Chapter 9
Tourism in Sigur Plateau in the Western Ghats of India: An Impact Assessment Report

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has emerged as a major player and an increasing threat to the Western Ghats, its ecological landscape, the diverse ecosystems associated with it, and the many groups of indigenous (Adivasi) and other traditional forest-dwelling communities living in it. Unregulated growth and overly ambitious developmental plans in environmentally fragile areas have many strong and often irreversible fallouts: increased deforestation, fragmentation of wildlife habitats, closing of critical links between habitats, loss of people’s access to and control over resources being among some of them. In 2010, EQUATIONS initiated a study that aimed to understand the impacts of tourism on the Sigur Plateau in the Western Ghats in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, taking into consideration the impacts of tourism on the biodiversity, natural resources, and the communities that live in and around the area. The scope of the study was to assess tourism in the realms of economic, environmental, and social impacts. For the purposes of this chapter, the environmental impacts have been focused on.

INTRODUCTION

The Western Ghats, extending along the west coast of India, covers an area of 180,000 sq kms and is one of 34 global biodiversity hotspots for conservation as defined by Conservation International (the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka are the two on the Indian subcontinent, the third being the Himalayas) (Bawa et al., 2007). The Western Ghats, stretch for 1,600 kms along the west coast of India, interrupted only by

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Tourism in Sigur Plateau in the Western Ghats of India

the 30 kms long Palghat Gap, through the states Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. About 60% of the Western Ghats is in the state of Karnataka.

Tourism in the Western Ghats began with pilgrimages and social forms of tourism and continues to contribute to the most significant numbers of tourists in this region (EQUATIONS, 2011).

The next significant development was the advent of the modern-day hill stations in India which can be traced back to the days of the British and the East India Company. Ootacamund or Udhagamandalam (Ooty) in the Western Ghats was ‘discovered’ in 1819 by John Sullivan, then Coimbatore’s collector (Anonymous, 2005, January 16). Charles Malet came to Mahableshwar in Maharashtra in 1791, which later became the summer capital of the Bombay Presidency. Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu became a summer retreat for American missionaries because Lieutenant B S Ward went there in 1821 (EQUATIONS, 2011). The British constructed the first roads and also the mountain railways to these remote mountain areas (Jamwal, 2004, September 30).

Access to the destination has emerged as one of the most important factors in the expansion of tourism. The opening up and official designation as a tourism destination of these places has resulted in the movement of hoteliers and tourists into the surrounding areas. Proximity to urban centres has brought more footfalls into the remote areas of Western Ghats (EQUATIONS, 2011). However unplanned and unregulated urbanization that tourism promotes, far beyond the carrying capacity of a place, puts huge pressure in the context of scarcity of drinking water and the vastly inadequate sewage treatment facilities, air pollution caused by the massive influx of thousands of vehicles in the destination, new roads and upgradation of existing ones through prime forest areas. In the name of tourism, these developments pose a grave hazard to the ecological integrity of a region (EQUATIONS, 2011).

Unplanned, unchecked growth of tourism practices in the hill ecosystems that are frailer than other ecosystems have led to the saturation of many hill destinations in the Western Ghats region. With the number of tourists increasing every year and people visiting these areas in bulk at a particular time of the year, predominantly in the dry season, the resources are unable to meet the demands of the tourists. The rapid growth of an affluent rural and urban middle class which had the leisure and means to travel for enjoyment was one of the many reasons that resulted in a tourism boom which changed the very landscape of towns such as Udhagamandalam in the Nilgiris (EQUATIONS, 2011).

Past research by EQUATIONS (2004, 2011, 2012) in the Western Ghats has highlighted the pressures caused by tourism on the ecosystems of the region. The Nilgiris corridor, a critical link, is teeming with tourist resorts that cause habitat degradation:

- Constant exposure to tourists and pressures on the land have resulted in an escalation of human-animal conflicts in surrounding areas since animals tend to lose the fear of humans resulting in aggressive animal behaviour.
- Corridors in Masinagudi, Bokkapuram, and Anaikatti in the vicinity of the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park have been flooded with tourist resorts. This has displaced the elephants from their natural routes and caused them to enter into villages and agricultural fields, leading to human-animal conflicts.
- Destabilizing hill slopes and increased occurrences of landslides due to unregulated construction and infrastructure development.
- Electrical fencing used by many tourist resorts kills many animals, particularly smaller mammals.
- Excessive water use by tourism establishments for swimming pools results in conflicts with local people over availability and access to water.
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