Chapter 8
Turtles or Tourists?
Assessing the Role of Ecotourism in Wildlife Conservation – A Case From India

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ABSTRACT

While ecotourism is a well-defined concept, operationalizing it to make it financially viable is a challenge. Ecotourism has a potential to conserve natural resources and biodiversity of the region, as suggested by many case studies across the world. In the last few years, Indian tourism has experienced an overuse of the term ecotourism. However, there are no standards nor guidelines to inspire confidence in tourists, nor policies to ensure its honest use. This chapter discusses the findings of the author’s comparative study of conventional tourism in Murud and ecotourism in Velas. Murud and Velas are coastal villages in Maharashtra, with similar characteristics. The Olive Ridley turtles arrive every year to Velas to lay their eggs. However, with growing human disturbances, their numbers dwindled. Velas residents chose to protect this unique phenomenon and chose to fund their conservation program with an appropriate model of ecotourism. Today, ecotourism in Velas yields income for the residents, helps fund the turtle conservancy program, and generates employment for youth.

BACKGROUND

Nature has bestowed on India a rich biological diversity which includes over 40,000 plant species and 75,000 animal species. Protecting this diversity has, not just a regional significance but a global one. However, India’s rising population and the concomitant increase in infrastructure have already put significant pressure on the environment. To add to this, increasing nature and wildlife tourism imposes pressures on the last remaining forests and uninhabited areas. Studies show adverse impacts of tourism in eco-sensitive areas (CBD UNEP, 2007) (Bindra, 2010). On the other hand, tourism contributed 6.8% to India’s GDP in 2014 and according to the World Tourism Organization, it will grow by 8% per annum between 2008 and 2016. Besides an influx of global tourists, increased prosperity among Indians has contributed to tourism.

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In the state of Maharashtra, in western India, there has been a humungous growth in tourism in the last decade. This is mainly in the coastal part of the state, which is a coastline of over 700 km. This part forms a unique landscape, sandwiched between the Arabian Sea on the East and the Sahyadri mountain range on the West. It is called the ‘Konkan’ - a strip of land averaging about 70 km in width. The region is different in many ways, from the rest of the state of Maharashtra. It is a hilly terrain and gets over 2000 mm of rainfall every year. There are ample rivers and streams originating in the Sahyadri mountains and draining into the Arabian sea. Unlike some other parts of Maharashtra, the region has an abundant supply of fresh water, making it a major producer of rice, coconuts, cashew nuts and betel nuts. However, it is best known for the Alphonso and the other varieties of mangoes, which thrive in this climate. It is also a major exporter of sea catch. Moreover, Konkan has rich deposits of bauxite and iron ore and the sea ports facilitate its transport to other parts of the world.

The sea shore is a major tourist attraction and has been an important driver of Konkan’s popularity. The region has witnessed construction of resorts, growth in beach activities and ‘second home’ projects luring urban investment. Forested hills are making way for sea view bungalows and local communities are diverting farmland to build resorts. The rate of growth shot up with the commissioning of the Konkan railway in 1993. To lay the railway line, tunnels, ghats and viaducts which were cut through forests and hills and across rivers. 59 railway stations, 179 major bridges and 1,819 minor bridges have changed the Konkan landscape dramatically (Garg, Naswa, & Shukla, 2013). Opening new sea ports has made way for mining, which require removal of forest cover, building roads and increased transport activities, all of which has had serious effects on the environment (Gadgil, 2010). With the growth in tourism, its revenues form a significant portion of the incomes of the Konkan residents. However, even as environmental impacts are increasingly noticed, little is being done at policy level to reduce the burden of tourist activities.

This chapter discusses an eco-tourism model adopted by a village in Konkan, to successfully conserve the turtle breeding activity. A comparison is made in the practices of conventional tourism with that of an eco-tourism model. The discussions are based upon a year-long study of two popular tourist destinations in Konkan – Murud and Velas. Murud, in Ratnagiri district follows conventional tourism while Velas, in Raigad district has successfully implemented an eco-tourism model. Both the villages have populations less than ten thousand and have no industries. Murud has a pristine beach and a serene village atmosphere, while Velas’s fame is due to its prolific visitors – the Olive Ridley turtles - who breed here. The eco-tourism model of Velas has generated income for its citizen also funded the turtle conservation program, while the conventional tourism of Murud has helped local communities to earn more than their traditional means of livelihood. However, there is a stark difference in the state of the environment and the cultural changes in both the villages.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Travel undertaken for recreation or leisure is generally termed as tourism. Presence of natural or manmade attractions and local produce are some of the key attractors of tourism. This benefits the local economy and hence tourism is promoted. In India, religious tourism and medical tourism are gaining popularity. Attracting tourists to places of religious significance is being widely promoted by state governments and benefits the local economy. However, there is evidence of positive and negative impacts which this can have at the destination (Okoye, 2017). With improving healthcare facilities, foreign nationals with