

About NCCF and its Ecotourism Certification Standard

Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests (NCCF), came into existence in January 2015 as a registered society, comprising experts, professionals, and stakeholders of natural resources, engaged in the development of India specific and globally benchmarked sustainability standards, as its core working area, apart from working for policy advocacy, training and capacity building through multi-stakeholder engagement.

NCCF has developed the first-ever Indian scheme of forest certification that is endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC), giving it global recognition. NCCF's Trees outside Forest Certification Scheme is the first of its kind and is presently under the process of PEFC endorsement. Standards for Ecotourism, Non-Wood Forest Products, Quality Planting Material, Safeboards, Protected Areas & Wetlands, Biomass & Biofuels, and Land Degradation Neutrality are at various stages of development, as per the Standard Setting Procedure. The stakeholders are mapped taking reference from the UN Agenda 21 stakeholder categories.

Ecotourism Certification Standard

In India, the tourism sector has significant potential given its rich culture, heritage, and diversity in ecology, terrains, forest types, landscapes, places of natural beauty, and also its unparalleled biodiversity richness. Tourism is a potentially large employment generator and source of livelihoods, besides being a significant source of foreign exchange.

Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” The sector faces the number of challenges in the absence of specific guidelines and sustainable management such as inadequate support infrastructure, lack of cleanliness of the destination site, lack of conservation of ecotourism sites, the safety of tourists, and the conflicts of interest amongst the ecotourism industry and locals, etc. that leads to excessive exploitation of local natural ecotourism sites/ecosystems.

There is increasing demand, particularly from the travelers and the service providers, and destination management entities, to have mechanisms in place for ensuring eco-friendly travel and tourism (*ecotourism*). That is where the need for the certification system has come to be recognized. Such certification standard gives the customers a well-informed choice to visit a truly eco- practiced destination, besides pushing the management to achieve a minimum level of sustainability, economic viability, and social needs and commitments. Many standards for sustainable tourism have been formulated and practiced the world over. There has been a felt need in India also to have such a Standard, that is India specific and at the same time internationally benchmarked.

NCCF constituted a multi-stakeholder Standard Development Group under the Chairpersonship of Mr. AK Varma, IFS (retired), ex PCCF & HoFF, Karnataka for developing an Ecotourism standard, that will promote responsible tourism and improve the degrading quality of ecotourism destination entities in the country, making them economically viable, environmentally responsible, and socially beneficial in accordance with the national policies, rules and guidelines, and also incorporating international best practices.

Zero Draft of Ecotourism Standard (V01), finalized in active consultation with the esteemed Members, following an open, transparent and consultative process, is hosted on website for public consultation, which is a mandatory requirement of the Standard Setting Procedure. The stakeholders involved in the process include WWF India, Responsible Tourism Society of India, Asian Adventures, The Corbett Foundation, Weldon Tours and Travels Private Ltd., TOF Tigers and state government organizations - Karnataka Ecotourism Development Board, and Uttarakhand Biodiversity Board, etc. The Draft Standard comprises 5 themes, 9 principles, 29 criteria, and 114 indicators, addressing diverse environmental, legal, economic, and social aspects of ecotourism.

The certification standard of Ecotourism developed here, efforts have been made to align this standard with other certification programs and at the same time making the Indian Ecotourism Sector compete at the global level and accepted widely. NCCF Ecotourism standards would be internationally acceptable and nationally implementable. The international endorsement would be sought from Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

Public consultation will be followed by pilot testing at few ecotourism sites to review the practicality of criteria and indicators in the field before the final version of the standard is placed before NCCF's Governing Body for its formal approval. NCCF is contemplating to launch the scheme by the year end .