

ECOTURISM AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL IN PENCH TIGER RESERVE - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The following case study attempts to analyse the use of ecotourism strategies for Park Management in PTR. The outcome of the implementation is also discussed. The study was initiated by identifying the various stakeholders, namely the Forest Department, the local people, the private groups and the tourists. Information was then collected from each group through various tools like interviews, questionnaires and focussed group discussions.

The Park

Pench Tiger Reserve named after the Pench river, which flows from north to south, through the Reserve is located in the southern reaches of the Satpura hill range in the Seoni and Chhindwara districts of Madhya Pradesh. The terrain is undulating, with most of the area covered by small hills, steeply sloping on the sides. An extensive forest belt extends in three directions, north, east and south, covering forest tracts of Seoni, Balaghat and Nagpur districts.

The Reserve was created in 1992, becoming the 19th Reserve in the Project Tiger Network. The core zone of the Reserve, Pench National Park was created in 1983. This was carved out of the Pench Sanctuary created in 1977 with an area of 449.39 sq. km. The area of the Park is 292.85 sq. km., which divided almost equally in two districts – 145.36 sq. km. in Seoni is all Reserve Forest whereas the area in Chhindwara includes 138.24 sq. km. Reserve forests, 6.26 sq. km. Protected Forests and 2.78 sq. km. revenue land. The buffer zone, 465 sq. km., comprises 333.05 sq. km. of R.F., 102.36 sq. km. of P.F. and 29.59 sq. km. of revenue land. The total area of the reserve is 757.86 sq. km. A dam has been constructed on the Pench river on the southeastern boundary of the Reserve.

Management Challenges

The Park was opened to tourists in 1983, but the number of tourists coming for recreation and other purposes inside the park was initially very meager. This situation changed gradually and it was not until the late 90's that tourism started picking up. However the influx was still miniscule compared to the tourism in other major national parks and tiger reserves. Insufficient availability of tourism infrastructure and other tourist facilities, non implementation of interpretation programme and the absence of adequate publicity were some of the reasons for the dismal growth of tourism in the Park.

The park also faced challenges like grazing by cattle from surrounding villages. Grazing posed problems of adverse effect on regeneration, and the threat of disease spreading from domesticated cattle to thenwild ungulates. The menace of illicit felling mainly for fuel wood also loomed large. The villagers on the other hand faced the problem of their crops being destroyed by the ungulates from the Park.

Another serious challenge was that of illegal fishing in the Totladoh reservoir on the Pench river. Construction of the dam was completed in 1990, but the fishing activity had begun since 1981 itself. The location of the reservoir inside the National park prompted a Supreme Court decision banning further fishing in the area on the basis of writ petition. In spite of this the illegal trade continued with the connivance of the traders, top officials and politicians. The adverse impact of fishing inside the park was reflected in an increase in the incidence of poaching and littering in the area with polythene bags left by the fishermen. Efforts to check the illegal fishing caused conflict between the department staff and the fishermen which sometimes escalated into violence. The Park also faced the threat of fires caused by angry villagers or the fishermen. A holistic approach with coordination of efforts of the concerned departments was necessary to create the optimum set of inputs required to ensure the success of ecotourism.

Management Interventions

Efforts towards park promotion

In June 2001, with the new field director of the park assuming office, efforts to promote the Park as a prime tourist destination were undertaken with renewed vigour. A brief research into the history of the area and perusal of books and pamphlets available on the region revealed that the Seoni region is the original setting of the famous work of Rudyard Kipling '*Jungle Book*'. Rudyard Kipling borrowed heavily from Robert Armitage Strendale's books – '*Seonee*', '*Mammalia of India and Ceylon*' and '*Denizens of the Jungle*' for descriptions of the topography, the wildlife, and its ways. Mowgli was inspired by Sir William Henry Sleeman's pamphlet, '*An account of wolves nuturing Children in ther Dens*' which describes a wolf-boy captured in Seoni district near the village of Sant Bori in 1831. Many of Jungle Book's locations are actual locations in Seoni District like Waingunga river, Kanhiwara village and the Seonee hills. The mass popularity of the character of 'Mowgli' was consequently sought to be used to the advantage of the Park. PTR has since been promoted as 'Mowgli Land' not only through hoardings and advertisements in travelogues but also in various articles in leading magazines like 'India Today' and T.V. channels like 'Aaj Tak' that have featured PTR. The result is evident in the increase in tourists from 5,288 in 2000-01 to 10,488 in 2001-02. The rise in tourist numbers can be attributed to permission of access to diesel vehicles, publicity by the media and the improved infrastructure.

Involvement of the Private Sector

The increase in tourists visiting the Park prompted improvement in facilities and development of new facilities. Roads, guest house, dormitories were maintained in good condition to cater to the demands of the tourists. With the increased publicity, the Park attracted the attention of private hoteliers and resort owners who soon set up their establishments near the Park entrance. There are at present three such tourist complexes operating in the area, one of these owned by the M.P. Tourism Board, and a few more proposed to be set up. These private hoteliers brought with them their contracts with travel agents and tour operators in major tourist units like Delhi and Mumbai. So far the tourists visiting the Park had been mainly from the nearby areas especially Nagpur and Jalabpur. The involvement of the private sector, could lead to an increase in the promotion of tourists from the rest of India and abroad and a subsequent increase in the Park income. Another pertinent aspect of the involvement of the private sector was the generation of income for the local people. The presence of the tourist

complexes also has encouraged income generating activities like poultry farming and cultivation of vegetables on substantial scale in the nearby villages by ensuring a ready market for the produce of the same.

Interventions for park improvement

To maintain and improve upon the tourist situation special attention has been focussed on the needs of the Park and the tourists. For better Park management various management interventions have been undertaken. Considerable planning and resources has been devoted to water management inside the park. This is in the interests of the animals as well as for better opportunities for animal sightings for the tourists. In addition to waterholes the park earlier had a system of bore wells, whereby water would be pumped out manually and filed in the surrounding trench for animals to drink from. The Park also had concrete saucers, in which water would be filled from tankers. One of the main objectives of ecotourism is conservation of biodiversity in its natural state. Efforts are therefore concentrated on providing a natural habitat for the animals to as great an extent as is possible. It was perceived that the system of handpumps and concrete saucers was incongruous with the surrounding wilderness and aesthetics of the forests. Moreover with rising temperatures the water stored in the concrete saucers used to become too hot for consumption by the animals. The management therefore decided to gradually phase out the system and replace it by constructing earthen ponds (talab) and shallow wells (jhiriyas). A number of these facilities have been provided after careful selection of the site taking into account aspects like slope of the area, access for animals, proximity of the area to some natural source of water, etc. The construction was undertaken by employing the services of labourers from the nearby vilalges. The result is evident in lesser reports of migration of animals from their areas and increase sightings of animals. The Park is now constructing an interpretation centre in collaboration with the Centre for Environment (CEE) to spread awareness and sensitise the people towards conservation. To cater to the demands of the higher income segment the Park has also constructed new accommodations designed to blend with the surrounding wilderness.

Combating the challenges

The problem of illegal fishing was solved to a significant extent when the management undertook intensive efforts at all levels to combat the threat posed by the fish mafia. Comprehensive data on the system of illegal fishing and trade was obtained. The cooperation of the department staff and personnel at all levels was sought through meetings and discussions. The cooperation of the village ecodevelopment committees was also solicited. After complying with the Supreme Court Order of compensating the families affected by the ban, patrolling along the reservoir was intensified and the motor boats, cycles, motorcycles and other vehicles used in the trade were confiscated. Efforts towards rehabilitation of the affected families saw 25 of the fishermen being employed in patrolling activities, and as watchmen. The impact of the resultant cease in illegal fishing was reflected in an increase in the flora and fauna count, which had seen considerable disturbance due to the fishing activities. The vacated areas are now covered with grasses improving the aesthetics of the area and attracting large herds of herbivores.

Community participation and development activities

An essential component of ecotourism is the participation and socio-economic development of the local communities. Efforts towards Park development and conservation cannot be successfully undertaken without soliciting their participation, since they are one of the main stakeholders. EDCs in Pench had been formed way back in 1997-98 but not much activity had been undertaken by them. The department still lacked support from the local people. Gradually however the situation began changing as development activities began to be implemented. The management undertook activities like distribution of pressure cookers to all households under EDC, distribution of LPG at nominal rates (25% of the actual rate), setting up of biogas plants, introduction of training centres for women which trained them in sewing and making papads agarbatti, etc. The EDCs further led to the formation of SelfHelp Group (SHGs) which has undertaken activities like formation of grain bank, Dairy Cooperative, etc. There is also a scheme whereby the landless are given money and training to take up activities like rope making, setting up of tea stalls, etc. These activities provided the people with income generating sources thus reducing the biotic pressure on the forests. The introduction of bio-gas facilities and LPG saw the fuelwood demand fall drastically¹ (65-70%). The EDCs also undertook construction of ponds and game proof walls to prevent the Park animals from crossing over and destroying their fields. The construction was undertaken by employing labourers from the villages on a rotation basis. The youth from the villages adjoining THE Park have been engaged as guides to benefit from their knowledge of the area while generating employment. The official canteen and the guest houses inside the Park also provide employment to the local people. The EDCs in some villages have undertaken pasture development for grazing and ponds for providing water for their livestock. This has considerably reduced the grazing pressure inside the Park and dissuaded the cattle from entering the Park in search of water. The success of these activities can in part be attributed to the cooperation and coordination achieved between the various government departments which was in itself a result of the convergence of their schemes.

Encouraged by these development activities people now are forthcoming to provide cooperation to the department in its conservation efforts.

To give due recognition to the efforts made towards conservation and park maintenance, rewards have been given to the concerned department employees and villagers. This has boosted their morale and secured their commitment to conservation.

Apart from the activities undertaken through the EDCs, the Park management has also involved itself in health care activities. The villagers are given basic information on nutrition and hygiene. Medicinal plants with instructions on its dosage and effects, are provided to the villagers. Most instance the herb Chiraita is distributed among the villagers during outbreak of malaria. Diseases like rheumatism and jaundice are also sought to be similarly contained. This has resulted in a significant control of the disease in the area. The provision of such health care has also helped reduce the expenditure of the households on medicines.

¹ Source : primary data

Future proposals

Attempting to further explore the untapped potential of the Park the future proposals for the Park envisage a number of activities. The increased tourist influx to the region has made crowd management a crucial aspect of the overall Park management. Diversification of activities is perceived to be one of the effective tools for this purpose. Introduction of activities like boating, rafting, trekking through Nature trails developed in the buffer zone are part of the future proposals. The proposed natural trail would give an opportunity to the tourists to get a feel of the jungle and educate and sensitize them towards the concerns of the Park. Development of eco-camps would provide a platform for showcasing and marketing the local arts and handicraft. Tourists would also be witness to the local culture and folk songs and dances of a few selected villages. This centre would provide an opportunity for the local people to share and earn from their indigenous knowledge, while allowing the tourists to gain an insight into the same.

It is believed that the introduction of these activities would increase tourist satisfaction thereby leading to extension of their stay, generate local employment and subsequently increase the income of the Park and the private sector.

Ecotourism, as it has developed in PTR in the recent years, has been able to conserve and enhance the bio-diversity of the area while also generating local participation in conservation efforts. The economic incentives created from tourism has helped decrease the biotic pressure on the Park. The future proposals seek to maintain and improve upon the current situation.