



Exploring Ecotourism Potentials And Nature Conservation Initiatives In Corbett Tiger Reserve

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Abstract

Ecotourism is pro-environment tourism that promises to promote conservation as well. Uttarakhand has immense potential to promote ecotourism. The present work explores the potential of ecotourism in Corbett National Park, which is part of Terailandscape having swamps and grasslands with mixed forests that preserve tigers. The park is the most popular national park in India and famous for tiger and elephant safari. However, the lack of ecotourism guidelines resulted into the mass tourism practices inside the park and threat to the fragile environment of the park.

Introduction

Ecotourism, the new buzzword of tourism has been described as a 'product', a 'destination', or an 'experience'. Various words have been used to represent ecotourism activities; among them some are descriptive- Nature Tourism, Adventure, Heritage Tourism; some are activity based - Spiritual Tourism, Religious Tourism, Tourism; some are values-based- Alternative Tourism. The characteristics of the ecotourism often denoted as "responsible," "sustainable," "green," or "low impact" tourism. The concept and practices of ecotourism began taking shape by early 1990s, the concept shaped into a new somewhat environmentally and socially responsible travel.

Uttarakhand is the most suitable state for the development of ecotourism in India. A close form of ecotourism such as Nature tourism, Wildlife Tourism and Adventure Tourism is already forte of the state. The state holds a crucial position regarding discourses of conservation of natural resources, scientific management of forests, community development and infringement of forest rights of local people. Unfair appropriation of natural resources and out migration was the major reason for the inception of Uttarakhand as a new state. Ecotourism was the very crucial model for the state to achieve sustainable development and conservation goals.

Ecotourism Policy Framework in Uttarakhand:

The state has six National Park along with other protected areas comprising 13.8 % of the total area of the state. These protected areas are locating at a range of elevation from 800 mts to 5400 mts

To promote high priority agenda of ecotourism; the newly created state took almost two decade to declare a concrete policy and in 1997, formed Ecotourism Development Corporation (ETDC). However, a detailed analysis of this corporation revealed a deviated path from ecotourism and conservation.

In Uttaranchal, ecotourism policy framework involves the forest and wildlife Departments. A wing of forest department as the Forest Development Corporation (UAFDC) exists for planning and conducting ecotourism in the state. This is a statutory body constituted by the State Government for the better development and appropriation of forest produce within the State. UAFDC define ecotourism as –

“Ecotourism is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism. Its purpose may be to educate the traveler, to provide funds for ecological conservation, to directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, or to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights”.

UAFDC is supposed to encourage ecotourism at various places in the state with alliance of accommodation and hospitality agencies of state government namely Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam(KMVN) and the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam(GMVN).

Yet, their practice reflects the use of term ecotourism as rhetoric and promoting nature tourism with hardly benefits going to the community.

In fact there is no need of developing new institutions for ecotourism instead using already developed tourism institution of the state. Recently, it is observed that tourism in state is facing challenge of mass tourism as well as high concentration of capital intensive industry. Therefore the small scale or local benefits in tourism to local populations is a far cry while their traditional social, cultural and livelihood rights have been affected by environmental regulations.

Methodology

The research methods of this paper consist of web content analysis and field survey. Qualitative methods chosen for this study as it is estimated to produce more holistic and in-depth information of the research objects. This study is strongly concentrated on ecotourism perspective and the main emphasis on to explore the tourism potential in the area.

Tourism is a field of study involving social sciences, in other words, it investigates the behavior of people in their natural and social environments. A qualitative approach could be applied in a situation where a specific culture or a small community is studied and the experiences and stories of those living inside are regarded highly important.

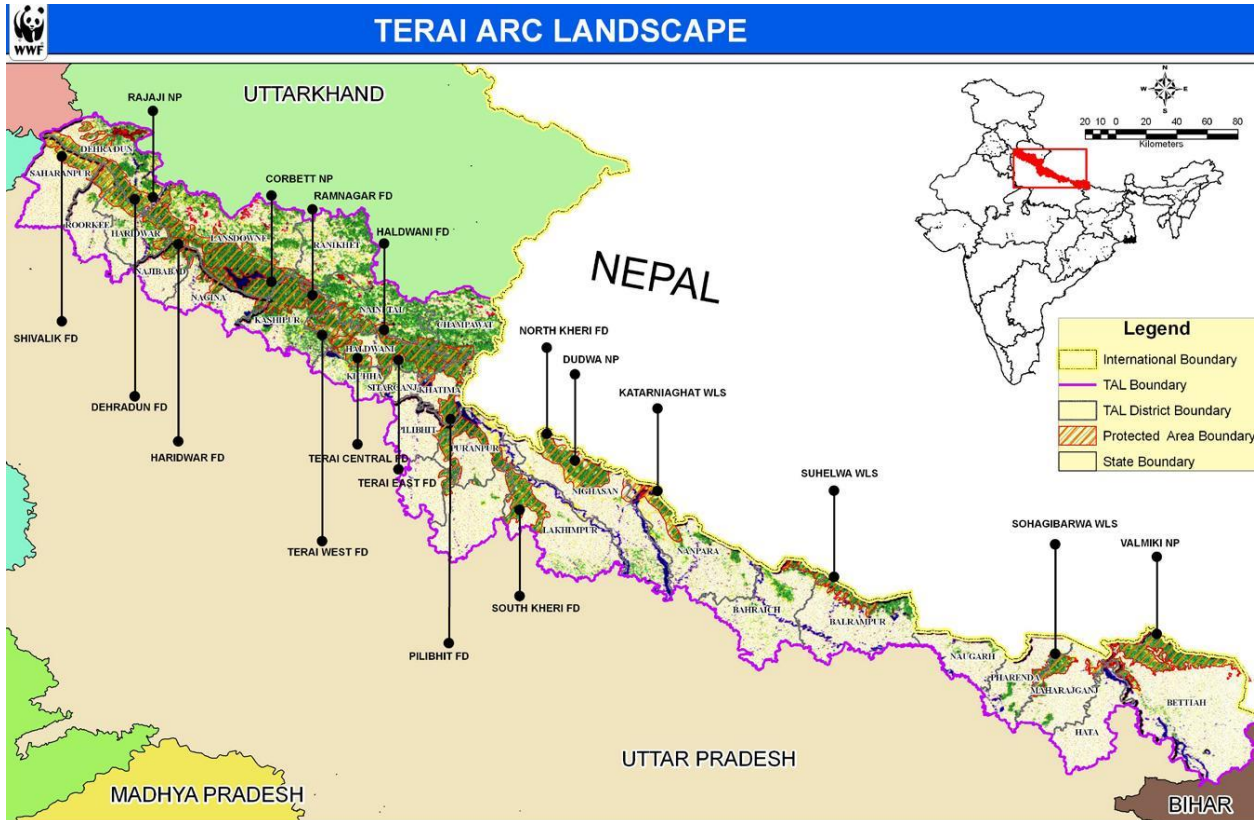
Ecotourism Potentials and Conservation Efforts in Corbett Tiger Reserve

The landscape of area is an astonishing intermingles of hills, rivers and grasslands. It has a panoramic area of Bhabar having big boulders, dense forest and picturesque landscape. “Boksa tribes from the Terai, settled in the area and practiced shifting cultivation, but they were evicted in the early 1860s under Major Ramsay.”¹ The Terai characterized by swamps, which support tall grasslands, water bodies and mixed forests. Corbett is one of India’s best-preserved parks with highest density of tigers and large number of Indian Elephant, buffalo and Himalayan Black Bear, sambar deer, hog deer, chital, sloth, Indian grey mongoose, otters, Himalayan gorals etc. Various species of trees, shrubs, herbs, bamboos, grasses, climbers and ferns are characteristics of the park. With approximately 550-recorded species of birds, park is also paradise for bird watchers. It park is known as the “land of roar, trumpet and song”- the roar of tigers, the trumpet of elephants and the melodious song of birds.

This protected area is part of the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL), a WWF supported ostentatious conservation plan for tigers. This arch shape landscape is extended in the Himalayan Terai Belt in India and Nepal extended over 800 km. from river Yamuna in west to river Bhagmati in the east in Nepal. This is a unique landscape parallel to the Shivalik Hills from North and Bhabar area in the South. The TAL plan proposed to develop wildlife corridors with human intervention free continuous area in the entire region. However, a big challenge is to hold the area free for wildlife as the belt supports high population pressure with settled agricultural fields and human habitation. A series of interconnected protected area are proposed to develop across this belt in both countries.

Figure: The Terai Arch Landscape, supported by WWF

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20071224224245/http://sea.unep-wcmc.org/sites/pa/0180v.htm> Accessed on 18 April, 2020



Corbett National Park is known for the Project Tiger, the biggest conservation initiative of its time was launched in April, 1973. Hunting and poaching, fragmentation of habitat and mounting human pressure on land caused tiger population was all time low in this area. The initiative helped to protect tigers as well as people become aware about going down population of the majestic cats and need of their conservation. Today, Corbett is one of our best-preserved parks, with highest density of tigers in India. Under 'Project Tiger', government combated poachers and gave funds to villagers so that they could relocate to avoid human-tiger conflict. Wireless communication systems and outstation patrol camps implanted within the tiger reserve managed by a Field director.

A Crocodile Conservation Project introduced in the year 1976 to protect the threatened number of Gharial and become very successful in enhancing their numbers by breeding in captive and restrain eggs from natural predators.

Apart from tiger and Gharial conservation, Corbett is the land of Asiatic Elephant conservation known started as Project elephant in 1991. Scientific and designed management plans followed to protect the existing habitat and alleviate the man- elephant clashes and measures to protect them from poachers and education and awareness of masses.



The Ecotourist Zones:

To properly manage tourism in the ecosensitive region of Jim Corbett National Park, it has been divided into five different zones or Gates to Jim Corbett National Park. Furthermore, these are the main areas of the park where visitors can be part of wildlife safari and can enjoy seeing wild animals in their true wild form with bare eyes at in short distance.

Bijrani Zone : Bijrani Zone is very popular tourist's hub because of its abundant natural beauty and open grasslands. The entry gate of the zone is located at only 01 Km from Ramnagar city.

Jhirna Zone: Jhirna is another important tourist zone in the Jim Corbett National park that is open for tourist round the year. The Jhirna Gate is located at 16 km from Ramnagar city.

Dhela Zone: Dhela is a new eco tourism zone in Jim Corbett National Park included in tiger reserve zone in November 2014. This is the only area in the reserve's buffer zone open to tourists in Corbett Tiger Reserve. The zone is retaining the attention of large number of tourist because of its wealthy flora and fauna open throughout the year, located at an approximate distance of 13 Km from Ramnagar City and is the nearest gate from Delhi. The safari is done using the registered vehicles and a mandatory guide. Private vehicles are not allowed in this zone just like the other zones.

Dhikala Zone: Being the largest and most varied zone in Corbett, Dhikala is famous for its abundant natural beauty as well as offering the best sight for exotic fauna. The entry gate is

18 km away from Ramnagar city and is the second nearest gate from Delhi. Night stay inside the Dhikala Tourism Zone is highly recommended for the hard core wildlife enthusiasts.

Durga Devi zone : Located on the north-eastern boundary of the Jim Corbett National Park, Durga Devi zone is the best gate for those who are fond of bird watching and photography. Entry gate is located at an approximate distance of 36 km from Ramnagar city.

SitabaniZone : Sitabani Zone doesn't fall under the Corbett Tiger Reserve area. If you are fond of peaceful uncrowded, natural beauty, then you must visit Sitabani area.

Pakhro Zone: Pakhro is the new entry gate opened in 2019 is the nearest to the Kotdwar town and 2 hour drive from jolly grant airport, Dehradun. Pakhro is situated on the periphery of the Sonanadi Sanctuary and can be approached from Kalagarh and Kotdwar. Historically, it was carved out of Kalagarh Forest Division. It was brought under the Project Tiger and became a part of the Corbett Tiger Reserve in 1991. Developed as a natural habitat of wildlife animals and birds, Sonanadi range is blessed with amazing beauty of flora and fauna. Situated in the north of Sonanadi river, this zone is favorite place for Asiatic Elephant along with tiger, cheetah, sambhar, leopard and reptiles. Other attractions to the Corbett visitors area Garjiya Devi Temple, Sitabani Forest Reserve, Sitabani Temple, Corbett Museum, Dhangari Museum etc.

With all these gifts from nature, the park is also a hub of adventurous activities like river rafting, rock climbing, rappelling, angling and more. Permits are issued for a particular zone. The safari is permitted only the zone is booked for.

Jungle Safaris

Observing landscape, flora and freely roaming animals, birds inside the protected area by riding on approved vehicles or trained animal is called jungle safari. Most popular and exiting activity in the Corbett Park is spotting deadly big game animal from a safe distance via motor vehicle or Animal (elephant) ride. Jungle lodges accommodations provided by the various private and government agencies within the jungle areas is also the part of this safari and insure the best way to explore nature.

Elephant Safari: Elephant safari are the most popular activity Corbett is famous for. The core areas of jungle are easily possible to access elephant safari that facilitate the closest gaze of the fascinating life of jungle. Conducted under the guidance of well-trained and expert mahouts, elephant safaris also ensure maximum safety, fun and excitement to the visitors. Elephant safaris are operated in morning and evening timing according to summer and winter season.

Canter safaris: canter safaris generally operated by park authorities are usually large vehicle with a seating capacity of almost 20 people are used for roaming inside the jungle. This is another exciting way to experience jungle life with group. Canter safaris are ideal for the large group of visitor to enjoy jungle safaris with utmost safety

Jeep Safari: Most popular safari in the Corbett is jeep safari. Ideal for small group of visitors; its accessibility inside jungle is far better than canter safari. To watch tiger, jeep safaris are proved safe and convenient.

Accessibility of the Site:

Corbett National Park is situated in the foothills of the Sub- Himalayan belt in Nainital districts of Uttarakhand with headquarter stationed at Ramnagar. Easy Accessibility and nearness to the major demand centers to the Jim Corbett National Park is one of the prominent factors that made these destinations as one of the most popular tourism site in India.

Ramnagar, the base town of Jim Corbett national Park is a small city; well connected by road and rail network with major cities of India like Delhi, Moradabad, Lucknow, Nainital Bareilly and Chandigarh. After reaching Ramnagar, its hardly a 20 minutes to one hour drive to Jim Corbett depending upon which gate you want to reach.

By Road Ramnagar has a very good network of road that connects the different cities. The Corbett National Park is situated at an approximate surface distance of 260 Kilometer from India's national capital Delhi. The state governments and travel agencies of Uttaranchal and nearby states provide taxis and buses make Corbett easily accessible.

The railway station in Ramnagar receives trains from different major cities of India like Delhi, Moradabad and Bareilly etc.

Ecotourism Practices in Jim Corbett

Park authorities are promoting Community based Rural tourism(CBT) as a viable option for providing livelihood opportunities to the communities residing in villages near the Forest areas and to provide visitors a glimpse of rural hill village life.

To protect the legacy Carpet Sahib(Jim Corbett) local people are successfully running a "Jim Corbett Trail" in Chhoti Haldwani, where a 2 Km long heritage trail to develop a model Kumaoni Village has been developed and successfully run with the help of the Eco Development Committee (EDC) of the village. The trail ends up at Jim Corbett Museum. The former house of Jim Corbett is managed a museum by the local people that presents an exclusive and authentic experience of works of Jim Corbett.

Chhoti Haldwani being a heritage village of Jim Corbett is being popularized with the help of trained guides, as birding area by the Corbett Gram Vikas Samiti .The area is surrounded by dense forests from three sides and a river on one side. These physical conditions attract a number of bird species around the village. Hundreds of species of birds are there in the

village and nearby forest area. During winter season, several species of birds from high hills visit this foothill area and remain there until beginning of summers. The village promotes home stay with the facilities of Jim Corbett Heritage Trail, Folk Music, Cultural Exchange, Cooking Workshop of Local Kumaoni Cuisine, Bird Watching etc.

Corbett Fall is situated about 1.5 kms away from Chhoti Haldwani village. This waterfall is one of the major attraction points for Corbett visitors

Boar Canal Trail: Boar is river which flows from one side of Chhoti Haldwani. There is a historical canal which was built in 1870 for cooling iron at the iron foundry located close to it .the canal runs over a stretch of 8.6 km and irrigate about 40 villagers of this region. This canal has various fascinating features. At few stretch, the canal goes underground while remaining stretch, it goes over a stream. The remnants of the three panchakki (water driven flour mills) are there on the bank of the canal.

Pitfalls of Ecotourism in Corbett National Park

Tourism has been referred to as a “goose that not only lays a golden egg, but also fouls its own nest” due to nearness of major urban centers, Corbett attracts huge number of tourist and is facing the danger of over tourism.

Overtourism: CTR is showing all signs of overtourism due to getting increasingly sandwiched as population pressure and resultant developmental activities presses in from all sides. This has led to increasing man-animal conflict. The reserve registers more than two lakhs visitors every year. The CTR authorities state that over 150 vehicles with about 600 people are permitted in on a daily basis during the season. There is accommodation for over 3,000 visitors around the reserve². In spite of being the highest density of population of tigers in the country at 20/100 sq km the park is overcrowded by visitors.

Habitat Fragmentation: Most important problem of the CTR is habitat fragmentation; especially along Kosi River. In Dhikuli village, the line of resorts along with road extends up to the river, a clear case of encroachment that has expanded with big market player’s patronage

High Commodification of Land: Commodification of Land of land is such high in the area their

²www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/corbett_tourism_report.pdf , Accessed on 12th May , 2020



land prices that used to be Rs. 30 thousands per bigha sold few year back at are now skyrocketed to over 30 lakhs per bigha that my survey in the village of Dhikuli; situated just outside the eastern edge of the Corbett National Park found that tourism is resulting in social disruption in the villages surrounding the park by creating huge economic disparity and social conflict. Local people told that the luxury resorts in the area are also resulting in water scarcity in villages because of the high demand of water by these resorts. These resort are arranging big fat wedding events.

Malpractices by Super Luxury Resorts: the CTR area has high density of Super Luxury Resorts. These resorts are involved in various activities of negligence of law and order as they some of them offered guaranteed tiger sighting. They extort very high rent; in some cases up to Rs.50000 per night in peak season to a room of 3 to 5 thousand prices of regular days. They plan and organize big lavish wedding in their premises and create huge noise pollution in the night time. They never follow regulation to dump their garbage and creating very hazardous situation for local people and promote straying to the CRT fauna. Their illegal construction has created physical obstruction to the tigers and elephants corridors. On the name of ecotourism, angling resorts inside CRT have created permanent structure along Ramganga River. These resorts also organizes night safari that is totally prohibited.

Conclusion

The strategy of ecotourism is useful in managing natural resources in such a way that creates economic avenues from preserving environment. The potential for ecotourism sites in the Corbett National Park has been explored. The park has many exiting natural feature to attract ecotourists. The density of tigers is prominent attraction for tourists. Elephant safari and jeep safari, trekking and camping are main activities popular among tourists. However, due to unregulated strategy of tourism, the site favors mass tourism over the ecotourism resulting into environmental degradation.

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