

Social Assessment

Community Based Partnerships for Impact Assessment and Regulation of Tourism in Western Ghats

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Tourism has emerged as a key threat to the Western Ghats. Tourism establishments have started mushrooming in ecological corridors, increasing deforestation and fragmentation of habitats. The shrinking of habitats has caused an increase in human–animal conflicts. The links between tourism growth and competition for natural resources between the tourism industry and local communities is evident. Our project aims to address the threats of unregulated tourism development posed to the Western Ghats landscapes in the Nilgiris area. Through the project, the intention is to shift the focus on local and community initiatives- build in them the capacity to assess tourism impacts and help them to influence regulatory and management practises.

The social assessment addresses the following issues :

1. Indigenous Peoples in the project area

This information is based on secondary data and on our engagement with this area some years ago.

In the Nilgiris District, the tribal population makes up 8% of the total district population. Their population is approximately 25,000, these tribal groups and indigenous people are largely marginalised and isolated. The main tribal communities found in the district comprise of Todas(Dodhas), Kothas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, Mullukurumbas and Kattunaikkans. The project site falls mainly in the Udhagamandalam block which has 16% of the total tribal population in the Nilgiris district (Kurumbas 6%, Irulas 20%, Paniyas 0%, Dodhas 85% , Kothar 56%, Kattunaikkar 0%).

These local communities living in the Nilgiri Hills are involved in various socio-economic occupations such as cultivators, agricultural labourers, household industry workers, construction workers, trade and commerce operators; where the largest percentage is engaged in live stock, forestry, fishing, hunting and plantations, orchards, and related activities.

The Dodhas are the original inhabitants of the Nilgiris Hills. They are mostly pastoral people and to a certain extent, nomadic, possessing large herds of buffaloes. Milk products are their main source of livelihood. Large extents of land are set apart as Toda patta lands over which the Dodhas have partial right to live, graze their cattle and to take cultivation. The Toda women have a great skill in embroidery work. The Toda embroidery garments are in great demand with visitors from other parts of India and abroad.

The Kothas are village artisans, who are good in carpentry, blacksmithy and pottery. But only a few families are engaged in these skills as a means of living. Most others are engaged in cultivation. Majority of the Kota families in all settlements have their own patta land.

The Kurumbas are nomadic and live in temporary constructions known as "GUDLU" in the forests. The traditional occupation of the Kurumbas is food gathering, like collection of honey and forests produce. They also cultivate millets like ragi and samai on a small scale.. Honey is a major source of livelihood from which the Kurumbas obtain considerable remuneration. They are mainly engaged in agriculture and those who do not own land work as casual agricultural labourers. However, the economic condition of the Kurumbas is very poor.

Irulas live in Masinagudi area, and in parts of Kotagiri and Coonoor Taluks. They are generally engaged in collection of minor forest products. This is a seasonal operation and they work as casual agricultural labourers on local estates. A few of them look after the herds of cattle belonging to others. Some are engaged in agriculture in the patta lands, conditionally assigned to them, where they have raised tea, coffee, jack trees, guava etc. However, due to their poor maintenance of their land due to lack of finance, the return from these lands is meagre. The general economic condition of these tribes is poor.

2. Assessment of project impacts (both positive and negative) on Indigenous Peoples

Tourism has emerged as a key threat to the Western Ghats - its ecological landscape and the diverse ecosystems associated with it. Almost all Protected Areas in the Western Ghats landscape are confronting an increase in tourist visitations- with huge numbers visiting tourism zones which bear the brunt of the maximum impact. The peripheral areas have seen a rash of tourism establishments. Other areas of ecological significance – the Unprotected Areas, that border the protected areas – are also witnessing a similar trend.

The Forest Departments of respective states have been instrumental in developing tourism inside protected areas, ecological corridors and unprotected areas under their jurisdiction. This activity has intensified under the guise of “ecotourism” wherein more and more areas are being opened up. To support ecotourism, additional infrastructure has also been installed in the form of roads, guest houses, cottages, camping sites and watch towers for wildlife viewing within Protected Areas.

As more and more tourism establishments (resorts, amusement parks, golf courses) have started mushrooming in ecological corridors, there has been increased deforestation and fragmentation of habitats and closing of critical links between habitats. The shrinking of habitats and fragmentation has caused an increase in human–animal conflicts especially with large mammals like elephants. The links between tourism growth and competition for natural resources between the tourism industry and local communities is evident. Water scarcity is of serious proportions, and so is the generation and lack of management of solid wastes especially non-biodegradable wastes like plastics. Furthermore the possibility that tourism also negatively impacts the culture of the indigenous communities will also be assessed in participation with the communities

The project aims at helping local communities (both tribal and non- tribal settlers) in the project area build in them the capacity to assess tourism impacts and help them to influence regulatory and management practises.

With the rapid development of tourist resorts in the areas that these indigenous and local communities inhabit, there is a strain on natural resources, especially water. There is a close relationship between water security for the agricultural activities, the native forest and the reliance of the local communities on forest products, scarcity of water is a major drawback to the livelihoods of the indigenous and local communities,

Through tourism activities which cause environmental damage, these local people who rely on forest produce degradation of the forest that they depend on for survival, which causes them to shift their dependence to remaining resources thus further compounding the degradation of ecological zones.

The project activities include the capacity building and facilitating the emergence of community based institutions to assess tourism impacts at local level (to monitor, manage and regulate impacts towards conservation of critical ecosystems). The intensive assessments will help in systematically documenting the tourism impacts at the local site

level, establish community based methodologies for studying tourism impacts and provide the base to develop regulatory and management measures. As these are thorough participatory measures, it will ensure ownership, establish meaningful relationships and build capacity of local communities to take forward the activities in future.

The activities will be:

Organizing local level workshops to take forward community, stakeholder action based on tourism impact assessments and research, facilitate inter-site visits for experience sharing and Participatory Impact Assessments, where the local communities would be trained to undertake intensive Tourism Impact Assessments (TIA)

In the course of this project, two Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA) cells that involve the local communities will be developed and established. The local communities involved in the TIA will be trained in assessing impacts of tourism. Through the project the established TIA cell, will instil a sense of ownership in the local community so that they are able to influence local government and policy about the growth of tourism and its negative impacts. They will develop mechanism and frameworks that are relevant for them at the local level to regulate unsustainable tourism.

3. Free, prior and informed consultations undertaken with affected communities as part of the project planning process

The project planning process has not included any direct field visit and has been based on secondary data and with discussions with our partner groups working in the area. Given that no negative impacts are anticipated the community consultations informing them about the project can be done at the start of the project

4. Measures to avoid adverse impacts and provide culturally appropriate benefits.

A workshop with the indigenous people and local communities will be conducted at the beginning of the project explaining the project objectives and activities and how they would be associated with the project. This workshop will be conducted in the local language and will include all community members including women and members of different generations and social groups. The views of the community members on the project will be documented.

In the course of this project, two Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA) cells that involve the indigenous people and local communities will be established. They will be trained in assessing impacts of tourism. The TIA cell will instill a sense of ownership in the local community so that they will be able to influence local government and policy. By the end of the project, the Rapid TIA reports conducted in the area, the training manual developed for the capacity building of the local communities and the TIA manual for the project area will be translated into the local language for their easy reference and usage in future.

The two TIA cells will function as a grievance mechanism for Indigenous People or other local communities who have any concerns or grievances about the project to raise them with the project team. In the unlikely event that a grievance is raised, Equitable Tourism Options will convene a meeting with the affected parties, in order to resolve the conflict. Equitable Tourism Options will seek to hold these meetings within one month of any grievance being communicated to them. Any grievance raised will be communicated to CEPF, together with minutes from the meeting held to address them, plus a detailed plan of remedial action.

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