



# ECOTOURISM POLICIES, THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FOREST DEPARTMENTS IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** Ecotourism, Community Based Tourism (CBT) are buzz words across the world in the domain of Tourism, Travel and Hospitality (TTH). World over adopting Ecotourism is based on the tenets of sustainability and ensuring the participation of the communities who are otherwise bereft of the benefits of TTH business. Besides the management of Protected Areas (PA), the issue of co-existence of the community and the forest area becomes the essence. At the Global level, organizations like the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) have created policies, parameters and indicators that govern Ecotourism destinations. The Research paper is a work in progress and makes efforts to understand what policies that Federal and State Governments in India adopt considering that Forests, Protection of wild animals and birds comes under the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution. The paper identifies policy milestones that have occurred in the twentieth and twenty-first century in India and the special purpose vehicles (SPVs) that have been considered to ensure Ecotourism as practice gets to the deep-dive of the community, and the other stakeholders who are unique to the ever-growing tourism system. The Research study undertaken has ensured interaction with the authorities in the Federal Forest Structure and four State Governments, where, the researcher has worked with the Forest Officers and the Communities who have made an effort to create SPVs as a policy dynamic in ensuring the objectives of the Constitutional mandates. Hence, the research objective has been to ensure the identification of milestones over seventy years which will help in assuaging the way the forest policy and various interventions help in the move towards Ecotourism promotion.

The Researchers have worked with the Communities across four states to ensure a thought process and suggested to the State Governments the way forward in the promotion of Ecotourism. The work has been carried out from 2017 and remains a work in progress and SPVs like the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC), the Eco-Development Committees (EDC), Ecotourism Management Committees (ETMC) are being studied to understand the policy construct which will support in assuaging and creating best practices for the State Forest Departments (SFD) that can/will be emulated across the spectrum, as has been seen in the research. As the research was being conducted, two states made changes based on the findings that were being established during the interaction with the Community and the Forest Departments.

**Index Terms – Community Based Tourism (CBT), Protected Areas (PA), Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV)**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ritwick Dutta, well known Environmental Lawyer summed up eloquently in regards to Eco-tourism (ET), “Firstly, eco-tourism is not a permissible activity under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 or the Forest Conservation Act 1980, yet. Even to Build basic concrete structures in a wildlife reserve or national park, the permission of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) is mandatory. They (Centre) can do these eco-tourism activities outside the national parks. Why do they need to set up inside? Even with eco-tourism pressures outside parks look at the condition of places like the Corbett Tiger Reserve. If you start opening up and breaking forest land there will be nothing left of our wildlife reserves and forests anymore. Already linear projects are wreaking havoc in protected areas. Tourism even with tents has a huge footprint,” (Nandi, 2021) following many a newspaper carrying reports about the 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) deliberating about The Guidelines on Sustainable Tourism in Forest and Wildlife Areas 2021 (Eco-Tourism Guidelines); which made efforts to lay the framework (NOTE: Guidelines on Sustainable Eco-Tourism in Forest and Wildlife Areas 2021, taken from the agenda of 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee on National Board for Wild Life (February 18, 2021) for practicing and promoting sustainable eco-tourism by maximizing outputs that support nature and natural resources in their original forms while minimizing any negative externalities arising out of the interaction between people and nature.

The mainstay (i.e., Tentative agenda of 62<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of National Board for Wild Life) of these Guidelines includes promotion of low impact nature tourism, traditional ecological knowledge and heritage values of India's wilderness, engagement of local communities in nature tourism partnerships amongst various stakeholders and finally enhancing India's potential as a global eco-tourism destination.

The question that came about every individual who has know-how of Eco-tourism was, we are already promoting eco-tourism in the forest fringes, with communities playing a dynamic role; why then did the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India, come up with this sentiment from the Forest Conservation Division and the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), which had suggested to ease norms for eco-tourism projects by allowing to build "non-permanent" structure in protected areas (PA) without permission from the federal government.

To understand the nuances from a layman and professional perspective, the FAC, in its meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021, also decided to delete two clauses (12.13 and 1.18) in guidelines on forest conservation published in the ministry's Handbook on Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and Forest (Conservation) Rules 2003.

The deleted clauses:

- 12.13 Eco-Tourism: Ecotourism is a non-forestry activity, and will be allowed in Protected Areas if the said activities are part of the Management Plan/ Tiger Conservation Plan and are duly approved by the Central Government.
- 1.18 (iv) Ecotourism is a non-forest activity requiring prior approval under the Forest Conservation Act 1980.

A Reading from the handbook (NOTE: Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and Forest Conservation Rules, 2003 (Guidelines and Clarifications) (2019), MoEFCC, Government of India) of MoEFCC clearly articulates the fact that eco-tourism is a "non-forestry activity", and thus require prior approval under the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. Thence the new guidelines were to ensure that no such approvals would be needed shortly (NOTE: The issue has been listed for the 62<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the NBWL as the same was deferred in the 61<sup>st</sup> meeting. Hence, we need to look out for the decision that will be taken in the future). The above developments brought the researchers of this paper to ponder as to why was this the need of the hour, when federal and state governments in India, were sustainably promoting eco-tourism, through various special purpose vehicles (SPV) viz., eco-development committees (EDC) and Ecotourism Management Committees (ETMC). One needs to know that, the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) was created as a democratic, decentralized and transparent local institution of forest and forest fringe dwelling communities, that is part of the *Gram Sabha* fully or partially and set up as per the provisions of applicable Joint Forest Management (JFM) rules/guidelines of the state much earlier than all the SPVs for eco-tourism (Sharma, DK). Typically, there is one JFMC in one revenue village. However, in special situations, e.g., a historical collaboration between neighboring villages, or where it doesn't make sense to divide the forest, a JFMC may cover two or more villages. On the other hand, especially in tribal areas, there may be situations where one village may have several dispersed hamlets, JFMCs may be set up at sub-revenue village or hamlet level.

A deep dive into the SPVs will help in the understanding of various eco-tourism projects that are in a decent number across the country. Another aspect from a policy perspective that one needs to consider is that: Forests (Entry 17A) (Forest as an Entry was transferred from Entry 19 of the State List to the Concurrent List by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, s. 57 (w.e.f. 3-1-1977) and Protection of wild animals and birds (Entry 17B) (Forest as an Entry was transferred from Entry 20 of the State List to the Concurrent List by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, s. 57 (w.e.f. 3-1-1977) are in the Concurrent List, wherein both the federal and state governments have an ambit of law-making management and regulation.

## II PROTECTED AREA POLICY

The Protected Area (PA) policy over some time had changed, wherein, many traditional views about PA s have had to change and a new set of ideas and approaches have emerged (Phillips, 2000). The meaning gets amplified when one reads the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972 (WPA) Sec. 2 (24A) which was inserted by Act of 16 of 2003 (w.e.f. 1-4-2003) which is as follows:

"Protected Area" means a National Park, a Sanctuary, a Conservation reserve or a community reserve notified under sections 18 (Declaration of Sanctuary by the State Government), 35 (Declaration of National Park by the State Government), 36A (Declaration and Management of a conservation reserve (State Government) (after having consultations with the local communities) and 36C (Declaration and Management of community reserve (State Government) of the WPA. Clearly, the State Government at the provincial level is entitled to declare and ensure the areas are protected, all in areas aspects the local community plays a dynamic role. Five major changes (Bhattacharya, Prodyut, 2018) have taken place in the approach to PA, which can be considered the follows:

- 1) They are no longer islands but networks.
- 2) They are guided not just by conservation goals but also by social and economic objectives.
- 3) Management is not with and for the people, instead of against the people.
- 4) The emphasis is on quality and not on quantity.
- 5) They are not just of national but of international concern too.

PAs can generate economic benefits through sustainable use of biological diversity to local communities in many ways. One such potential means of economic benefit is wildlife tourism. Tourism use of PAs involves the travel for the discovery and learning about wild environments. Thus, tourism is seen to have the potential to generate substantial revenues that local people can realize, and therefore contribute to the protection of the PA. (Udaya Sekhar, 2003). Porter et. al. (1998) discusses the importance of identifying sustainable means of livelihoods such as tourism in PAs and its significance in promoting stakeholder participation in conservation. The linkage between the environment as a tourist attraction and economic impact can be substantial. Another view has been that PAs were initially established to conserve biodiversity in the face of inevitable human-centered development. However, they have emerged as a critical tool for not only safeguarding species but also for poverty alleviation, improving human livelihoods, and overall development of a nation (Kumar, A., et.al. 2020).

| Year | No. of National Parks | Area Under National Parks (km <sup>2</sup> ) | No. of Wild Life Sanctuaries | Area Under Wild Life Sanctuaries (km <sup>2</sup> ) | No. of Community Reserves | Area Under Community Reserves (km <sup>2</sup> ) | No. of Conservation Reserves | Area Under Conservation Reserves (km <sup>2</sup> ) | No. of Protected Areas | Total Area under Protected Areas (km <sup>2</sup> ) |
|------|-----------------------|--|------------------------------|---|---------------------------|--|------------------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| 2000 | 89                    | 37803.10                                     | 485                          | 108862.50   | -                         | -  | -                            | -   | 574                    | 146665.60   |
| 2006 | 96                    | 38392.12                                     | 503                          | 111229.48   | 1                         | 0.31   | 4                            | 42.87   | 604                    | 149664.78   |
| 2007 | 98                    | 38428.88                                     | 507                          | 111529.04   | 5                         | 21   | 7                            | 94.82   | 617                    | 150073.74   |
| 2008 | 99                    | 39441.74                                     | 510                          | 113123.35   | 5                         | 21   | 45                           | 1259.84   | 659                    | 153845.93   |
| 2009 | 99                    | 39441.74                                     | 512                          | 113395.36   | 5                         | 21   | 45                           | 1259.84   | 661                    | 154117.94   |
| 2010 | 102                   | 40283.62                                     | 516                          | 113842.87   | 5                         | 21   | 47                           | 1382.28   | 670                    | 155529.77   |
| 2011 | 102                   | 40283.62                                     | 518                          | 113998.75   | 5                         | 21   | 52                           | 1801.29   | 677                    | 156104.66   |
| 2012 | 103                   | 40500.13                                     | 526                          | 114933.44   | 5                         | 21   | 59                           | 2012.93   | 693                    | 157467.50   |
| 2013 | 102                   | 40500.13                                     | 532                          | 117123.63   | 19                        | 30.94  | 64                           | 2232.61   | 717                    | 159887.31   |
| 2014 | 103                   | 40500.13                                     | 535                          | 118290.66   | 43                        | 58.22  | 64                           | 2232.61   | 745                    | 161081.62   |
| 2015 | 103                   | 40500.13                                     | 541                          | 118866.44   | 44                        | 59.51  | 71                           | 2548.82   | 759                    | 161974.90   |
| 2016 | 103                   | 40500.13                                     | 543                          | 118917.71   | 45                        | 59.66  | 72                           | 2566.20   | 763                    | 162043.70   |
| 2017 | 103                   | 40500.13                                     | 544                          | 118931.80   | 46                        | 72.61  | 76                           | 2587.95   | 769                    | 162092.49   |
| 2018 | 104                   | 40501.13                                     | 544                          | 118931.80   | 46                        | 72.61  | 77                           | 2594.03   | 771                    | 162099.47   |
| 2019 | 101                   | 40,564.03                                    | 553                          | 119,756.97  | 163                       | 833.34   | 86                           | 3,858.25  | 903                    | 1,65,012.59   |
| 2020 | 104                   | 43,716                                       | 566                          | 1,22,420  | 214                       | 1,302  | 97                           | 4,483   | 981                    | 1,71,921  |

Illustration 1: Protected Areas of India from 2000 to 2020 (As of December 2020) (ENVIS, n.d.)

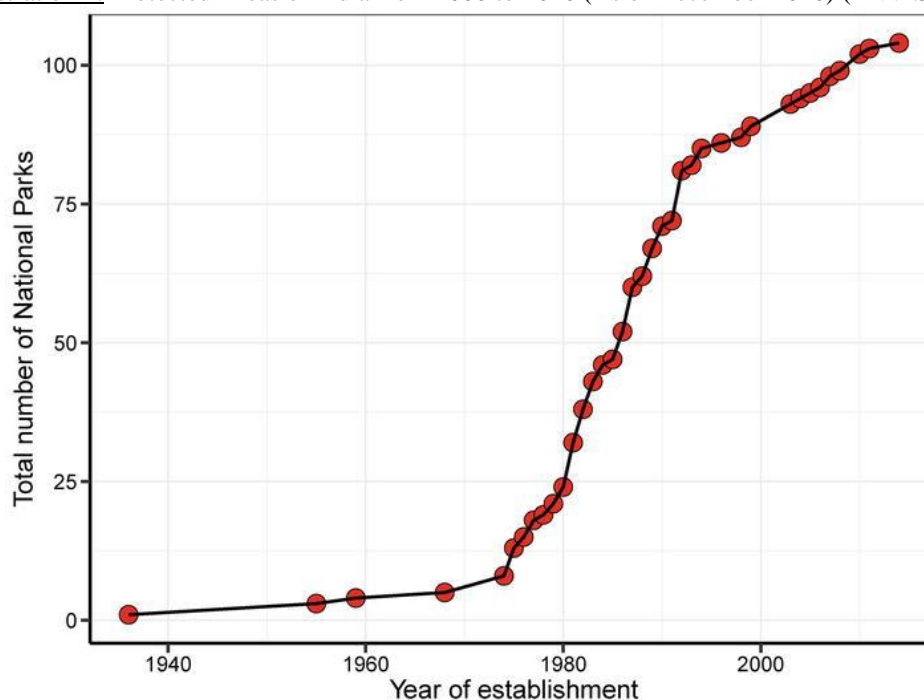


Illustration 2: National Parks in India after the 1970s (Kumar, A., et.al. 2020)

It is clear from Illustrations (1) and (2) the increase in the number of PAs was brought about after the WPA and off course the movement of Forests from the State List to the Concurrent List, which meant, that the various section of law encouraged the states to pass laws and notify PAs across the states and ensure preservation and conservation of the forests. The states had an interest to genuinely preserve the flora and fauna for there were many notifications that ensured preservation.

### III SPECIAL PURPOSE VEHICLES FOR ECOTOURISM

The forest administrators lead by the Indian Forest Service (IFS) officers, who are allotted to work in various states across the country; work with the Foresters lead by the Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), Range Forest Officers (RFO); who in turn are supported by Deputy RFOs, Guards and Watchers. Hannam, K (2000), has very beautifully articulated the fact that the IFS is an elite organization and there are no comparable environmental services in the world. The IFS bring in the facet of preservation and conservation of flora and fauna of a given area, a state and make the best of efforts to ensure the same. While the study on SPVs was undertaken by the research team, (most of the officers who were spoken to want to remain anonymous), accepted the fact that the forest-fringe communities and even those, tribals and others who lived within the forest enclosures should be co-opted to ensure the preservation and conservation efforts; and true to the arguments, they should never be antagonized, for an angry forest-fringe dweller and even those within, would be the first to set fire and ensure trouble to the foresters. In our discussions with many of the forest officers, it was realized that the forest officers knew that at least in the forest fringe areas, the community would be an asset to the forest departments (FD) in the primary objective of conservation and preservation in the long-run and part of the institutional building and strengthening (TNFD, 2016) mechanism. One of the earliest SPVs that was contemplated within the FD system were the EDCs, which had their merit and direct access and the relationship between the FDs and the Communities. What then are these EDCs that are found across the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala and a few other states.

Sharma, DK, in his renowned handbook for the foresters put forth: An EDC is similar to JFMC but meant for villages in PAs and their buffer zones. Their setup, working, role, responsibilities, powers, funds etc. are as per the state-level government orders (GO). The area of operation is restricted to PAs and forest and non-forest areas near protected areas. EDCs are set up with twin objectives i.e.,

- i) To protect wildlife and other biodiversity and
- ii) To undertake eco-development activities in the villages.

To understand the facets better; the EDCs were constituted further so that:

- a) The investment climate in the forestry sector is enhanced as rural communities participate in forest protection and management,
- b) Rural communities are equal partners in the protection and management of forests,
- c) They control the management of forest lands and community lands by both members and non-members,
- d) The community gets a say in the objectives of management of the local forests,
- e) The community and its members contribute knowledge, time and effort through the EDC,
- f) The EDC mechanism is a position to develop local leadership for roles in the future in regards to the forest,
- g) To work with the 'revolving funds' that get created from the income-generating activities/sources of the EDC

The FD which at times is understaffed at the level of Guards and Watchers works in tandem with the local community to ensure the goals of forest management and conservation. As researchers who have and are working with the communities, we have observed the way the FD works along.

#### IV MODELS OF BEST PRACTICES/CASE STUDIES

##### 1. The Kurangani Ecotourism Case Study in Tamil Nadu: Conservation and Preservation.

Kurangani hills are very popular near Bodinayakanur in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Forest Department has declared this an "Ecotourism" site. It has provided for funds under the Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Program (TBGP) of JICA, to set up the infrastructure necessary to initiate a comprehensive Community-based Eco-Tourism development. The local Village folk/community is showing the way by actively aligning themselves with the Forest Department and taking up jobs as Nature Guides, trekkers and ticket collectors. Kurangani is known for forest fires that occur regularly during the summer, along with the FD personnel, who not only have to focus on the 'beat', it is the Community that stand tall in extinguishing the fire day and night and ensuring the forests are safe. The Youth have been forest watchers too, helping the TNFD in beats, to keep a check on the forest and poachers. They have become Walking Warriors in protection and conservation. This is a true example of Tourism leading to conservation, a much sought-after model of inclusivity.

##### 2. Case Study of Agarzari, Tadoba-Andheri Tiger Reserve-TATR in Maharashtra: Safari, Dependence of Forest Resources and Community development.

Located close to Chandrapur in Maharashtra, at the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Agarzari is a success story (Maria, Freeda, et. al., 2020), and the EDC caters to the needs of the domestic and international visitors to showcase Tigers, has succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. With about 45 households, and a small population who depend completely on Ecotourism activity, wherein, Tiger Safari has been the mainstay; it was the community that decided its fate, of course eagerly supported by the FD in Maharashtra whose focus was on reduction of poaching, illegal collection of forest produce and the overall preservation and conservation of the forest area.

The community at Agarzari has Agriculture as the mainstay occupation (Maria, Freeda et.al., 2020); with lands in the buffer of the Tiger Reserve. The researchers established that the community would also get to the forest for collecting the forest products from a historical perspective. However, this has come to a halt on account of the interventions of the Maharashtra Forest Department (MHFD) and the Revenue Administration departments of the state of Maharashtra. Except for collecting the "*Mahua*" flowers, during a particular season of the year, is collected and no other pressures. Agarzari got the first Buffer Tourism in 2011 in Maharashtra and Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR). The TATR area has a total of 91 villages with a population of 1 lakh. This aspect was discussed in detail with Mr. Anirudh Chaoji, the Biologist of TATR based in Chandrapur.

TATR becomes an epicenter for human-wildlife conflicts (HWC) considering the dependency on the forests by the community members. There was a time when the Gond Tribe was all over the area. The Community has been weaned away from the forest area and has been provided for alternative livelihood options that are as follows:

- i) Owning of Gypsy vehicles for organizing Forest Jeep Safari through various gates in the vicinity of Agarzari
- ii) Options to drive the Gypsy vehicles (Driver Job)
- iii) Working in the Tented Accommodation (Agarzari Campsite) of the Forest Department through the Eco-Development Committee (EDC).
- iv) The workforce in the Butterfly Park created through an EDC (Entry gate Collection, Interpretation Centre and a Bamboo Souvenir Shop)
- v) Canteen being run through EDC in the Butterfly Park.
- vi) Workforce: cooks for the Tented Accommodation (Agarzari Campsite) through the EDC.
- vii) Working directly with the Forest Department as contract labour engaged in: i) Fireline creation, ii) afforestation iii) Forest Census Activity
- viii) Agarbathi (Incense stick) manufacturing facility.
- ix) Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) collection: "*Mahua*" flower collection once a year.
- x) The Local youth are involved in Nature Education and adventure activities. A place designated for the same, adjacent to the Agarzari campsite, outsourced to a partner from Chandrapur.
- xi) Tourism and the inflow of tourists to Agarzari, has given rise to individual run eateries and *Kirana* shops, giving a source of income for the village folk of Agarzari.



- xii) Maintenance and housekeeping staff are employed from the village at The Campsite, for adventure activities and Butterfly Park.

### Kailash and family at Agarzari:

Kailash and his wife Rekha, who belong Gond tribe in Agarzari depend upon the forest resources of the Agarzari Zone of TATR for their livelihoods along with their children: Pranjali, Bharat and Appalli. When the MHFD opened up the opportunities for Jeep-Safari, Kailash sprang into action and purchased a Gypsy Vehicle through a loan. He drives the vehicle and on a good day for Safari earns INR 4400 per day; INR 2200 per day from the Gypsy is assured. He has already repaid the loan for the vehicle and proudly says, that he had his wife, Rekha headed the EDC Canteen located in the Butterfly Park as a Head cook after winning the tender from the MHFD. After serving the one-year tender, since the canteen tender went to another local through tender mechanism; Kailash and his family started a roadside eatery; which earns them about INR 55,000 per month.

Thus, it can be seen that Kailash and his family of five, garner an income (in INR) as follows:

|                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Gypsy Vehicle Income | 2200 X 30 days = 66,000 |
| Income from Eatery   | 55,000 per month        |
| Monthly income       | 1,16,000                |

### **3. The case study of Sasthakoil Site in Tamil Nadu: SHG, Women and Revolving Funds**

Under Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project (TBGP), an Ecotourism Management Committee (ETMC) at Kovilur village for Sasthakoil (TNFD, 2016a) site has generated an income of Rs. 7.01 lakhs in 2014-15 and Rs. 9.57 lakhs in 2015-16, totally, Rs. 16.58 lakhs, which enable engaging 2 women members for checking & ticketing and 4 men members for guiding visitors, fire watchers and driver wages etc. Further 6 women SHGs have been provided for an internal revolving loan of Rs. 5.80 in 2014-15 and Rs. 8.80 lakhs in 2015-16, totally Rs. 16.60 lakhs including revolving funds for alternate income generation activities. The community participation helped in the regulation of visitors, regulation of activities like removal of litter, prohibiting liquor & cigar, cooking, use of shampoo etc., and reduced the burden of Forest officials. When the research team met with the Sasthakoil ETMC team just before the Covid-19 pandemic along with the Biologist from the Wildlife Office at Rajapalayam; and the ensuing lockdown, the ETMC members had decided to buy a mini-bus that would help them to facilitate visitors to travel from the Rajapalayam Railway Station to the Ecotourism location and return to the Railway station once sightseeing was accomplished. This was a phenomenal achievement in itself.

### **4. Case Study of Syntheri Rocks, Aurli, Karnataka: Conserving a Natural Wonder and Community Development in a remote place.** (Maria, et.al., 2012)

Located in the Uttara Kannada (Karwar) district, the FD has created an EDC that has been functioning since 2005 in the village of Nandigadde (Gund Panchayat). A 54-household village with a population of 190, with agriculture products like areca nut, paddy and banana as the mainstay and the community growing vegetables for household needs; Aurli was a phenomenal point of growth, for the community decided what they wanted, along with the FD and other stakeholders who helped with the interventions. The EDC embarked upon the following Ecotourism objective:

1. Tourism Management of the Syntheri Rocks.
2. Supporting themselves to build a protection wall (four kilometres) from wildlife (elephants, monkeys and porcupines).
3. To provide Solar lamps for the community members.
4. To provide for LPG.
5. To build toilets.
6. To solve drinking water problems.
7. To construct a permanent structure for the visitors.
8. To produce literature about the destination.
9. To provide for sewing machines based on the community requirement.
10. Maintain the road in the village.
11. Participate with the FD for Forest Fire Control.
12. Enrol patrolling to control poaching of wildlife, and
13. Afforestation

What was allowed to the EDC by the FD was a collection of an entry fee to the Syntheri Rocks for Domestic and International visitors and collecting parking fee for vehicles. To maintain the entry facility to Syntheri rocks, a manned (two personnel, locally employed by the EDC, the two community members would also collect disposed plastics and other materials left behind by the tourists) gate has been constructed. The four locals employed and paid by the EDC have been given training on good environmental practices for them to educate tourists on aspects like no burning of waste, no smoking, no usage of plastic to mention a few. They have also trained to act as rescue staff if visitors get into the waters of the river in the vicinity. From the funds collected 25% go to FD.

In the case of Aurli, the FD and other stakeholders who intervened, ensured what the community wanted to pursue, for when we look at the options of human-centricity, it augurs well for the people who need the solution. The decisions taken, by the community, who required the interventions ensured qualitative participation of the community and thereby preservation and conservation of the core area of the forest.

Syntheri Rock is at the Core of the KTR. It is a rock 300 feet in height and the rive at the foot of the rock provides an awe-inspiring view for the visitor. The place is of Geological importance and the local community is aware of the importance of the rock formation. Hence, the community managed project has ensured, qualitative protection of the Natural Wonder thereby the opportunity for the community to develop.

**5. EDC Case Study in West Bengal: Community Development through Eco-Development.**

With a total of 115 EDCs, it had about 5,10,000 members from the community who would be protecting about 6,560 sq. km., of forest area, amounting to 54% of the state forest area (Ghosh, Saumyajit, 2018). The EDCs in West Bengal were primarily created as per the provisions of the National Forest Policy 1988 of the Government of India vide letter No. 6.21/89-PP dated 1<sup>st</sup> June 1990: which outlined and conveyed to the State Government a framework to create massive people's movement through the involvement of village committees for the protection, regeneration and development of forest lands. Thence the EDCs were constituted to bring about the cooperation of forest fringe communities to protect, preserve and conserve the wildlife areas.

West Bengal Forest Department (WBFD) make the best of efforts to create Management Plans and Micro plans for the EDCs that would help in adding value to the efforts of preservation and conservation. Some of the aspects of the Micro Plans:

- a) Reconnaissance and Familiarization.
- b) Socio-economic and Resource Survey.
- c) Identification of Impact Zone.
- d) Prioritisation and Selection of Target Villages.
- e) Writing Preliminary Eco-Development Plan.
- f) Discussion over Preliminary Plan-Participatory Planning.
- g) Writing Eco-Development Micro plans.
- h) Submission and Approval of Micro plans.
- i) Consolidation of Micro plans into Division or District local Micro plans.

And what did the community ask from the EDC, this is something worth mentioning about how the community involvement will help mitigate a multitude of issues. The qualitative relationship between the FD and the Community, and the people, thence what was the ask?

1. Drinking water facilities for EDC villagers
2. Cooking gas distribution to EDC members
3. Pump installation in fringe villages
4. Supply of paddy thrasher machines
5. Organizing training unit centre
6. Supply of horticulture seeds to villagers
7. Renovation of village schools
8. Organizing Medical camp
9. Repair/reconstruction of damaged forest village huts
10. Construction of community halls
11. Development of Eco-Centre
12. Construction of toilets

From the case studies, it is clear that the State Forest Departments (SFD) along with the support of Communities, have played a dynamic role and ensured an eco-tourism practice and policy continuum based on the SPV model. It is necessary to not only involve the Locals in decision making but also, in governance and operations. There have been a handful of success stories, following this model and some non-starters as well, or have been slow to start, like the Vedaranyam ETMC destination at Point Calimere, the Kovilar Dam project in the Sasthakovil area (Rajapalayam) in Tamil Nadu; Devada EDC in the TATR area in Maharashtra. The reasons sometimes have been completely due to external factors such as weather, environmental externalities, the flow of tourists and the like. We have been working with multiple Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), with Researchers from other states to get to a meta-analysis on the issue of Ecotourism, EDC and the policy continuum and have been making slow progress. We are confident that we will be in a position to work through collaborations and ensure a metric-based collation of data that will help assess a policy and a framework.

**V INTERVENTIONS WORTH CONSIDERING IN POLICY CHANGE**

Two interventions that will create a rift in ecotourism policy changes would be the following; if and when it will be implemented: UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO WHS) Listing and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) funding that has supported many of the ecotourism projects.

**A. UNESCO WHS:**

Satpura Tiger Reserve (STR) (STR along with The Iconic Riverfront of the Historic City of Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Hine Benakal, a Megalithic Site in Karnataka, Maratha Military Architecture (12 forts built during the times of Chatrapathi Shivaji) in Maharashtra, Bhedaghat Lamettaghat in Narmada Valley, Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh and the Temples in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu are part of the tentative list of UNESCOs WHS in 2021). In Madhya Pradesh became the eighth UNESCO WHS Natural site in India by being included in the tentative list (TL). One of the criteria on which the national park made it to the tentative list includes "its tranquil silence where one can even hear the snoring of bears and roaring of the tigers". Moreover, its location adds on to its aesthetic and incredible values. One can enjoy an adventurous time in STR, which is rich in its biodiversity and can experience wildlife up and close' (Indian Express, 2021). STR joins the already listed 30 cultural sites, 7 natural sites and 1 mixed site along with the five other TL sites in India. The question therefore that comes about is which are the UNESCO Natural World Heritage Sites in India. The list below will provide the reader, the academic, the researcher an opportunity to gauge the unique feature and thereby the interventions by the Governments at the federal and state level, the Civil Society and the Ecotourism Industry.

|   | Name of WHS                                     | State Location  | Year of Notification | Area (sq. Km.) |
|---|---|---|----------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Manas Wildlife Sanctuary                        | Assam   | 1985                 | 391            |
| 2 | Keoladeo National Park                          | Rajasthan   | 1985                 | 28.73          |
| 3 | Kaziranga National Park                         | Assam   | 1985                 | 429.96         |
| 4 | Sundarbans National Park                        | West Bengal   | 1987                 | 1330.10        |
| 5 | Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks | Uttarakhand   | 1988                 | 630<br>87.50   |
| 6 | Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area | Himachal Pradesh  | 2014                 | 905.4          |
| 7 | Western Ghats                                   | Maharashtra<br>Goa<br>Karnataka<br>Tamil Nadu<br>Kerala | 2012                 | 7,953.15       |

**Illustration 3:** Natural World Heritage Sites in India (As of December 2020) (Envis n.d.,a)

|   | Name of WHS                   | State Location | Year of Notification  | Area (sq. Km.) |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| 8 | Khangchendzonga National Park | Sikkim         | 2016 (Mixed Category) | 1784           |
| 9 | Satpura Tiger Reserve (STR)   | Madhya Pradesh | 2021 (tentative list) | 2133.30        |

**Illustration 4:** Mixed and Tentative List Natural UNESCO WHS sites in India

When we assess UNESCO WHS, it is clear that the main facet of the construct is the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) that is ascribed to each of the Heritage products that are identified by the UNESCO team.

“To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), which forms the basis of the Convention. Each inscribed property must be able to justify its OUV.” (Gravari-Barbas, 2021). UNESCO is very focused on the Management Systems (MS) and Management Plans (MP) that each country provides for the WHS and no change can be done once listed or otherwise. Hence, the primary question is with a policy of this kind that is in the offing to usher in changes through the Standing Committee of the National Board of Wild Life (NBWL) will be not be contravening with the Internationally accepted conventions and norms that have been agreed upon and get into the mode of counter-argument? This is a question that one needs to ponder, for the UNESCO – WHS team is very clear in its approach to the Natural WHS and they are strict as well. By redefining the goal of drafting MPs and by using them for example as tools “to significantly improve community engagement at the local level and also to be aware of their limitations” (Ripp and Rowell, 2018). It is therefore clear that any tinkering will lead to a controversy with the world body, as it happened in the case of Hampi Archaeological site in Karnataka (The Hindu, 2019). The UNESCO focus has been on protection and conservation with strict management implications and protection mechanisms while the latter two are aimed at fostering a dynamic development that is adaptive, participative and future-oriented (Bontenbal, 2020). Thereby Management and Monitoring by the world body becomes pertinent (Job et. al., 2017). Any aspect contravening to the guidelines and the MS and MP are touched will invite the Global Body to immediately take action. Of course, the listing is completely voluntary; but once it is taken down from the list, we know the catastrophic results and the negative impacts.

#### **B. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA):**

JICA (2020) has assisted 27 loan projects and 2 technical cooperation projects in 14 states for the forestry sector in India. Japan's support to India consists of ODA loans of 270 billion Japanese Yen (approximately INR 16,300 Crore) since 1991/92 towards the forestry sector and have plantation activities under JICA supported projects that cover close to 3 million hectares across Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Nagaland, Odisha, Sikkim, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Tripura. The focus has been on Sustainable Forest Management and Integrated watershed management. The researchers had a wonderful discussion with the JICA India team lead by **Mr Vineet Sarin, Chief Development Specialist**, who stated that the idea of supporting sustainable forest management was to ensure traction between the forests and the community and facilitate (JICA, n.d.) environmental improvement from increased forest cover, effective soil and moisture conservation for agriculture, institutional strengthening through the introduction of management processes and latest technologies at state forest departments, and strong community participation through Joint Forest Management (JFM), which includes alternative income generation activities and community development works, to facilitate sustainable forest resource management by local communities. Mr Sarin in our discussions mentioned the state of Tamil Nadu and the forest department had led from the front to ensure utilization of the resources provided and much of development and action-oriented improvement had come from this state. Thence, one can assuage and sense that, if funds are being provided to such an extent, then no funding agency would like to dilute the efficacy of the sustainable system that is being ushered in by the changes that are being envisaged.

## VI CONCLUSION

The current ecotourism construct, of ensuring no projects in the core area should **stay**; and there should be **no change**. The SPVs of EDC, ETMC and any other that will come about in the future will focus on largely involving the local community and creating sustainable community-based ecotourism (CBE) wherein the FDs and the Community will play a role in tandem, that will bring about success over some time. Considering that the goals of the Guidelines on Sustainable tourism that have been envisaged are as under:

“The overall goal of these Guidelines is promoting a better understanding of nature and wildlife conservation while generating income and opportunities for the local communities in an ecologically, culturally and economically sustainable manner.” This as we know as an important stakeholder, the Civil Society and a research community, is happening at ground zero and we should make efforts to strengthen the Institutional structures, rather than bringing something that will be termed ultra vires at a later stage.

If we are to assess the orders of 19<sup>th</sup> September 2018 objectives and other aspects that flow in the notification and compare it with the NBWL Guidelines that are being discussed; they appear similar if not identical, if not similar. However, what will appear controversial would be the easing of norms for eco-tourism projects by allowing the construction of “non-permanent” structures in PAs without permission from the Central Government i.e., the MoEFCC; which will surely lead to many more controversies considering the issues we face in preservation and conservation. If we were to see this in the light of many states having their Eco-tourism policies, it is clear that the states forest machinery has planned well for the sustainable business of eco-tourism. Some of the states that have led from the front to this effect are Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Sikkim, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Kerala who have their eco-tourism policy documents that incorporates the finer aspects of preservation and conservation. Madhya Pradesh was one of the first states to create the Eco-tourism Development Board (MPEDB) within the precincts of the FD, which ensures collaboration and effective handling of the fragile administrative mechanism of eco-tourism. Well-intended policies were laid out, which other states considered important and unique for the existence of the fragile forest ecosystems. One question that arises is the control mechanism to be exercised by the bureaucracy who are at the helm of the Forest and its management; if a humane approach is adopted, the eco-tourism policies are bound to be community-oriented and driven, which will lead to success over some time.

| The Guidelines seek to achieve the objectives: | GO F.No. 1-57/2014 WL dated 19 <sup>th</sup> September 2018 (Objectives)  | Guidelines on Sustainable Ecotourism in Forest and Wildlife Areas 2021  | Civil Society and Researchers View   |
|--|---|---|--|
| i.   | Adopting low impact nature tourism which ensures ecological integrity   | Promote low impact nature tourism which ensures ecological integrity of the eco-tourism sites and their environment   | The EDCs and ETMCs as SPVs and the joint forest management (JFM) are already ensuring sustainable nature tourism.  |
| ii.  | Promoting biodiversity richness and heritage values of India's wilderness   | Promote biodiversity, traditional ecological knowledge and heritage values of India's wilderness  | The Communities have ensured the knowledge and heritage values of the wilderness of the Nation and even educate the visitor about its efficacy.  |
| iii.   | Engaging local communities and developing mechanisms with a view of enriching the local economy and promoting sustainable use of indigenous materials | Promote engagement of local communities in nature tourism in a manner that enriches the local economy and encourages sustainable use of indigenous materials through financially viable value chains thereby helping such local communities become “Atma Nirbhar” | This is happening on a day-to-day basis. The income-generating program (IGP) and the ‘revolving funds’ that the community work out has brought about the nuances of entrepreneurship and thereby ‘Atma nirbharta’. |
| iv.  | Establishing partnerships with all stakeholders for developing and promoting nature tourism   | Promote partnerships amongst stakeholders for mobilising resources and developing and promoting nature tourism, as well as equitable sharing of benefits.   | The EDCs and ETMCs have ensured this over some time. The FD and civil societies and academia in the relevant jurisdiction should work with the SPVs that are lagging and to function well.                         |
| v  |   | Enhancing potential of India as a global eco-tourism destination.   | We have done it in the first phase; the second phase is to ensure the SPVs start complying to Global norms of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) <sup>1</sup> and other bodies, which will attract          |

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gstcouncil.org> Freeda Maria Swarna M., the Researcher of this paper has been recently co-opted as India Working Group and Member, Global Sustainable Tourism Council, initiated by the Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Foundation (UN Foundation), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), USA. (2021 onwards). <https://www.gstcouncil.org/india/> working group: <https://www.gstcouncil.org/about/people/gstc-working-groups/> The GSTC India Team which will focus on Sustainable Tourism opportunities and interventions and proliferate the global dialogue to the Eco-tourism scenario in India.



|  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  |  |  | international visitors, who will enhance the value of the ecotourism product. |
|--|--|--|---|

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