

Ecotourism and conservation refugees: The Indian Scenario

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has profound role particularly in emerging economies like India but the ground realities of wildlife conservation in India are quite uncertain and ambiguous. Protected areas are contentious as those are significant for conservation and these conservation initiatives diffuse fortune (for conservationists and wildlife tourists) and misfortune (for local tribal population due to livelihood jeopardy and eviction for conservation) unevenly. The mushrooming of protected areas across India creates conservation refugees who are the people displaced by the creation of protected areas; actually they are the victims of ecological expropriation. Conservation initiatives have a history of marginalizing indigenous people living in areas designated for conservation which made conservation most elusive today. The tribal communities are paying a brutal price for tailor made agendas to boost safari, create protected areas and attract tourism. Recent steps for eviction of up to nine million indigenous people in India who has ancestral link to the land and forest gains stiff opposition. Conservation initiatives that boot out stakeholder communities may preserve natural resources but denying livelihood opportunities. India as a developing nation with huge population cannot promote the scheme of pristine nature preservation initiatives due to the socioeconomic and political reverberations. In short, framing and sustaining vigorous multifaceted policies for protected areas necessitates honesty when considering its dooms and boons also there requires a readiness to share it with those who incur the costs will only has commendable outcomes.

Key words: Ecotourism, Conservation refugees, Protected areas, Environment conservation

Introduction

Ecotourism is an activity that makes environmentally responsible journey to natural areas in order to relish and apprise environment with ensuant ethnical lineaments, both past and present which engenders conservation with minimal visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic participation of local stakeholder communities. Here, the resources of ecotourism are directly linked with the biodiversity as well as cultural pluralism of developing especially least developing nations. The

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) outlines ecotourism as: "*environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations*" (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). Today, ecotourism got wider acceptance in the tourism market especially in the backdrop of climate change and sustainable development.

Thus, ecotourism is a hot debating topic in the tourism literature which is depicted as a product, a place or a feel. Ecotourism in general manifest a spectrum of environments from polar to tropical and terrestrial to aquatic which exhibit an impregnable correlation with protected areas irrespective of geographic realm. The past few decades have witnessed an explosion in wildlife tourism and ecotourism because they are considered as an emerging sector within the global tourism industry (EBSCO, 2009). On the other side, eco/wildlife tourism causes significant disturbances not only to animals in their natural habitats but also social and cultural impacts to indigenous communities along with dilution of local languages and culture (Tapper, 2006; Pitts, 2010). New-fangled biodiversity rich regions, under Protected Area status or otherwise, are being hastily opening up for ecotourism in all continents. Lack of consistent policy and regulations, existing form of ecotourism has impacted biodiversity very much. Newer ecotourism destinations in and around protected areas has resulted in loss of rights and doles from use of biological resources to stakeholder communities where women and children are mostly impugned (Mariki, 2016; Franks and Small, 2016).

However, ecotourism is indubitably an enormous business globally which received tremendous support from every nook and corner. Ecotourism is purely market based that facilitated the tourism industry to grundle critics by the nature conservation imperatives but not compromising on profits. Such a green-washing is discernible to overcome the adverse effects on the life of communities in developing countries; they are the target of ecotourism (Carrier and Macleod, 2005). In the midst of these intricacies, ecotourism still continues to be a widespread theme for authorities and industries to surmount the current era of climate change maladies. In India ecotourism continues to reap widespread acceptance plus attention as a feasible theme thereby attaining total government backing and industry investment even though it has negative impacts too (Karanth and Defries, 2011).

Ecotourism and Protected areas

The connexion between ecotourism and protected areas are symbiotic in which the protected areas are pivotal component in the spread of ecotourism and its commodification. In other words, if there is a protected area, some form of ecotourism uses it, and

if ecotourism enterprises are present, some protected areas likely exist in the near vicinity. In concept, fringe area people in and around protected areas witness ecotourism as a means of revenue and as a pack of socio-economic interactions that form feasible platform for cultural exchange (Vivanco, 2001; West and Carrier, 2004). The revenue in which tourism engenders often links parks as well as park authorities to ecotourism modalities (Walpole *et al.*, 2001). However, the relationship causes conflict and wrath due to changes in land-use rights, failure in delivering promises in connection with community-level benefits and enforcement of restrictions and regulations to stakeholder communities in the name of conservation (Chaithanaya, 2012; Anaya *et al.*, 2014; Springer and Almeida, 2015; Smadja, 2018). In addition, several researchers highlighted the damaging impacts of ecotourism initiatives coupled with conservation modalities with a deluge of social impacts with unforeseen reverberations in socio-economic and political arena like Liou (2013); Vishwanatha and Chandrashekara (2014); Newsome and Hughes, 2016; Clayton (2017).

Protected areas across India

Protected areas are the places where anthropogenic interferences and exploitation of resources are negligible. In India, there are myriad of protected areas, with differences in intensity of protection liable to various laws and acts like National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves, Community Reserves and Marine Protected Areas. The mushrooming of protected areas across India creates conservation refugees who are the people displaced by the creation of protected areas; actually they are the victims of ecological expropriation. Conservation initiatives have a history of marginalizing indigenous people living in areas designated for conservation which made conservation most elusive today. More precisely, in 2000 India has only 89 National Parks and 485 Wildlife Sanctuaries. But today in 2019 (up to December) India has 101 National Parks, 553 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 86 Conservation Reserves and 163 Community Reserves (ENVIS, 2020) (Fig. 1). In 2000 India has 146665.60 sq. Km protected areas while in 2019 it reaches 165012.59 sq. Km.

After creation of enormous number of protected areas, conservationists and nature lovers are now demanding linking of protected areas as majority of protected areas has area constraints to sustain suffi-

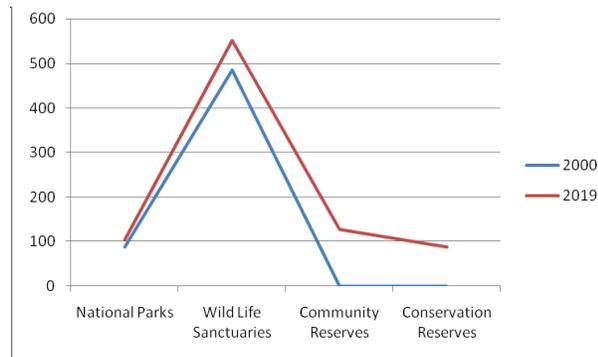


Fig. 1. Extent of protected areas in India in 2000 and 2019

cient territory for individual species. The intention for notifying 'eco-sensitive zones' around protected areas are another way of offering protection to the notified protected areas, but jolting fundamental rights to citizens enshrined in constitution and so many instances are noticed from various protected areas across India (Mukherjee, 2009; Pande and Sharma, 2015).

Conservation refugees and protected areas across India

Dislodgment and relocation of local inhabitants from protected areas is the vital dogma in nature conservation irrespective of geographical location. The deracination of people who herded, collected forest resources and cultivated land was the cradle of twentieth century nature conservation (Rangarajan and Shahabuddin, 2006). Protected areas offers immense contributions to combat global warming by carbon sequestration, promoting ecotourism and biodiversity conservation, it has negative effects too. If the socio-economic and cultural impact on local communities are reckoned, creation of protected areas are not very invigorating (Dowie, 2009). The increase in the number of protected areas is directly linked with number of conservation refugees as it results in eviction and displacement of stakeholder communities. Such displaced people are "conservation refugees." One can define these displaced people as "the people who are displaced by the creation of protected areas; actually they are the victims of ecological expropriation." After displacement/eviction, they move into the realms of survival, migrating to informal sectors of towns and villages with no land or house ownership. In addition, the involuntary displacement of stakeholder communities also occurs due to the restriction of access in and around protected areas;

even physical displacement and relocation are not necessary and such instances are common across Indian protected areas (Sahoo, 2012).

In India, the pioneering relocation drive can be seen in pre-independence era itself where two villages were moved out from the Kaziranga Reserve in Assam in 1908. This was followed by other attempts in Kashmir from Shikar Reserve, then Kanha National park in Madhya Pradesh. Since 1947, displacement cases and eviction drives are reported from Sariska Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan, Gir Forest in Gujarat etc. (Lasgerscoix and Kothari, 2009). This relocation drives are occurring in a regular manner during 1970s especially with the portrayal of the Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA) in 1972 and the establishment of Project Tiger in 1973. Recent regulations of biodiversity activities under the Wildlife Protection Act, Biodiversity Act and National Green Tribunal interferences had directly affected thousands of indigenous inhabitants in the forest whose traditional lifestyle got affected while ecotourism and wildlife adventure tourism activities are permissible (Karanth and DeFries, 2011). Major eviction drives and conservation refugee creation across India are given in Table 1 which makes clear that the indigenous groups across protected areas left excluded; their rights, pride as well as dignity are incessantly despoiled; livelihoods interrupted; relocation under compulsion, without prior informed consent and with toweringly unsatisfying package; absence of facilities at the new site; or simply evicted without any notice which are evocative of brutal colonial times.

Conclusion

Ecotourism winged as a multifaceted spectrum depending on attributes like identity, location, accessibility, scale and implementation. It can be concluded that attitudes and values towards wilderness and wildlife have changed over time and that these changing values and attitudes have affected management strategies too especially in developing countries like India. The sharing of the profits of ecotourism among local inhabitants across protected areas is a sparkly debated issue in conservation arena. India cannot encourage the strategy of pristine nature conservation initiatives due to the socioeconomic and political reverberations. Stakeholder populations survive due to the livelihood

Table 1. An overview of eviction drives and creation of conservation refugees across various protected areas in India

No.	Protected area	State	Eviction drives and conservation refugees
1.	Nagarjunsagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve	Andhra Pradesh	More than 1000 families evicted and about 1000 are under eviction threat (Fanari, 2019a)
2.	Pakhui-Nameri National Park and Tiger Reserve	Arunachal Pradesh	About 1000 families displaced (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009)
3.	Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve	Assam	More than 200 villagers are evicted and 1000 families were threatened of eviction (Lang, 2018; Fanari, 2019b)
4.	Valmiki National Park/ Tiger Reserve	Bihar	700 families with 3500 people (MoEF & CC, 2005)
5.	Achanakmarg Tiger Reserve	Chattisgarh	245 families relocated; No prior informed consent was taken. Relocated villages did not received proper rehabilitation (Menon, 2012; Ejatlas, 2017)
6.	Gir National Park	Gujarat	1425 families relocated and displaced due to poor rehabilitation packages (Devullu <i>et al.</i> , 2005; HLRN, 2009; Ganguly, 2004).
7.	Great Himalayan National Park	Himachal Pradesh	Displaced people exist as conservation refugees without any compensatory packages (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009; MoEF & CC, 2011)
8.	Palamau Tiger Reserve	Jharkhand	5740 families (MoEF & CC, 2005)
9.	Nagarhole National Park and Tiger Reserve	Karnataka	Over 3400 families relocated and remaining families are continuously induced to relocate. Relocated people received only barren land. In the absence of monetary and other supports, their life is in a miserable condition (MoEF & CC, 2005; Desai and Bhargav, 2010; IPT, 2017)
10.	Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary	Kerala	880 families residing in the sanctuary are to be relocated (Ayappan, 2017; Fanari, 2019c). The Muthanga agitation in 2003 was considered as one of the momentous agitation in the history of indigenous people to obtain land rights for cultivation (Abraham, 2019).
11.	Kanha National Park and Tiger Reserve	Madhya Pradesh	More than 22000 evicted and all evictions were forced (Mukherjee, 2009; Hazik, 2015; Saiju, 2017)
12.	Tadoba National Park and Tiger Reserve	Maharashtra	608 families relocated (MoEF & CC, 2005; Rucha, 2005; Pallavi, 2015; Fanari, 2019d)
13.	Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary	Manipur	105 villages affected and protesting (Hanghal, 2018)
14.	Dampa Tiger Reserve	Mizoram	More than 500 families evicted forcibly with poor rehabilitation and 61 villages are under threat of eviction (MoEF & CC, 2005; Just Conservation, 2010; Fanari, 2019a)
15.	Chandaka-Dompara Wildlife Sanctuary	Odisha	Families relocated are still waiting for the land and other facilities they were promised (Asher and Kothari, 2015)
16.	Sariska Tiger Reserve	Rajasthan	9 villages were relocated and 29 villages with a total of 2,409 families to be relocated (Shrivastava, 2015; Bose, 2019; Fanari, 2019a)
17.	Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve	Tamil Nadu	Affected survival and livelihood issues of over 10,000 traditional forest dwellers (Shaji, 2013; Janetius, 2017)

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18.	Dudhwa National Park	Uttar Pradesh	Forced relocation and protests (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009; Fanari, 2019e; Pal, 2019)
19.	Rajaji Tiger Reserve	Uttarakhand	1500 families relocated and rest of the villagers face continued threat of eviction (Agrawal, 2014; Fanari, 2019a; Fanari, 2019f)
20.	Buxa National Park & Tiger Reserve	West Bengal	Curtailed employment and access to the forest. After relocation some villagers moved back to the old site. Regular conflicts with forest officials (Businessline, 2012; Lahiri, 2018; Fanari, 2019g)

diversity and presence of the forest, as they are historical dwellers. The stakeholder populations need to be properly compensated for the loss of livelihood either by the new conservation regime or by newer ecotourism initiatives where alternative livelihood options must be made available, so that these people can earn their own livelihood and live with dignity. In fact, ecotourism is the need of the hour as envisioned by the UN especially in the backdrop of climate change and sustainable development. In addition we must understand that biodiversity without human beings are not complete because they are integral part of the food chain that sustains the ecosystem. In short, framing and sustaining vigorous multifaceted policies for protected areas necessitates honesty when considering its dooms and boons also there requires a readiness to share it with those who incur the costs will only has commendable outcomes and others are counterproductive.

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