

Will the tiger paparazzi keep away?

TIGER TOURISM The SC's interim order banning tiger safaris in core reserve areas has started a huge debate. Some say the move can do more harm than good to tigers. Tourists unknowingly play the role of extended ears and eyes of the forest guards and also deter poachers. But some say poaching activities occur in the darkness of the night when tourists are not around, writes **Atula Gupta**

The Supreme Court's temporary order of banning tiger safaris in core areas of all the 42 tiger reserves in the country was made with a simple reasoning – to provide the tiger with the much-needed solitude and let the big cat enjoy its kingdom without the hounding paparazzi. But leaving the tiger alone is the last thing on the minds of tour operators whose life revolves around selling the national animal. In the aftermath of the new code of conduct, the nation is still mulling whether the move will really help bring the tiger back from the brink of extinction.

Booming business

Every year, thousands of tourists from around the world, armed with fancy cameras and English-Hindi dictionaries make a beeline to India to see the nation's second most popular attraction after the Taj Mahal – the tiger. Luring them are tour operators who have over the years gained an acute sense of understanding about every demand that a tourist might have. So even when the hotels and resorts are in the wilderness, swimming pool, spa, yoga classes and wi-fi connectivity make sure that city-bred guests are at home and ready to spend thousands on services.

It is also not just private players who are gaining from business in tiger's kingdom. State governments too are promoting tourism in protected areas fiercely because it earns them revenues. Take the case of Madhya Pradesh. The state is home to three of the most popular tiger destinations – Kanha, Pench and Bandhavgarh. The state earns close to Rs 15 crore by way of entry fee only which is not more than Rs 22 for the national parks. But add to it the amount spent by a tourist to buy an entire tour package, the tourism earnings easily shoot up to Rs 150-200 crore. The state forest department not only uses the earnings to manage national parks but also shares it with the state. Karnataka and Rajasthan too have an equally big share of revenue coming solely from tiger tourism.

But the profits the tourist resorts make is often at the cost of local resources. According to a yet-to-be-published study by a forest official in Madhya Pradesh, in 2009, 48 resorts in Kanha extracted 5,40,000 litres of ground water per day. The hotels also consumed 302 tonnes of firewood, 42 per cent of which came from the forests. In March last year, Bhopal

based non-profit Prayatna had filed a public interest petition pleading that critical tiger habitats should be kept devoid of any human disturbances including tourism. It is this petition that prompted the SC this July to first put into place a revenue sharing system where tour operators had to part with 10 per cent of their profits for conservation. The court had also summoned individual state governments to define the buffer and core areas of their state national parks. Miffed by the lack of response from seven state forest departments, the court took the strict measure of an interim ban on tiger tourism.

Experts opine that the move can do more harm than good to the tigers. Tourists unknowingly play the important role of extended ears and eyes of the forest guards when they can observe ludicrous activities within the forest and also deter poachers. But some say that poaching activities occur only in the darkness of the night when tourists are not around. Others also believe that the revenue generated through tourism helps local communities. But again views are divided in this regard. While some say the ban will hit hard on locals who have opened food joints and tourist homes in the fringes of the forest, according to researcher MD Madhusudan from Nature Conservation Society at Mysore, elitist model of tourism that generate revenue for the private sector have very little profits that percolates to the local community.

Eco-discipline

From a truly conservation point of view, most conservationists believe that even if total ban of tourist activities is a bit too harsh, a more regulated module of eco-tourism is needed urgently. "While it is important to regulate tourists, it will be a national loss if the SC order takes away common man's chance to see the tiger," says Madhusudan.

India's tigers have become a symbol of conservation that everyone relates too. But as one senior officer of the Environment Ministry rightly puts, "The main objective of creating a tiger reserve is to conserve tigers, tourism is only a by-product." It is once again the question of setting our priorities right – do we want to see the last remaining tigers bypassing all laws of nature, or do we want...really want the tigers to last.



NO EASY ANSWERS Conservationists believe that even if a total ban on tourist activities is a bit too harsh, a more regulated module of eco-tourism is needed urgently. FILE PHOTO