



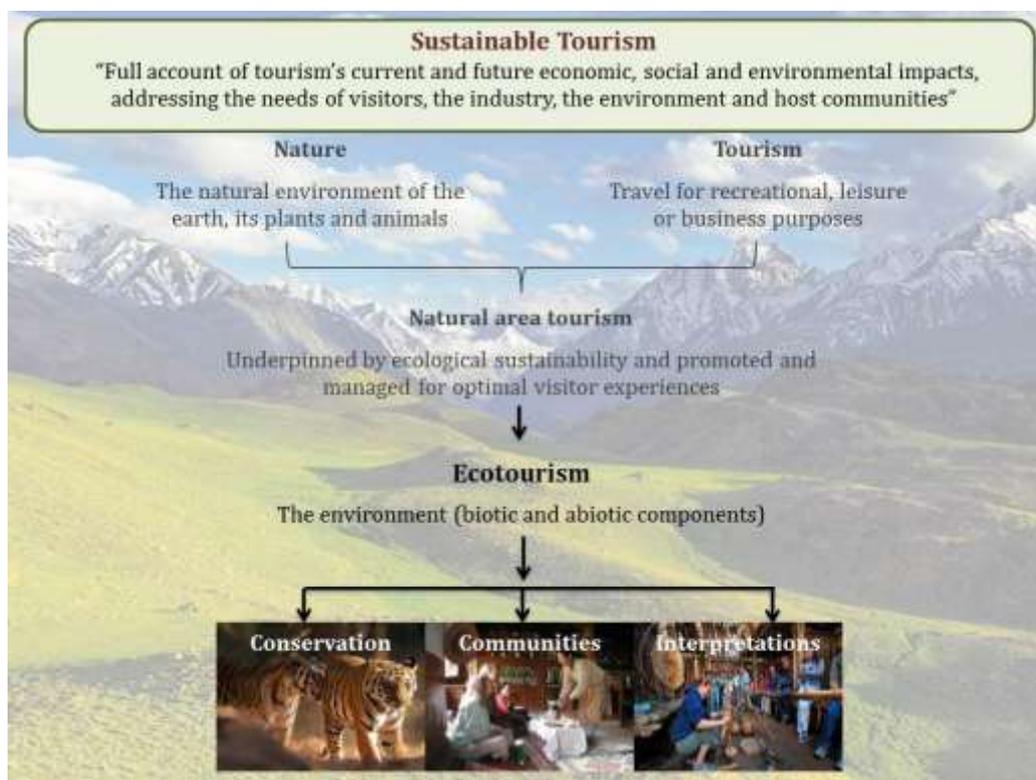
Concept note on Ecotourism Certification Standard in India



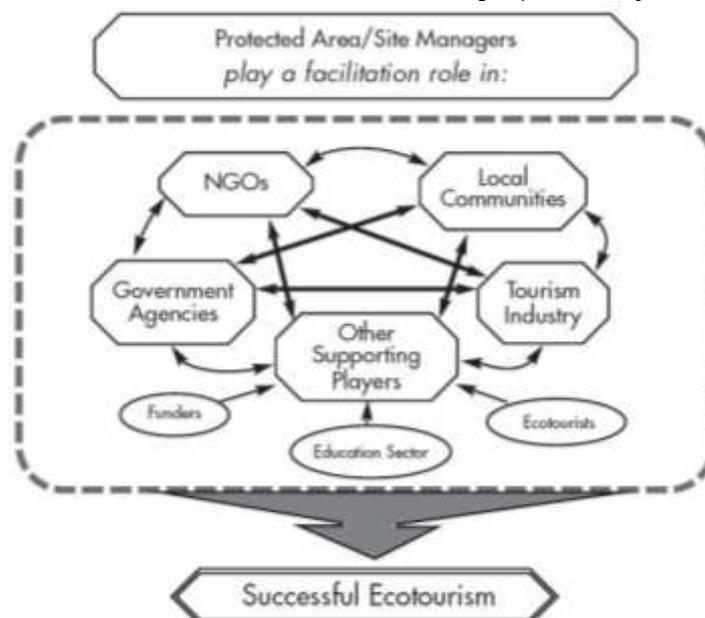
Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests

Background

Ecotourism or environmentally-responsible tourism is synonymously used with natural-area tourism, and stands on the cornerstones of benefit to environment, benefit to communities, conservation and interpretations. The primary goal of ecotourism is to enable tourists to enjoy nature and wilderness areas in its full glory without causing any disturbance, such that it fosters sustainable use through resource conservation, cultural revival, and economic development and diversification.



A huge range of players with varying interests and goals participates in ecotourism which are broadly classified under the core decision makers (Forests and protected area managers, local communities, tourism industry, and NGO's) and the supporting players (funders, academics, and travelers) as suggested by Drumm and Moore (2005). These players have a significant role in ecotourism functioning, and it is the consensus and coordination between and among these crucial players that decides the success of an ecotourism project in any destination.



Ecotourism aims and objectives

The formal enunciation of environmentally-responsible tourism emanated from the 1989 Hague Declaration on Tourism looking upon special problems of the developing countries in the field of tourism. The declaration advocated the rational management of conventional tourism to contribute to the protection and preservation of the natural and cultural environment. With the Earth Summit in Brazil, June 1992, the issue of '*sustainable tourism*' within the context of overall sustainable development, further gained impetus, and new forms of eco-friendly tourism became visible. Ecotourism is defined differently in different ecological, economical and political contexts and, many definitions exist to describe it. The most widely accepted definition is given by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), according to which, ecotourism is:

"A responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education"

According to this definition, ecotourism firstly, 'by offering market-linked long-term solutions, provides effective economic incentives for conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity and help in protection of the natural and cultural heritage of earth'. Secondly, 'by increasing local capacity building and employment opportunities, ecotourism is an effective vehicle for empowering local communities around the world to fight against poverty and to achieve sustainable development' by judicious use of natural resources of the area. Lastly, 'with an emphasis on enriching personal experiences and environmental awareness through interpretation, ecotourism promotes greater understanding and appreciation for nature, local society, and culture'. TIES further list certain ecotourism principles to be adopted by its practitioners, in order to ensure true practice of ecotourism. These include:

- To minimize physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts.
- To build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- To provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- To provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- To generate financial benefits for both local people and promoters.
- To deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates.
- To design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- To recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

Ecotourism impetus in India

Travel within India is an age-old practice and its traces can be retrieved from the famous Silk Route. The concept of ecotourism in India came into the consciousness during the latter part of the eighties. When, the history of Indian tourism saw many changes, a shift towards the need to conserve natural resources and to curb the ill effects of conventional tourism was realized and the present day ecotourism shows it as being the fastest growing tourism space in all forms of tourism across the globe. Further, the geographical diversity of India makes it home to a wealth of ecosystems which are well protected and preserved. These ecosystems have become the major resources for ecotourism here. Simultaneously, most of these wilderness areas across India are fragile ecosystems that provide a whole host of ecosystem services to local residents and people living in surrounding areas. However, as unplanned tourism in such landscapes could completely destroy the very environment attracting tourists, the need to move towards a sustainable model of tourism that is compatible with these fragile landscapes was soon realized.

In India, Forests and Protected areas (PAs) specifically form the primary focus for establishing ecotourism destinations as they tend to retain their natural characteristics and are not modified to any large extent by the human interference. **The existing PA network of India constitutes 5.02% i.e. an area of 16.5 mha with respect to the total Geographical Area of India. This network of 868 PAs of India is grouped broadly as 104 National Parks (IUCN Category II),**

550 Wildlife Sanctuaries (IUCN Category IV), 87 Community Reserves (IUCN Category VI) and 127 Conservation Reserves (IUCN Category V) (as in January 2019). There are also Biosphere Reserves (IUCN Category V), Reserved and Protected Forests. India's varied forests inhabiting diverse wildlife and culturally significant areas attract potential travelers worldwide. However, with any disproportionately increased human activities due to unchecked tourism in otherwise untouched areas from human development, impacts become inevitable. Thus ecotourism is debatably referred to as a double edged sword. Wherein, it is usually observed that, at the initiation of any program or activity, project impacts are rare or minimal and often, it is only when severe impacts are manifested that concerned authorities become alert and management actions are deemed necessary.

Ecotourism initiatives in India have also resulted from effective participation of all relevant stakeholders. Despite geographical and other differences the success behind these initiatives contains many points of commonality. Primary among these is the complete acceptance and support of the local community members; consensus among community individuals carrying out ecotourism activities; benefit sharing and resolve potential conflict. Further, India's tourism strength lies not only in its historical monuments, natural beauty, mysticism, diversity of culture as represented through its various dance forms, festivals but also in the warm hospitality extended to its guest. Hence the motto, "*Atithi Devo Bhava*" designed to reinforce the feeling of pride in servicing the guests, forms an important milestone in the development of ecotourism concept in India.

By transforming poachers into guides, reducing dependency on forest products, stimulating local guardianship of natural resources, reducing locals' outward migration and generating alternative sources of income, ecotourism plays an important role in ensuring sustainable growth of people living in and around the PAs of India. Ecotourism's implementation thus requires detailed environmental and social impact assessments against environmental, social and economic destination parameters in order to ensure sustainability of the project. **This subsequently reflects the importance of standardization in ecotourism implementation.** Further, ecotourism when practiced correctly becomes an important economic and educational activity. It has the scope to link to a wider constituency and build conservation support while raising awareness about the worth and fragility of such ecosystems in the public at large, supporting the interpretations pillar of ecotourism. It also promotes the non-consumptive use of wilderness areas, for the benefit of local communities living around, and dependent on these fragile landscapes.

Ecotourism Industry in India

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 area. As a concept ecotourism has gained momentum recently here, but as a way of life it has 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.

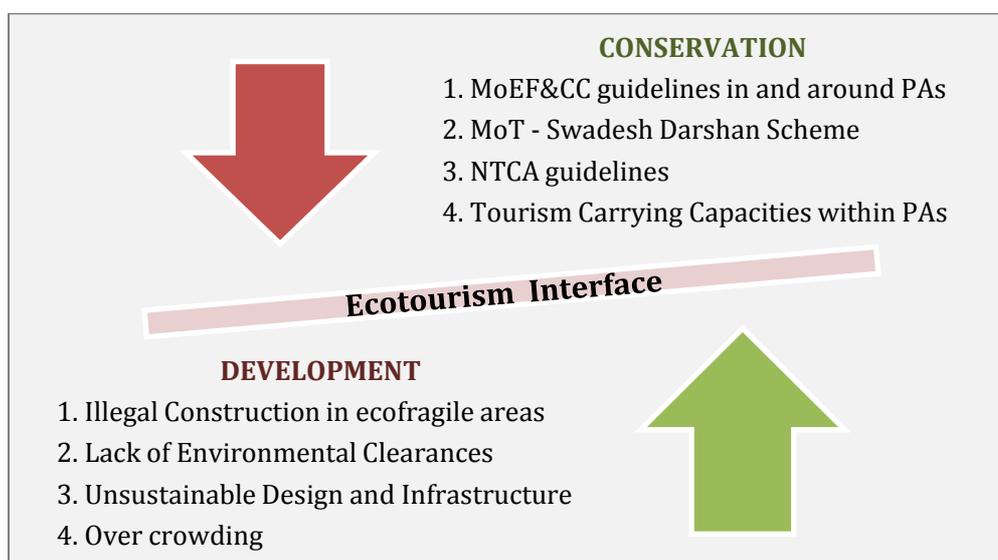
Various forms of ecotourism in India attract an increasing number of tourists each year. Some of the most prominent forms include wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, and village tourism. According to UNWTO (2018) India holds a strong position and lead in sustaining tourism in South Asia region, and is largely benefited from increasing demand from western source markets and simpler visa procedures. Further, India ranks 26th in world tourist arrivals, and 7th in receiving international tourist arrivals (323.2 million) at the Asia & the Pacific Region (India tourism Statistics, Ministry of Tourism, 2018). The number of foreign tourist arrivals in India was recorded to be 10.04 million with an annual growth rate of 14%, whereas the number of domestic tourist visits to all States/UTs was recorded to be 1652.49 million with an annual growth Rate of 2.3%. The foreign exchange earnings from tourism in India were reported to be Rs. 177874 Crore, with an annual growth rate of 15.4%.

Total contribution by travel and tourism sector to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to increase from Rs 15.24 trillion (US\$ 234.03 billion) in 2017 to Rs 32.05 trillion (US\$ 492.21 billion) in 2028. Travel and tourism forms the third largest foreign exchange earner in India. As of 2017-18, 81.1 million people were employed in the tourism sector in India which was 12.38 percent of total employment in the country. Considering the potential, the Government of India (GoI) also realized the inevitable impacts arising from this burgeoning industry. Therefore, sustainable development of tourism is being promoted and practiced, particularly in ecologically fragile tourism destinations, under the capacity of ecotourism.

The Forest and Tourism Departments of the states like Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Sikkim and Uttarakhand have specifically announced policies for ecotourism laying special emphasis to the involvement of the local communities. This further necessitates nature-based tourism data record keeping and maintenance as pre-requisite to promote ecotourism in the country. Currently ecotourism related tourist data records are sparsely located, but available with the PA management authorities coming under the aegis of the regional state forest departments.

Promotion of Ecotourism in India

Realizing the inevitable impacts of conventional tourism the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) formulated the 'draft Guidelines for Ecotourism in and around PAs' for regulated and sustainable tourism in and around such PAs to enhance wilderness protection and wildlife conservation, while providing nature-compatible livelihoods and greater incomes for a large number of people living around natural ecosystems. It further aimed to contribute directly to the protection of wildlife or forest areas, while making the local community as stakeholders and owners in the process.



The Ministry of tourism (MoT), simultaneously stressing on maintenance of environmental integrity considers tourism development in an ecologically sustainable manner and recognizes following cardinal principles for development of ecotourism in India:

- a) Involvement of local community and economic development of the area
- b) Identify and minimize conflicts between use of resources for ecotourism and the livelihood of local inhabitants
- c) Compatibility of the type and scale of ecotourism development with the environment and sociocultural characteristics of the local community; and
- d) Planning overall area development strategy, guided by an integrated land-use plan while avoiding intersectoral conflicts and ensuring sectoral integration associated with commensurate expansion of public services

Simultaneously, the guidelines for Tourism in and around Tigers reserves' notified by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) also takes cognizance of various matters of concerns of the MoT, specifically, **regulated tourism in PAs of the country** while considering ecotourism:

- Scientific carrying capacity and sustainability principles
- Conservation fee for eco development and local community upliftment work
- Conduct of tourism activity in the Core areas and tourism zones where no consumptive uses, tiger density and recruitment seem to be impacted.
- Core Critical Habitat as tourism zone
- Co-existence of tourism and wildlife
- Requirement of hotels to incorporate various ecofriendly measures and architect keeping in mind the sustainability and energy efficiency in conformity with the local ethos and use local materials.

The Swadesh Darshan scheme (MoT) for integrated development of theme based tourist circuits in the country further aims to support communities, provide employment and foster social integration without comprising upon the environmental concerns, and provide unique experiences to the tourists. Fifteen theme based circuits have been identified based on special interest of tourists visiting such places. Wherein, the ecotourism circuit aims at creating a positive interface between tourists and nature. Projects sanctioned so far include:

1. Integrated Development of Ecotourism Circuit in Uttarakhand
2. Development of Eco Circuit I and II in Mizoram
3. Eco Circuit in Jharkhand
4. Integrated Development of Ecotourism Circuit in Telangana
5. Eco circuit in Madhya Pradesh
6. Development of Ecocircuit in Kerala Thekkady as EcoTourism Circuit

India's ecotourism initiative is imperative but facing a number of issues which contradict the very principle of the concept:

- a. Environmental Issues:** considering consumerism, tour operators invariably succumb to the tourist demands and 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. 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. 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.
- c. Impacts over local people:** 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 perennial source of income and rational distribution of profit made are rarely kept. Hence, cost of ecotourism is borne by locals and big players make profit.

Need and Objectives for Ecotourism Certification Standard

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.

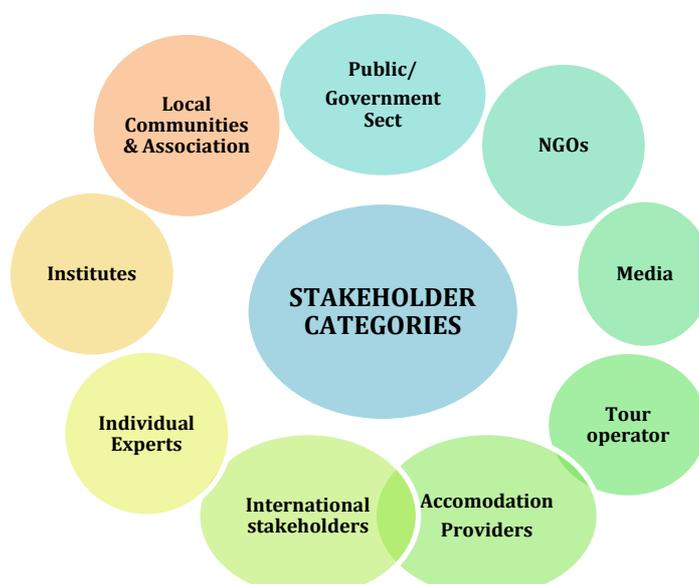
Ecotourism sector is growing fast and various ecotourism projects are coming up in various biogeographical regions of India. However, MoEF&CC, GoI is yet to finalise its draft Ecotourism policy. Ecotourism is the need of the time and a policy on the same to guide the sector was awaited since long. Often 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. Ecotourism holds immense potential in regions where other industrial set-up is difficult. Ecotourism benefits in terms of generating alternative livelihood opportunities for forest dwelling people living in rural remote areas of high conservation value. Therefore, there exists an urgent need to **consider ecotourism at the interface of conservation and development**, with focus on maximizing benefits and minimizing impacts. 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. Interdisciplinary approaches to such assessments need to be adopted. Thus, considering the growing and unstoppable attraction towards ecotourism in PAs of India adherence to develop National level ecotourism certification standard:

1. Allows for nondestructive and sustainable use of the natural resources on which ecotourism relies
2. Enable appropriate management of environmental and social resources; playing a vital role in ensuring sustenance of ecotourism projects.
3. Assist to maximize benefits and minimize impacts from ecotourism practices

To enable sustainable growth of ecotourism sector, development of certification standards for ecotourism stakeholders is an imperative. Certification leads to independent third-party evaluation of ecotourism 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 ecotourism 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 (traditional knowledge) as well as others directly concerned.

Stakeholders involved in the process

Stakeholders represent individual, group of individuals, or an organisation with a common interest, concerned with or affected by the operation of an organization. The stakeholders' groups under the ecotourism regime include, but not limited to the following:



Roles and Responsibilities of the Parties Involved

- A voluntary sustainability standard setting organisation is involved with developing, coordinating, revising, amending, reissuing, interpreting, publishing and producing technical standards for assessment in an open and transparent manner, of the efficacy and efficiency of functioning of a conservation entity, or its management practices
- This voluntary sustainability Standard for Ecotourism being developed is to follow an open, transparent and participatory approach involving multiple stakeholders
- The developed sustainability standard would be accredited by a competent organisation
- A certification body, in the current context, will be a third party auditing entity that is competent to audit Ecotourism destination against a specific standard or code. The minimum audit performance criteria will need to be fulfilled by each of the ecotourism destination to obtain the mandated certification

About the Organisation

Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests (NCCF) is a 'not for profit' organization established under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 to evolve and promote a globally aligned forest certification programme developed within India and addressing the concerns for sustainable management of forests, biodiversity and the plantations, while at the same time making the Indian wood and forest fibre based industry globally competent. As the national governing body for the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC), NCCF developed internationally benchmarked Forest Management Certification in India. NCCF was officially registered in January 2015. People's participation is an important mandate in the organisation's objectives, for which NCCF adopts a "bottom-up" approach to governance. It builds on national members whose local expertise is complemented by the experiences of internationally-active organizations. The organisation has a Governing Body and Standard Development Groups (SDGs). Each SDG comprises professional foresters, wildlifers, conservationists, NGOs- social and environmental, industry representatives, academicians, etc., and is the apex body constituted for developing the Standards. The SDG is serviced by an in-house working group called Technical Working Group (TWG). 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

Mail: ecotourism.mail@nccf.in

'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'...

- Mark Twain

NETWORK FOR CERTIFICATION AND CONSERVATION OF FORESTS (NCCF)

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