

ECOTOURISM AND TIGER CONSERVATION – SUMMARY OF THE MAIN MESSAGES

- For over two decades ecotourism has been the reference point for tourism that contributes to the conservation of natural areas and benefits local communities. This session highlighted a private sector lodge owner in Indonesia whose product is located in the buffer zones of four protected areas, and whose logo and product profile is intimately tied to the wildlife experience of the area. The Namibia case study highlighted the dramatic resurgence of wildlife, including predators, as a result of the government's policy to devolve the rights over wildlife and tourism to the local community level. The session was chaired by the Minister Boorah of Nepal, who provided an overview of the government policy of splitting park entrance fees with the local community – perhaps a best practice among Tiger Range States.
- Loss of a tiger in any TRC would do irreparable damage to the destination profile. Ecotourism is among the fastest growing industries in the world. The demand for an authentic wildlife experience is surging across the world. But ecotourism is not a panacea for conservation; rather it is one of a suite of intervention that involves a delicate balancing act. It requires, *harnessing incentives and that all key stakeholder groups (public sector, private operators, communities, NGOs) work together.*
- It is worth doing and it will work for conservation *if and only if it substantially alters the balance between the payoffs from destruction relative to the payoffs from conservation.* It needs to ensure that habitats thriving with living wild animals are worth more than empty landscapes converted to agriculture, roads, mines and factories and other destructive forms of economic enterprise.
- *Involvement of local communities is absolutely essential* if one is to create a constituency for conservation at the local level.
- It is also essential to find an appropriate balance between public and private sectors and NGOs where appropriate. Government must provide the overall policy framework within which the private sector and communities can operate.
- We have seen excesses all too often in TRCs. Most notable are cases where the industry profits from the fruits of conservation, but contributes little to it. It functions as an “*enclave industry*” with a short term horizon. Such operations export their profits out of the region, provide few local benefits other than low level employment, and do not invest in the natural asset on which they depend. This is a model of extraction rather than sustainable development.
- In many places the industry is not well managed and overcrowding is the norm in most tiger reserves on the tourist trail in India. The most common sight is of *tourists viewing tourists, rather than tourists viewing tigers!!* There are concerns that it is hard to reverse these bad trends and that there is a need to urgently embark upon new good sustainable tourism practices drawing on global excellence that has been highlighted at this session.

- Protected areas (PAs) as the stronghold of conservation are **TOO SMALL to ensure viable tiger populations**. Deforestation, land conversions and inappropriate development in the buffer zones remains among the most far reaching threats to tigers. **Tourism focused in the buffers can alter this balance** by creating jobs, economic value and a local constituency for tiger conservation. **Tiger tourism MUST be focused on the buffer zones (outside PAs)** to ensure that viable corridors are preserved, rather than destroyed by encroaching “development”. **THIS IS A VITAL CONTRIBUTION THAT THIS SECTOR CAN MAKE.**
- Nepal is the notable exception. It has pioneered a benefit sharing model that now needs to be scaled up, refined and replicated. It also needs to **further** increase its focus on the buffer zones where pressures are mounting.
- The tiger is an elusive animal – seldom seen. Marketing the tiger is a recipe for disappointment. Rather than only focusing on tiger-viewing tourism, experience shows that tiger viewing needs to be part of a **broader multi-objective tourism packages that include other plants and animals, culture,** etc. This approach has been successfully employed in places as diverse as Costa Rica, Belize, South Africa, and Kenya, where many “mass tourists” also visit at least one national park and/or local cultural events. There is huge potential to strengthen nature tourism as an add-on to general tourism; this would diversify and add value to the existing tourism product.
- Successful multi-stakeholder management is often expressed in part by **Protected and Buffer Area Management Plans** that have been developed in a participatory manner and which are therefore jointly “owned”. Management plans are needed for all parks, protected areas, limited use areas, reserves, and buffer zones. This includes considering charging entrance fees, which could be two-tiered, i.e. lower for nationals than for international visitors. But there is a real challenge here. **Plans and talk-shops abound in the world of conservation – translating plans to reality is the real need, and it requires policy and money. This has been a challenge!**
- Namibia’s policy of Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) has devolved the rights over wildlife and tourism to local communities. This progressive policy has incentivized conservation, giving local residents a reason to live with human wildlife conflict. In the past 12 years, the number of communal conservancies has grown from one to sixty and now encompasses 16.8% of the land area and one in eight Namibians participates with a communal conservancy. The private sector has teamed with conservancies and invested more than \$20 million US over the past decade. There are now 29 tourism joint-ventures between the private sector and communities, and another 14 under negotiation. The “communal conservancy tourism sector” now contributes over 1400 bed nights, employs more than 700 full-time employees and in 2008, total benefits accruing to communities exceeded \$5,5 million US. **Wildlife numbers have increased dramatically in the past decade and now one in four rural Namibians benefit from ecotourism.** The experience gained from Namibia can be adapted and replicated in TRCs.
- Ecolodges Indoensia is an example of a private sector ecotourism operator establishing workable partnerships with the government sector, communities and NGOs to

contribute to the conservation management of wildlife within national parks. This particular business model includes:

- expanding the equity in the company to key local staff at each ecolodge ranging from long serving gardening staff, guides, administration and kitchen staff.
- Planning and supporting a range of wildlife, national park and ecotourism training programs for local communities and national parks staff
- Integrating iconic wildlife images into the product marketing and investing in quality interpretive experiences for ecolodge guests