Community-based Tourism in Pawalgarh

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Written specially for Vikalp Sangam and ‘People in Conservation’ newsletter

Introduction

Tourism has from time immemorial been promoted as a benevolent, non-consumptive activity that provides enjoyment and entertainment to the traveler. It has also brought to many communities and countries substantial revenue; helped conserve endangered species; and rejuvenated and revived cultural heritage. However, this is only one side of the coin and what many have now seen coming for several decades is the fact that tourism can cause inordinate harm when it goes beyond the carrying capacity of a place. In the summer of 2017, the media and the travel industry finally acknowledged the negative impacts of tourism and thus came into existence the term ‘overtourism’. Very simply ‘overtourism’ takes place when there are far too many visitors at a particular destination. However, the term ‘too many’ itself is site-specific and would be defined by local residents, travel entrepreneurs and tourists themselves. In terms of protected areas, it is determined by the health of the ecosystem and species therein. The signs of overtourism are many. When local communities are forced to sell their land to hoteliers; when forest roads get jammed by tourist vehicles; when tourists cannot view wildlife because of the crowds, subsequently disturbing wildlife, and when fragile ecosystems get degraded is when ‘overtourism’ is taking place. Corbett Tiger Reserve is showing all signs of ‘overtourism’. It is in this context that this case study becomes significant. There is a need to look at more innovative approaches to tourism, particularly in the larger Corbett landscape. This case study looks at the ecological significance of this landscape and highlights the Eco Harryman’s initiative and describes how this initiative along with the declaration of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve are catalyzing the creation of an alternative model of tourism in the landscape. Taking the lead in this direction is the Pawalgarh Prakriti Prahari (PPP)[1], a local youth group. PPP provides a unique platform where individual homestay owners will sign an agreement obliging them to follow the terms and conditions laid down by PPP and in turn avail of the benefits of the PPP agreement. This is indeed an innovation in community-based tourism in India. The Larger Corbett Landscape Spread across the region between the river Yamuna in India and the river Bagmati in Nepal, encompassing the Shivalik hills, is the landscape that covers some of India’s well known Tiger Reserves and Protected Areas. Perhaps one of the most celebrated parks in this landscape and in all of India is the Corbett National Park that spreads across the Nainital, Pauri and Almora districts. The landscape is an amazing blend of high hills, the mighty Ramganga, riverside belts, and grasslands. It is a unique blend of Bhabar characterized by boulders and Sal (Shorea robusta) and other mixed vegetation and the Terai characterized by clay rich swamps which support a mosaic of tall grasslands, wetlands and mixed deciduous forests. Corbett is one of India’s best-preserved parks with 164 tigers and over 600 elephants. A recent survey revealed that Corbett has the highest density of tiger population in the country at 20/100sq km. More than 600 species of trees, shrubs, herbs, bamboos, grasses, climbers and ferns have been identified in the Park. The Corbett and the adjoining Rajaji National Parks between them hold India’s northwestern-most population of tigers and one of the world’s most significant populations of Asian Elephants. With approximately 550 recorded species of birds, this landscape is one of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs).
The Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve

At a distance of less than half hour from the Corbett Tiger Reserve lies the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, a part of the larger tiger landscape. Jim Corbett made Pawalgarh famous for having hunted the largest ever tiger in these forests. Titled "The Bachelor of Pawalgarh," Corbett recounted his tale of tracking and killing this tiger that took him over a decade, in his famous book, "Man-eaters of Kumaon". The amendments made to the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 in 2002 provided for the formation of two new categories of Protected Areas. One category was that of Conservation Reserves, which the state government may declare after consultations with relevant local communities. Areas adjacent to existing protected areas or those connecting one protected area to another are priority.

Pursuant to this, the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve was established in 2012. The landscape is criss-crossed by three rivers. It is flanked by the river Kosi in the west and river Buar in the east. The river Dabka flows from east to west in the northern area and flows south towards the Terai region, bifurcating the landscape. The Conservation Reserve has large tracts of undisturbed forests. With sightings of 365 species of birds on record, this 58.25 sq km reserve is a bird watcher’s paradise. Unlike Corbett Tiger Reserve, the trails here can be traversed on foot. The reserve also has 32 species of mammals and more than 125 species of butterflies. Eco Harryman’s Resort In close proximity to the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is a unique homestay called Eco Harryman’s (Eco Harryman’s is actually an acronym based on the names of all the people who were part of the first coordinating committee). It is owned and managed by the dynamic Manral ji. Manral ji belongs to a family, several members of which were part of the Indian Army. He too wanted to join the Army, but his family wanted him to look at other options. He got a diploma in electronics from Delhi and was exploring employment opportunities when a chain of events brought him back to Uttarakhand. This was the time when Uttarakhand was struggling for independent statehood. He wanted to be part of the movement and also in some ways promote the natural beauty of the state. He decided to then start a tourism initiative from his family house in Pawalgarh. In the year 2000, the State Forest Department started looking at ecotourism in earnest and Manral ji’s place was best suited for this. This resort has three rooms on the ground floor and three on the first, with a varying number of beds. The rooms themselves are comfortable and clean. There is a common set of toilets and bathrooms at the back. Across from this is another building that has on the first floor an outdoor venue for meetings. A look at the vast collection of books and the wildlife related artwork on the walls indicates that one is in the company of a true naturalist. One walks across a beautiful fruit orchard to get to the dining hall that can also accommodate quite a few people, if additional dormitory space is required. The walls throughout the resort are adorned with nature-related paintings by local artists, making the place vibrant and attractive. This is an ideal venue for school/college camps. Manral ji’s wife supervises the cooking based on delicious, local, organic cuisine for the guests. Eco Harryman’s offers a range of activities to travelers that include nature walks, camping on the campus, adventure activities and also some traditional games. There are many who come just to relax in the wonderful surroundings, eat healthy food and enjoy the tranquility. This includes several who come on a regular basis just to get away from bustling/stressful city life. There are naturalists who make the resort their base and then go and explore the Conservation Reserve. At any given time, there are also a few youngsters who come here to volunteer and help in a range of activities at the resort. The resort also hosts many conservation-related meetings and events. With an annual turnover of Rs. 3-5 lakhs, the resort is economically sustainable and is able to support other relevant
Festivals in Uttarakhand: A Unique Endeavour

Recognising the amazing bird diversity in Uttarakhand and the need to conserve it, the Uttarakhand Forest Department in 2011 started Bird watching Camps across the state. Between 2011 and 2016, the Ecotourism Wing of the Forest Department supported 25-30 such camps. These camps culminated in birding festivals, the first of which was held in Asan in 2014. This commendable initiative to promote birding in the state and subsequently create awareness was the brainchild of the then Chief Conservator of Forests in charge of Ecotourism, Rajiv Bhartari. There has been an overwhelming response to these and in collaboration with other groups that include Titli Trust, Kalpavriksh and Himal Prakriti, birding festivals have become a regular feature in the state. These festivals are opportunities where forest staff, local community members, tour guides and others learn the basics of birding and also become conservation ambassadors. The second birding festival was held in Pawalgarh in 2015. From a workshop on community-based tourism convened during the festival emerged the need for more trained nature guides, particularly with the delineation of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve. Titli Trust[2], a non-government organization, urged the Forest Department to support a Nature Guide Training Programme that would help link rural youth to conservation. It was this need that led to the establishment of the PPP. PPP was registered as a not-for-profit nature conservation society in December 2015. The main objective of the Society is to support nature conservation, environment protection and sustainable living by promoting alternate livelihoods such as ecotourism through village homestays, nature tours with experienced guides and promoting local produce and cuisine in the landscape of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve. PPP also supports the sale of nature interpretation products such as books, brochures, handicrafts, paintings, etc. The Society focuses its efforts mainly in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve landscape and its members are from the villages around Pawalgarh. These include: Pawalgarh, Mankanthpur, Kyari, Kotabagh, Syat, Ramnagar, Gabua, Chhoi and Amtoli.

Once established, there began an intensive training of nature guides through the Titli Trust for over 70 work-days. This included training on basic skills of bird watching followed by bi-monthly practice sessions; first aid; soft skills such as communication; and storytelling. There were also other training sessions conducted by organizations such as the Wildlife Trust of India and the Uttarakhand Forest Department. These trainings included ones for advanced nature guides and a course for trekking leaders. A four-day test was conducted at the end of 2016. 65 youth took the test out of which 30 were selected as requested by the Forest Department. It was at this point that the Forest Department seemed to go back on its word and did not take on the trained nature guides as agreed upon earlier. There was no clarity on why this happened. A lot of expectations had been raised and this led to considerable disappointment for the trained youth. Nearly two years after the initial agreement, recently, there has been a move to register guides as part of the nature guide
programme. Unfortunately, many of the youth trained as nature guides have taken to other occupations. There are few that remain. Towards more Community-based Tourism In the wake of the delay in taking trained youth as nature guides, the PPP, with the help of organizations and persons such as the Titli Trust and Manral ji, are attempting to move towards a model of community-based tourism in the Pawalgarh region. Specific to this PPP hopes to:

- Provide livelihoods to local youth in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve landscape by offering a range of ‘products’ for tourists which include nature guiding for vehicle safaris and on designated walking trails, local homestays, local cuisine and other local produce.

Ensure that the tourism at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is eco-friendly, sustainable and equitable with benefits flowing to local community.

Support nature conservation activities in Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, as determined by and in consultation with the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve management.

On this background, PPP now intends to begin Homestay services, both community homestays and individual homestays, for visits in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve landscape. To take this forward, in a rather unique way, PPP will sign an agreement with individual homestay owners who will then comply with the terms and conditions laid down by PPP and in turn avail of the benefits of the PPP agreement. As part of the agreement, PPP will be responsible for marketing of homestays; customer engagement; planning of schedules and itineraries; managing bookings and financial transactions; registration of homestays; and ongoing training and capacity building. PPP retains the right to conduct annual performance assessments of the Homestays based on pre-determined standards. These standards may be revised from time to time based on customer feedback. Homestay owners will be responsible for all onsite customer management that includes boarding and lodging, nature guiding etc.; upkeep of homestay property; payment of bills for all utilities used; and sharing onsite customer feedback. Homestay owners will inform PPP in case it is directly engaging in any marketing activity and also inform PPP in case it is engaging with large groups/schools/institutions. Homestay owners should be geared to provide to the visitors guides for bird watching and nature and heritage walks and introduction to other activities such as traditional games. Manral ji has indeed been a trailblazer in the context of ecotourism in this region. His resort has now become the hub of activities related to ecotourism. Besides his own guests, Manral ji has nurtured the local youth and is taking the PPP along the path of ecotourism. Eco-Harryman’s is the venue for many of the trainings and capacity building exercises for members of the PPP. Manral ji is spearheading the movement for ecotourism in the region and he does so by example.

for Local Communities [photo by Seema Bhatt] Responsible Tourism: The Larger Context

‘Overtourism’ in Corbett Tiger Reserve

The growing popularity of wildlife tourism is resulting in a heavy influx of visitors, particularly during the holiday season. Protected areas such as Corbett are facing an issue of ‘overtourism’ that is causing degradation of the habitat as also disturbance to wildlife. Corbett Tiger Reserve, due to its proximity to Delhi and its immense popularity, is a classic case of the emerging ‘five star’ culture where people from more affluent sections of society are frequenting these areas, but still want their luxuries and can pay for them. The eastern boundary of the reserve near the town of Ramnagar has seen a phenomenal growth in luxury resorts that are inundated with tourists the year round. The Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) is one of the most popular protected areas in the country. The reserve records over 200,000 visitors annually. 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 3000 visitors around the reserve.

[3]

. The Wildlife Institute of India carried out a study in the village of Dhikuli, situated just outside the eastern edge of the Corbett National Park to look at tourism related impacts. The study found that tourism is resulting in social disruption in the villages surrounding the park by creating islands of prosperity resulting in financial disparity, resentment and conflict. Luxury resorts in the area are also resulting in water scarcity in villages because of the high extraction level of water by these resorts.

[4]

to meet customer demands. The Corbett landscape is in a crisis situation in terms of tourism. Given the popularity of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, and the alarming growth of luxury resorts in the buffer zone, the landscape is in danger of being smothered by mass tourism. It is being loved to death. Often in the ‘five star resort’ culture of tourism, tourists care precious little about wildlife, and are there only to have a good time. There are others who care only about seeing the tiger and will go to any extent to see it. Finally, there are the true nature lovers and conservationists who want to enjoy the peace and quiet of the wilderness and soak in nature. Ironically, while they are the greatest allies of the reserve, they now hesitate to visit it. Tourism in the Corbett landscape and many others needs to diversify and go beyond just the parks. In this context, the declaration of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve and the PPP initiative are indeed timely. There is a need to spread tourism activities beyond the Corbett Tiger Reserve and it is critical that tourism be promoted in other parts of the larger landscape. And for this, the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is ideally suited. Further, the PPP model supports the participation of local youth in tourism whereby giving them a larger scope as stakeholders in conservation. At present the Corbett authorities are under tremendous pressure to manage the reserve adequately, particularly in terms of the sheer number and kind of tourism demands being met. PPP is the ally that can provide nature guides as also alternate accommodation. Further, the PPP Code of Conduct ensures that tourism in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is sustainable and responsible.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to
Manral ji
and Sanjay Sondhi for sharing with me the background and history of the place and initiative.

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[1] www.pawalgarh.org

[2] TITLI TRUST (www.titlitrust.org) is a not-for-profit nature conservation organization based in Dehradun. It is primarily focused on conservation and livelihoods in the Himalayas.
