to create an enabling environment for conservation and generating a monetary resource base for conservation. Conservation education for tourists is also seen as an important outcome. Ecotourism in forest areas are primarily located in or around PAs and areas identified as Critical Wildlife Habitats, Critical Tiger Habitats, which has resulted in opposing interests and conflict between the adivasis, the state and other actors.

Causes for concern

1. Decisions are made without involving local communities, despite the constitution and the law that make it mandatory that forest communities are involved in the decision-making process before any action is taken. Adivasis and other forest dwelling communities are often displaced from core zones of PAs (which includes Wildlife Sanctuaries, National Parks, Biosphere Reserves and Tiger Reserves) without taking their consent about the areas being declared as PAs; these zones are then later promoted as ecotourism destinations. Additionally, while change in land use is being regulated in core zones, the same is not being done in buffer zones, where tourism development takes place. Further ecotourism development does not concern itself with the implementation of forest laws, which are in support of local communities (The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and Panchayats (Extension) to Schedule Areas Act). Only conservation related laws are taken into consideration while developing tourism (e.g. The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972).

2. Community skills and practices, and employment opportunities: During the planning and development stages, activities do not take into account the cultural and social specificities of communities in the region. Neither do they take into the account the special knowledge and skills that each of the communities has in terms of conservation. Conservation education for tourists is also seen as an important outcome. Ecotourism in forest areas are primarily located in or around PAs and areas identified as Critical Wildlife Habitats, Critical Tiger Habitats, which has resulted in opposing interests and conflict between the adivasis, the state and other actors.

3. Very often ecotourism activities impinge on resources that are otherwise used by the adivasis for livelihood, Resources that otherwise served as an integral part of their work, health and other purposes and allowed them to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. Adivasi and other forest
dwelling communities who have already been alienated from their natural resources due to prevailing conservation laws, face further alienation due to the advent of ecotourism.

Additionally, there is huge pressure from the tourism industry on the adivasis and other forest dwelling communities to sell their land due to their prime location. The sale of land to tourism projects is not a sustainable option for communities since these monies dry up fast and leave no other source of income in their hands. Until now the only livelihood option that has been opened up for communities is their employment in tourism establishments, which translates to the fact that communities who were once land owners and practitioners of agriculture, with diverse cultural and social histories have become homogeneous cheap labour in the tourism industry.

Despite being overlooked for roles within the tourism enterprise, they are often sited as beneficiaries of tourism led development in the local area. Adivasis and other forest dwelling communities are objectified in ecotourism literature, often displayed in their token roles in propaganda, intended to further the cause of the ecotourism enterprise and any other involved parties, including the state government.

4. Construction of tourism infrastructure like roads, living structures like permanent tents, cottages and so on further damage the environment, and subsequently are also a threat to the adivasis. Environmental impact studies are not conducted thoroughly enough to determine the affect they might have on the local communities and ecology.

Further, the use of pollutant construction materials, such as cement and plastics, result in irreversible environmental damage. Most permanent structures and tents constructed are also fitted with air conditioners. Resorts which do so have captive generation of electricity, while very often the villages in surrounding areas have not yet been electrified.

5. The “Carrying capacity” of an area, which is the limit of occupation an area can sustain determined after factors like water, food, and other necessities are taken into account, is often ignored while planning ecotourism initiatives.

The mainstream notion of conservation overlooks and does not acknowledge the role that is played by adivasis and other forest dwelling communities in conserving the forests as well as the diversity. Notions of modernity treat the cultural and conservation practices of adivasis as backward without understanding respect for the sustainability and spirituality that they embody. Forms of conservation are also very often indigenous in nature and are tied with the religious and spiritual beliefs of communities. Some of the conservation practices that have been recorded are the existence of sacred groves, navai a harvest festival in western Madhya Pradesh, during which the gayana is performed. The gayana chronicles the evolution of humankind. It is an oral tradition teaching the future generation their past and possibly indicating their future by describing the symbiotic relationship that exists between man and nature and the importance of this relationship for sustenance.
boundaries of private players in the industry, benefit sharing between the different stakeholders, role of the State vis-à-vis tourism development as well as a monitoring and regulating body, strong non-negotiable regulatory mechanisms which detail out consequences in case of transgressions and violations.

The first benefit from ecotourism must go to the local people, and in the long-run, capacity-building should be carried out to forge a sustainable partnership between the forest department, tourism department, tourism professionals and local communities. The long-term goal is for communities to be able to own the ecotourism enterprises through active participation in their governance.

The erosion of natural resources, due to tourism, has been well documented - whether it is the forests of Corbett, Kanha and Ranthambore, the sea and beaches of Goa, Mammalapuram and Puri or the Western Ghats, the Himalayas in Kashmir, Shivaliks of Himachal Pradesh and the lower Himalayas of Uttarakhand. It is important to promote ecotourism with the strictest of regulations and legislations such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.

Are you interested in knowing more about the impacts of tourism particularly on communities living in forest areas? For more information write to us at info@equitabletourism.org or visit our website www.equitabletourism.org

Who we are
Established in 1985, EQUATIONS is a research, advocacy and campaigning organisation charged with the vision of democratising tourism in India. We study the social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism on local communities. A key area of our work is on Forests, Communities and Tourism.