

THE REAL PRICE OF ECOTOURISM IN INDIA : ECO-FRIENDLY OR ECO-PHONY?

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Abstract

Across India, nature-based travel is expanding faster than many protected landscapes can handle. From the mangrove labyrinths of the Sundarbans to the cloud forests of the Western Ghats, eco-holidays have channelled income to villages and funded wildlife protection. Yet unchecked growth and commercial motives threaten to turn an idealistic concept into little more than “eco-branding.” This article weighs the real benefits, the hidden ecological and social costs, and the reforms needed to keep Indian ecotourism genuinely sustainable.

Introduction

The country's first organised eco-travel efforts—Himalayan trekking routes, birding trips in Bharatpur, and family-run homestays in Kerala—emerged in the early 1990s. Three decades later the spectrum is far wider: luxury safari lodges in Madhya Pradesh, jeep expeditions to spot tigers in Rajasthan, rafting and hiking circuits in the Northeast. Post-pandemic demand has only accelerated, with market forecasts pointing to double-digit annual growth. But in

many sanctuaries, staffing, funding, and regulation lag behind the surge in visitors, leaving fragile habitats exposed.

Why Ecotourism Matters :

When carefully planned, eco-travel can produce layered benefits:

- **Direct Conservation Funding** : Park fees and guided safaris in sites such as Kaziranga, Periyar and Jim Corbett help pay for anti-poaching patrols, fire control and habitat restoration.
- **Stable Local Livelihoods** : Jobs for guides, boatmen, homestay operators and artisans reduce dependence on mining or shifting cultivation, easing pressure on forests.
- **Environmental Awareness** : Encounters with rare wildlife—from high-altitude herbs in the Himalaya to salt-water crocodiles in Odisha—encourage climate-friendly behaviour among visitors.
- **Cultural Continuity** : Showcasing crafts, food traditions and festivals strengthens pride in indigenous culture.



- **Balanced Regional Growth** : Community-run lodges and improved access roads support small-scale, low-impact development in remote districts.

These outcomes depend on firm ecological limits and fair profit-sharing; otherwise the “eco” tag becomes a marketing slogan.

When It Works

- **Funding Protection** : Revenues from tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh and the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary show that tourism can underwrite research and forest management.
- **Empowering Communities** : Village-managed ventures in the Western Ghats, Sikkim and around Kaziranga retain a greater share of income locally. Bhitarkanika in Odisha is a recent success, where com-

munity-led tourism improved livelihoods while strengthening mangrove protection (Mohanty et al., 2024).

- **Low-Impact Practices** : Solar micro-grids, composting toilets and “pack-in–pack-out” waste policies in parts of Himachal Pradesh and Kerala demonstrate how infrastructure can stay light.

The common thread is tight control of visitor numbers so that natural systems remain within their carrying capacity.

Hidden Costs

Rapid expansion brings serious drawbacks:

- **Overuse of Fragile Habitats**: Popular trails in Valley of Flowers or jeep tracks in Chinnar are already suffering erosion and wildlife disturbance.
- **Unequal Benefits** : Field studies in

Chhattisgarh reveal that seasonal jobs often fail to translate into lasting gains for residents because profits leak to outside operators (Thakur et al., 2025).

- **Cultural Distortion** : Rituals or performances may be staged for tourists, diluting authentic practice.
- **Carbon Emissions** : Flights, road traffic and diesel safari vehicles add greenhouse gases that offset on-site conservation gains.

Tourism alone cannot replace robust laws and on-ground enforcement.

Research on tribal-inclusive models in Chhattisgarh highlights the need for direct participation of indigenous groups in planning and profit distribution (Dutta & Navin, 2023).

Pathways to Genuine Ecotourism :

Solutions already tested in parts of India can guide policy:



Key Challenges

1. Fixing visitor limits and enforcing them across parks and wetlands.
2. Guaranteeing transparent revenue-sharing with local communities.
3. Creating credible eco-certification to curb greenwashing.
4. Restricting resorts, roads and air-strips that fragment habitat.
5. Gathering baseline ecological and social data for long-term monitoring.

- Seasonal closures or strict caps based on ecological indicators.
- Legally earmarking a fixed share of park revenues for village development and habitat care.
- Independent, science-based certification tied to measurable outcomes.
- Renewable-energy transport and other low-emission options for travellers.
- Financing and training for enterprises owned and managed by local communities.

Examples from Sikkim, Kerala and Rajasthan show that strong governance can balance rural development with biodiversity conservation.

Conclusion

Ecotourism in India is a tool, not a guarantee. Managed well, it finances forest protection, supports wildlife rangers and nurtures conservation awareness. Mismanaged, it drives commercialization and ecological harm. Policymakers, operators and communities must enforce science-based limits, ensure fair benefit sharing and uphold sustainability standards to keep India's ecotourism genuinely eco-friendly rather than eco-phony.

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