

Conservation Tourism: A Novel Idea for a Paradigm shift

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The past few decades have seen many avatars of wildlife and nature-based tourism: one of the most well-known is eco-tourism. This term has been around for over 50 years and is said to now have 85 definitions! Its marketing value was recognised and eco-tourism was adopted by the industry and defined according to its need. Since most of nature-based tourism operates near protected areas, emphasis in the IUCN definition was on conservation of protected areas. Several academic reviews only identify and characterise eco-tourism and take it as being responsible tourism that helps minimise negative impact so that positive impacts such as poverty alleviation and support to conservation prevail over negatives and help protect the environment (Sheryl Ross, 1999; Blamey, 1997; Holly M. Donohoe, 2006; Fennell, 2001). Conservation tourism is in danger of becoming the latest avatar. Initially the idea remained with academic and conservation NGOs but it seems now to be entering the general tourism lexicon and used more widely. The danger here is that it could go the way of 'eco-tourism' that many would argue has become so over and loosely used by industry professionals that it is in danger of losing its value. When adopted by commercial tour operators for marketing purposes it can quickly lose its meaning and descend into 'greenwashing'. When used as a marketing tool to garner a niche space or to take early benefits to occupy an advantageous market position, it can lead to commodification of a novel idea (Jenny A. Cousins, 2009).

Eco-tourism and conservation tourism are both significant categories and ideas within the tourism industry and need to be understood better in order for them to retain their importance, relevance and bite.

Conservation Tourism (CT) is a new concept and to date there are few examples of it (Buckley, 2010), especially in snow leopard range country. As the name indicates it is an integral part of main stream tourism and involved in promoting growth for the sector but it goes beyond eco-tourism as by definition it has an active and catalysing role in the conservation of biological diversity; it is the main engine that drives the conservation. One of the early definitions expressed by Buckley in 2010 is "commercial tourism which makes an ecologically significant *net positive* contribution to the effective conservation of biological diversity". CT has similarities with ecotourism but it has a more specific biological conservation focus and goes beyond the responsible and sustainable aspects of eco-tourism even when this includes benefits to conservation.

CT can be confused with eco-tourism because it also focuses on conservation and necessarily on economic benefit from tourism going to communities. It is important to note that the communities refer to a collective, and not to the individuals in the communities, benefitting from such development. India's Ecotourism Society (now the Responsible Tourism Society of India RTSOI) says Eco tourism is about "uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel". At present tourism and conservation meet mainly through visiting India's Protected Areas—wildlife areas that are already preserved for biodiversity conservation by the Government—or those regions where wildlife is already present. Through park fees and employing and buying locally,

such tourism can provide significant benefit to conservation and the communities there. Thus ecotourism helps safeguard the system and brings economic benefit, so it is a creative way of reconciling ecological conservation and economic development.

Conservation Tourism by comparison is an active rather than passive partner— CT involves using tourism as a dynamic conservation tool to *initiate* the biological conservation. Once a tourism entity is an active conservation partner and the economic incentives generated are the primary engine driving the conservation, it becomes an integral part of this novel CT initiative (Rochelle Steven, May 2013).

There are many examples of conservation tourism around the world, but most of these are operational in private lands (Machiel Lamers, 2014). In countries where wilderness (land) ownership is large and diverse, a range of conservation models are in practice. When land is owned by individuals, charities, communities, corporates, because of their diverse individual interest and skill sets, each one of them undertakes different conservation approaches. Since conservation over a large area where communities are an integral part of the ecosystem conservation requires a significantly large amount of funds, it cannot be entirely sustained by charity. In these situations, tourism can provide an economic support system, especially when tourism is run within the conservation framework. Tourism entities in such places are major conservation drivers in addition to providing economic incentives on a sustainable basis directly linked to conservation success. In the sub-continent, the Annapurna Conservation Area is an ideal example that showcases the potential of conservation tourism.

The situation for snow leopard range country is slightly different. Most of the wilderness areas are under ownership of the Government. Because of this unusual situation nature conservation has been entirely dependent on government policies with very little support from outside, including tourism. As a result, conservation in snow leopard habitat is more or less limited to within the boundaries of the legally protected conservation centres. It has been a successful conservation model but it has mostly kept everyone at arm's length (Chundawat, 2017).

Wildlife tourism has benefitted from the success of this conservation model but the tourism sector's growth is independent of conservation need. One such destination is Kibber in Spiti valley in India and provides many lessons how tourism growth is market driven rather than conservation need. Since the tourism around our conservation hot spots is not guided nor promoted for conservation purposes, the tourism sector, even though it operates very close to major conservation centres, plays a largely passive and indirect role in promoting or supporting conservation. Even so this can be quite substantial through, for example, employing locally and paying entry fees that go to conservation through the wildlife authorities. But it lacks a direct link to conservation with the economic benefits generated. When such a tourism growth is not guided by conservation principles, it tends to benefit a few individuals leaving behind a larger section of the communities untouched by this development generating resentments.

Conservation tourism philosophy goes some steps beyond this and is ideally suited to bring positive change and fill the gap that exists in such models that are currently operating at many places— that of extending conservation beyond the protected area network. One of the biggest hurdles is government policy, which to date is not very tourism friendly. Tourism is generally seen either as a threat or at best a management headache.

If wildlife tourism has to grow in the SL habitats, the sector needs to transform radically; it cannot continue to grow and sustain itself on someone else successes. Better for it to create its own successes. It needs to create its own success story for future growth. It needs to identify potential conservation areas and bring in investment to generate conservation-based economies and make conservation tourism a major economic driver. Currently there are only a few places to which tourists go to see snow leopard but through industry participation we can easily develop more.

By identifying conservation tourism, a snow leopard friendly activity, conservation tourism can bring wider wilderness areas into the conservation fold, also creating a mechanism for development of the communities in these remote areas. By allowing public private partnerships involving the local communities, tourism experts and entrepreneurs along with conservation scientists, large snow leopard habitat can be conserved for the benefits of communities and snow leopard both.

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