

Editorial

Guns, saws and double standards

Sunday 4 February 2007, by [NARAIN Sunita](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2007).

Recently, the Rajasthan High Court, concerned about lesser tigers in the Ranthambore tiger reserve, directed that all vehicles should be denied entry into the park. The response was immediate and furious. Conservationists, tiger lovers and tourist operators combined to argue that the ban would destroy the hotel industry and hit livelihoods of tourist operators. Angry scenes of foreign tourists denied sight of the tiger flashed on national media. It was even argued that the entry of tourists into the park would stop poachers (assuming all poachers would stalk all tigers in open daylight and that all tigers would be visible to all tourists). The pressure worked. By December-end, the court had lifted the ban.

Now switch to another event in another place. Same beginning. Different end.

Jambudwip, a small island in the West Bengal delta, is used by local fisherfolk to dry their catch each season for roughly four months. The Supreme Court, petitioned by conservationists against such use of this partially forested island, banned all fish drying. The fisherfolk were devastated. They explained why this island was critical to their livelihood: they needed a transient docking facility in the middle of the deltaic sea. Each year the forest department would issue seasonal passes, they would build temporary huts, catch fish and use the island to dry their catch. The island had natural creeks, helping them to dock. There was nothing like it in the vicinity. The fisherfolk presented an action plan so that they and the mangrove forests could survive. But conservationists-ironically, the very same who argued for opening tourism in the tiger reserve-did not budge. The ban continues.

It would be too obvious to say double standards exist regarding rich and poor India. But these stories truly reflect how we do the business of conservation. Ultimately, either we learn from them, or conservation will not work in India.

Firstly, let us understand why conservationists would argue that tourism is good and subsistence fishing is bad. Why would they accept that the livelihood of the tourist operators is important, while that of the fisherfolk is not? The cynical response would be that conservationists have business interest in tourism-which they do. It is their livelihood that is threatened when tourism is banned in the park.

But I believe there is more to it. There is a strong belief that tourism will benefit the park. It will bring attention to tigers and other wild animals; build a constituency for their protection; it will educate; allow people to enjoy nature and most of all, it will bring money into conservation. In contrast, people who use the island, and other forested regions, will destroy the habitat.

The fact is that both answers are correct and both are wrong. Tourism can be good for the park, but it can be disastrous. Human use can be sustainable, or it can be destructive. The question is how it is managed.

Take these very two examples. In Ranthambore, tourism management is a nightmare. This is the first national park that has been taken out of the hands of the forest department and given to the

tourism department. The result has been complete chaos. The forest department still controls the number of passes that are issued for entry into the park, but the tourism department dictates the route the vehicle will take. The trade is now steeped in nepotism and corruption, as operators fight to get the most tiger-sighted route, to get the maximum entries into the park and do everything else to pull off a sighting for their rich clients. Forest department officials say that this intensive human presence in the protected core area of the reserve may be the reason why tigers are straying away from the park.

The hotels which ring the park, in many cases, are built on disputed land and would contravene regulations for eco-sensitive areas. Every effort to regulate construction at a distance from the park has been successfully resisted. The irony is that while fisherfolk in the vicinity of mangroves were denied permission to set up habitations, in Ranthambore hotels have been 'allowed' in the very buffer of the park.

The Ranthambore way of tourism also does not bring financial benefits to conservation. It is estimated that the annual turnover of the elite hotels is about Rs 22 crore, which can be compared to Rs 30 crore spent on the park by the government in the last 30 years. This tourism only gives a pittance to the park, in the form of gate receipts. Local people, who are denied development and livelihood benefits because of the tiger sanctuary, do not even get anything in return. Their anger grows. The tiger becomes more vulnerable.

Tourism can work for conservation. But it will have to be carefully regulated and its benefits shared with local communities. Not Ranthambore-style.

In Jambudwip, fisheries can also work. The passes issued by the forest department can control the access to the area. The fees collected from fisherfolk-and they are charged, unlike rich hoteliers -can be used to replant mangroves and improve enforcement. The area and conditions for use can be determined. The monitoring can be done using satellite imagery. This then becomes a win-win situation, for the environment and local livelihoods.

The fact also is that there is no real evidence to show that this prolonged human use of the island has devastated its vegetation. But there is evidence to show tourism in Ranthambore has impaired its sustainability.

Poachers' guns and the saws of timber smugglers are hateful. But the fact is we have used half-baked science and bad politics to decide what is allowed and what is not. That is conservation's and our real tragedy.

To comment, write to
editor downtoearth.org.in

Read the editorial online
www.downtoearth.org.in/cover_nl.asp?mode=2

P.S.

* CSE's Fortnightly News Bulletin [February 2, 2007].