



## Concept note on Ecotourism and Need for Certification Standard

## Introduction

In the words of Mark Twain, *'India is a fabulous world of splendour and rags, the one country under the sun with an imperishable interest, the one land that all men desire to see'*. India has a wonderful blend of all essential resources to make it most preferred destination in the world. India's variety of landscapes, rich biodiversity, glorious traditions, plethora of cultures and rich human heritage immensely support the development of tourism.

Within tourism sector, ecotourism has received much attention in recent years especially within the developing world. Ecotourism means management of tourism and conservation of nature in a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirements of tourism and ecology on the one hand and needs of the local communities for jobs, new skills, income generating employment and a better status of women on the other. The most important feature of the growing ecotourism industry in India is its capacity to generate large-scale employment opportunities, particularly in remote and underdeveloped areas. As a concept ecotourism has gained momentum recently here, but as a way of life it has been practiced since times immemorial by Indian people. The immense popularity of ecotourism in India stems from the fact that people are becoming increasingly conscious of the environmental hazards of irresponsible tourism. Such tourism is low impact, educational, and conserves the environment while directly benefiting the economic development of local communities.



Ecotourism is globally identified as a way of achieving twin goals of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. There are various forms of ecotourism in India that attract an increasing number of tourists each year. Some of the most prominent forms include wildlife tourism, agro-tourism, and village tourism and so on. The key players in this sector are Government, local authorities, developers and operators, tourists and local community. Each one of them needs to be sensitive to the environment and local traditions and follow a set of principles for successful development of ecotourism. In addition, non-governmental organisations and scientific institutions also have a key role in development of ecotourism. The Forest and Tourism Departments of the states like Karnataka, Kerala, Sikkim, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh have specifically announced policies for ecotourism laying special emphasis to the involvement of the local communities.

The WTO (World Trade Organisation) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) recognise five key challenges for sustainable tourism:

- Managing dynamic growth, in the light of a forecasted doubling of international tourist arrivals by 2020.
- Climate change, not only recognising the consequences for future tourism planning but also the contribution that tourism makes to global warming through pollution from transport emissions.
- Poverty alleviation, notably in rural areas where tourism can provide only a small number of development options.
- Support for conservation from tourism spending given that protected areas in developing countries receive under 30% of their funding needs and many governments are cutting back on their support for them; and
- Concerns about health, safety and security of travellers.





Travel and tourism is the second highest foreign exchange earner in India. Considering the potential, government has given organisations in this industry export house status. The industry is recognising the potential of domestic tourism as well. Export earnings from international visitors and tourism goods are expected to generate INR 2,750.2 billion or US\$51.6 billion (4.4% of total exports) in 2018. The contribution of the travel and tourism economy to employment is expected to rise from 3.05 crore jobs in 2008 (6.4% of total employment) to 3.9 crore jobs (7.2% of total employment) by 2018. By 2020 tourism in India could contribute Rs 8,50,000 million to the GDP (Source: WTTC).

Most wilderness areas in India are fragile ecosystems that provide a whole host of ecosystem services to local communities and people living downstream; and continue to remain important tourist attractions. However, unplanned tourism in such landscapes can destroy the very environment that attracts such tourism in the first place. Ecotourism, when practiced correctly, is an important economic and educational activity that has the scope to link to a wider constituency and build conservation support while promoting the non-consumptive use of wilderness areas for the benefit of local communities living around, and dependent on these fragile landscapes.

Indian ecotourism industry is successful but facing a number of issues which contradict the very principle of the concept:

- a. **Environmental Issues:** It is seen that tourists opting for such tourism often belong to the prosperous strata of society and are capable to pay for everything they wish, therefore, consumerism becomes focal here. Tour operators invariably succumb to the demands made by tourists and they build an artificial landscape. Such changes cost almost the entire ecosystem dearly. Tourism competes with other forms of development and human activity for natural resources, especially land and water. The use of natural resources for ecotourism involves an economic, social and ecological 'opportunity cost' that need to be compensated appropriately by developers.
- b. **Socio-Economic Issues:** Ecotourism business are often owned and controlled by outside interests in just the same way as mass tourism. Hence, accrued economic benefits often are not used for the protection of the areas or to support the local community. The carrying capacity of host areas is not calculated, leading to unsustainable extraction of resources. As a result, there is a breakdown of civil amenities during peak season when the influx of tourists is large. Breakdown of water supply system in Shimla and other Himalayan towns in recent years is a clear evidence.
- c. **Impacts over local people:** One of the basic objectives of ecotourism is to engage local communities so that they benefit from conservation, economic development and environmental education. Ecotourism is often seen to deceive the locals in two ways. First, their traditional economic and social structure undergoes a transformation towards tourism monoculture. Secondly, the promise made to them to provide a perennial source of income and rational distribution of profit made are rarely kept. Those locals get jobs but only of low quality, low valued and seasonal in

nature. They serve mostly as tourist guide, food providers, or souvenir vendors in the locality. The lion's share of revenue generated goes only in hands of organisers. Hence, cost of ecotourism is borne by locals and big players make profit.

In recent years, the mushrooming of tourist facilities around natural areas has led to their exploitation and misuse of these ecosystems. It has also led to misuse of the term 'ecotourism', often to the detriment of the ecosystem and alienation of local communities. The principles of Ecotourism include adopting low-impact tourism that protects ecological integrity, emphasising the heritage value of wilderness, building environmental and cultural awareness, facilitating sustainability of ecotourism enterprises and activities, providing livelihood opportunities to local communities and using indigenous, locally produced and ecologically sustainable materials for tourism activities. For successful ecotourism enterprise, the local community should be involved, likely conflicts between resource use for ecotourism and livelihood of local inhabitants should be identified and attempts made to minimize the same, type and scale of ecotourism should be compatible with environment and socio-cultural characteristics of the area, and it should be executed with an integrated land-use plan avoiding inter-sectoral conflicts.



Ecotourism sector is growing fast and various Ecotourism projects are coming up in Himalayas, Southern states and NE India. However, Government of India is yet to finalise its Ecotourism policy (MoEFCC released a 'draft Guidelines for Ecotourism in and around PAs' in 2011). Recently, it was declared by the MoEFCC that it has prepared a National Ecotourism Policy to guide the growth of this sector. Ecotourism is the need of the time and a policy on the same to guide the sector was awaited since long. Often under the garb of eco-friendly

tourism, much damage has been done by private players in booming tourism market of India, in the absence of any policy. Now, picture should change for better. It's good that government has laid focus on local employment generation in new draft policy. This will boost local economies and help halt migration of poor people out of villages. Thousands of villages in Himalayan states have become deserted in last years. However, government should take care that upcoming ecotourism enterprises don't come in conflict with forest rights of people; it should instead support local livelihoods and economies. In fact, ecotourism has immense potential to generate income in remote forest and other natural areas, which should be tapped. But to achieve a least impact growth of this new form of tourism, certification standards and checks for the industry should be developed so that ecotourism brings optimum ecological, economic and social benefits to society. Scientific assessment of carrying capacity of natural areas for ecotourism must be done to control number of tourists and resource use thereby. Shimla water crisis in summers this year has rung an alarm bell already. A multi-species approach to such assessments should be adopted.

To enable sustainable growth of Ecotourism sector, development of certification standards for Ecotourism entrepreneurs is an imperative. Certification leads to independent third-party evaluation of forest management practices market driven mechanism, independent of legislative and policy fluctuations. Main objective of such standard is to promote responsible tourism, improved ecotourism management practices, improved wildlife resources, healthier forests and providing livelihood security to local people. Certification will also provide price premium and access to new tourism markets for such initiatives. Certification will also require proper management planning for each ecotourism area that will be prepared by professional landscape architects and urban planners in consultation with the local community as well as others directly concerned. NCCF seeks comments and opinions on this subject for developing certification standard on Ecotourism in India for sustainable growth of this sector in India.

**We seek your valuable comments, feedback and suggestions to take this idea forward and elicit support of relevant stakeholders**

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