



## **Banning tourism won't save India's tigers** **An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston**

If you dream of seeing tigers in the wild, it may be too late. In April this year, India's National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) announced plans to phase in a ban on tourism in the country's 37 tiger reserves. Justifying the controversial action Rajesh Gopal, head of the NTCA, said, "We should not forget that tiger reserves are primarily for conserving the endangered tiger and tourism is just a secondary outcome."

News of the proposed ban spread far and quickly causing an outcry among conservation groups and, unsurprisingly, travel operators and tourists. Internally, India's Ministry of Tourism also opposed the ban and a dispute broke out between the two government authorities. So heated was the debate that, apparently, it reached the Prime Minister's Office, where a decision was made to shelve the planned ban, in favour of tourism.

### **Arguing for a ban**

This is not the first time a ban on tourism in India's tiger reserves has been proposed and it's unlikely to be the last. In arguing for the ban, the Environment Ministry cited the large number of tourists and increasing tourist-related construction as having proved disastrous for the ecology of the reserves – a controversial assessment given that the government, which runs the NTCA, even now continues to build new roads through protected forests, such as a proposed 6-lane highway through Pench Tiger Reserve.

Even so, the NTCA was not alone in calling for a ban. Justin Francis, Managing Director of the online travel agency, [responsibletravel.com](http://responsibletravel.com), supports the idea, saying tourists searching for tigers atop elephants and in vehicles destroy the animal's natural hunting grounds and drive away its prey, while hotels in reserve corridors prevent tigers from crossing their regular migratory paths.

In my role as Principle Photographer for the NGO Animals on the Edge, I have visited India's tiger reserves numerous times in recent months and I have little doubt that tourism is uncontrolled, ill-disciplined and mismanaged. That tourism is adversely affecting wildlife in the reserves is undeniable. What is untrue is that banning tourism as an isolated action is an effective solution to the problem because, despite the NTCA's protestations, poaching, not tourism is by far the greatest threat to tigers and little if anything is being about it.



## **The true threat**

Practically every single part of a tiger can be sold, primarily for use in traditional medicines and tonics: teeth (to treat fever), claws (as a cure for insomnia), penis (to boost virility), bones (used in wine as a stimulant for fatigue), eyeballs (to treat epilepsy and malaria), brains (a cure for laziness and acne), the tail (to treat skin diseases), fat (to treat rheumatism and muscular ailments); even the whiskers (to bring courage and to prevent toothache). The 25kg of bones in an adult tiger alone are worth around \$120,000, the pelt another \$20,000 – \$50,000. In total, on the black market, India's remaining 1,411 tigers are worth over a quarter of a billion dollars dead.

For many, the fact that tiger poaching is still rife in India, despite numerous soundly-voiced global outcries, the supposed close attention of powerful international NGO's, and the perilous state of the country's tiger population, is nothing short of alarming. However, for those who understand India and its politics it is far less surprising.

Prerna Singh Bindra is one of India's most prolific environmental writers and she has made several observations that point to a lack of public and political will towards saving the tiger.

"The Indian Forest Service continues to be the most neglected service in the country. Promotions are delayed from the lowest to the most senior levels, there has been a freeze on recruitment for the past 17 years, and the average age of a forest guard is 53 years. At present there is a 40% shortage of forest staff at ground level, where the real battles are fought."

## **An impotent force**

Singh Bindra is equally scathing of the government's solemn promise to save the national animal, made after the publication of the alarming 2007 tiger census. "The dawn of 2009 only brought despair for the tiger", she says. "One shocking revelation is the unprecedented level of poaching in the past three months [November 2008 to January 2009]. Skins and bones of seven tigers have been seized, plus three killed by poachers – and they're the ones we know about. The reality is, it fares no better, only worse."

She continues, "There are no strategies, no extra force, nothing. Quite the contrary, parks like Corbett have had an absentee leadership for the past month. And while some brave individual directors take up the cause, they are severely constrained in their battle. Our weaponry to fight poachers, who are backed by the might of trade cartels, is our rag-tag green army, with defunct weapons and *dandas* (batons). Some not paid for months, nearing retirement, and still no fresh recruitment."

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On a recent visit to India's largest tiger reserve, Kanha, I wanted to corroborate Prerna Singh Bindra's observations on the parks' anti-poaching initiatives and spoke to forest officials who introduced me to some of Kanha's anti-poaching guards. All were close to retirement age, were badly armed (if armed at all) and patrolled on foot, covering an area roughly 11 sq. km in size. Speaking to one of the men, he told me, "It's a thankless task. With so much land to cover I have no real hope of ever catching a poacher. And, if I do encounter poachers, how am I supposed to defend myself from their automatic weapons when all I have is a stick?"

## **Learning from others**

India's poaching problem is not unprecedented. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the mountain gorillas of central Africa faced a similar threat and were, like the tiger, on the brink of extinction. In Rwanda, however, they found their salvation – a lifeline driven and funded by tourism. With the help of outside non-governmental organisations Rwanda developed an eco-tourism industry around its population of gorillas. It is well organised, well managed and profitable.

Tourists are charged a fee of \$500 to trek high into the mountains to spend one hour viewing and photographing gorillas. Numbers are strictly limited (there are eight gorilla families that can be visited and a maximum of eight tourists per family) and viewings are tightly controlled. It's lucrative business for Rwanda's government to the extent that gorilla tourism is the country's third largest export, providing a vital source of revenue for the economy that is surpassed only by sales of tea and coffee.

## **Rwanda-ization**

Interested parties inside and outside India have argued that a similar program of high cost/low impact tourism should be introduced to help protect the tiger. In an interview published in the Sunday Times Travel supplement in May, it was reported that Jairam Ramesh, the Environment Minister, hinted that increasing tourist fees into tiger reserves in line with Rwanda's policy might be on the agenda.

Dubbed Rwanda-ization, such an approach to tourism is seen by many as the Holy Grail for India's tigers. But Rwanda's success with gorilla conservation is based on far more than high permit fees. Critically, the tourism industry directly benefits local villagers, those people having to live and survive on the edge of the forests that the gorillas inhabit.

In the past, the villagers would use the forest to harvest timber for building and firewood, as well as for hunting animals such as deer for food. Directly and indirectly, such activities affected the gorillas, which were often caught inadvertently in traps and snares, or were killed through fear when their paths accidentally crossed those of the human trespassers. As Theodore

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Mgerageze, a porter in one of the villages that skirt the edge of the forest told me, "Before tourism gorillas had no meaning to us because we got no benefit from their being here. Now the whole village looks out for the gorillas, protects them, because we earn our living from the tourism they bring."

In total around 76% of the jobs related to gorilla tourism are filled by local villagers like Mgerageze, which ensures that those people affected most by the presence of the national park, with all its associated rules and restrictions, benefit the most from the tourist dollar the park earns. Additionally, as well as the jobs directly linked to tourism – forest rangers, trackers, guards, porters, guides – the government set up a scheme of revenue-sharing that diverts 5% of income generated through gorilla tourism directly to the villagers. This money pays for wood and food, negating the need to plunder these vital resources from within the national park boundaries, reducing the potential for human-gorilla conflict.

Further still, an 80km-long dry-stone wall has been built at the park boundary, keeping the grazing animals inside, which protects the valuable crops grown by the farmers owning land abutting the park. No longer concerned with the potential loss of their crops, the farmers have ceased laying snares to catch deer and, as a result, accidental mortality of gorillas has been all but eradicated.

The local communities also benefit indirectly from the tourism program. Road building to aid tourism has had the knock on effect of making it easier and cheaper for farmers to transport their products to the markets, increasing their yield. Additionally, the national treasury has provided funding for community-based projects, including community lodges, health centres, school classrooms and freshwater tanks.

The overriding effect of government policy in Rwanda is that gorillas are now protected by thousands of people, villagers that have been turned into conservationists by government sponsored employment and social welfare programs that have made gorillas literally worth more alive than dead. As a result, poaching has stopped and gorilla numbers are increasing.

This is the true meaning of Rwanda-ization and herein lies perhaps the greatest failing of India's government and, indeed, the tourism industry: both have failed truly to support local communities – the people who can actually make a difference when it comes to conservation, as Rwanda has proved. None of the benefits from tourism afforded to the villagers in Rwanda are forthcoming in India.



## **India's sleeping giant**

In a village abutting Bandipur Tiger Reserve, I spoke to one of the residents, Melkamanahalli. On the subject of tourism he said, "It has been of no use for people of this village. Big people from outside have bought the land and built the resorts. They made the resorts, brought their own people and gave no jobs to anybody in the village." Melkamanahalli's observation is one I've seen first-hand replicated in other parts of India. Lack of jobs for local people is a criticism aimed not just at the resort operators. Of the thousands of people employed in India's national parks, less than 1% live in local communities. Compare this figure with 76% in Rwanda, and again we get a glimpse of where India is failing its wildlife.

This view is supported by a report written by Nagothu Udaya Sekhar into local people's attitudes towards conservation and wildlife tourism. Based on a study conducted around Sariska Tiger Reserve, the report found that national and state government wildlife conservation policy in India does not view tourism in protected areas as a source of revenue for the local communities. Elsewhere in the report, results showed that two-thirds of respondents from the local villages were positive towards tourism and support for conservation. In its conclusion, the report argues that where the benefits of tourism are properly and fairly directed, protected areas also benefit.

Banning tourism in India's tiger reserves will not prevent tigers from becoming extinct. However, so far, the tourist industry and international conservation groups have failed to provide any solutions of their own that have led to any measurable successes. In the past ten years, despite donations to tiger conservation projects totaling over \$41-million and the hundreds of millions of dollars earned in tourist revenue, India's tiger population has more than halved and their numbers continue to decline at an alarming rate.

Ultimately, however, like the mountain gorilla, the future of the tiger almost certainly lies in the tourist dollar. But for Rwanda-ization to be effective it will need government commitment and a willingness to support the only people that can make a real difference – the thousands-strong army of conservationists-in-waiting living around all of India's tiger reserves, willing to make a difference. Ultimately, it is they – the villagers and communities – who can save the tiger, if only they were given the chance.