

## **Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests**

### **Mr Avani Varma's statement in the IUCN webinar**

**1<sup>st</sup> July 2020**

Mr. AK Varma, Chairperson, NCCF-SDG, Ecotourism (Former PCCF&HoFF, Karnataka) addressed the webinar on “**Role of cultural and Natural Heritage in Tourism based Economy, held by IUCN, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020**” and had highlighted the need for certification standards in promoting and sustaining heritage based tourism while focusing on its impact on heritage based tourism post pandemic.

Heritage tourism includes whole spectrum of the word heritage –right from cultural, to archeological sites to nature. Talking with respect to India, which is well known for its rich historical, cultural and natural heritage, there has been renewed interest and manifold increase in the number of visitors, both domestic and foreign tourists visiting above heritage sites thanks to the push given by government. Be it Ajanta Elorra, Taj mahal, Rajasthan or Kaziranga, Eastern and western Ghats, Eastern and western Himalayas and Sundarban are getting more and more tourist foot falls.

India has 29 world heritage sites in cultural category, 7 sites in natural category and 1 site in mixed category, totaling 37 world heritage sites, putting us at 6th position in the world heritage category. Additionally we have another 42 sites in the tentative world heritage sites list. And these are bound to bring in more and more tourists to above places as the new class of visitors want to experience these sites first hand. The tourism growth worldwide was 6% in 2019 and was expected to grow by 4 % in 2020. In 2017 alone more than 10 million foreigners visited India bringing India to 40th position in World Economic Forum travel and tourism competitiveness ranking. . This was pre pandemic position; it would be a temporary setback and things in above sector are likely to rebound first as and when situation starts returning to normal.

#### **Impacts on tourism sector post pandemic**

The impact tourism can have on environment and local communities-both positive and negative; the sustainability of the destinations themselves is the key point. We have seen how unbridled and uncontrolled tourism has taken a toll on the natural capital resources of various destinations-be it Rome or Shimla That the nature and heritage destinations world over were under severe pressure of unsustainability came out very clearly during the ongoing lock down stage with increased sighting of wild life in and around PAs, appearance of blue waters everywhere, increased laying and hatching of turtle eggs, manifold increase in the visit of migratory birds, reduced man wild life conflict around PAs etc. The world is full of such nature revival stories and it is imperative to not let the gains go away. This is the key for sustainable tourism in the post pandemic normal. While the contribution of such tourism to GDP and employment generation is well recognized, concerns have also been raised about responsible tourism aspect. And that is where the role of certification standards comes into play for basically they deal with sustainable and responsible tourism. Sustainable tourism and hence Certification standards are also part of UN Agenda 21 and tourism is part of UNDP Goals.

Many standards for sustainable tourism have been formulated world over. Certification is popular subject in tourism and sustainability. Some in the industry say it doesn't address the critical mass while others say it is the only way to stop green washing. To address these issues, a global body GSTC was formed with sustainability criteria. Similarly in India STCI (Sustainable tourism Criteria for India) has been developed on the initiative of Ministry of tourism with participation of all the stakeholders. STCI follows the guidelines of GSTC.

Certification in tourism has always been a tumultuous affair and there is continuous debate especially as not many tourism industry suppliers are certified, although there are many certification systems available in the world.

NCCF has started an initiative as an independent non-government organization devoted to setting standards in the field of sustainable management of natural resources and it is in the process of setting standards for nature destination management and ecotourism, particularly in and around protected areas. There is increasing demand –particularly from the travellers and the service providers and destination management entities-to have true green travel and not the green washing. That is where the need for above standards and the certification system has come to be recognized world over. Such certification standard gives the customer a well informed choice to visit true eco practiced destination, besides pushing the management to achieve minimum level of sustainability, economic viability and social needs and commitments. So the role of certification standards cannot be over emphasized in Cultural and Heritage tourism.