

Can **INDIA** learn from **AFRICAN** wildlife tourism?

BY JULIAN MATTHEWS

In the 1980s, Richard Leakey stopped elephant poaching almost in its tracks with a 'shoot to kill' policy. His orchestrated burning of 12 tonnes of captured ivory was seen on television news bulletins around the world. The internationally-renowned paleontologist, politician, conservationist and former head of the Kenya Wildlife Service is no stranger to controversy, so when I heard in November last year that he was now calling for private management of Kenya's national parks, I was astounded. Had I really heard the man – a genuine sceptic of allowing private enterprise to be involved in conservation – having a late epiphany – or was I just mistaken?

I was a young man in the 1980s, having just left Africa myself, and I recall all the issues and newspaper headlines of the time. Sadly, it bears all the hallmarks of what is happening in India today.

Back then, elephant poaching was out of hand, law enforcement was weak, morale in park services was low with critical staff vacancies, communities were being impacted by wildlife, cattle and goats were overgrazing landscapes, corruption was rampant, politicians didn't

care and tourism was booming but paying a pittance at entrance gates. As a result, little was being ploughed back and mass market tourism was driving lodge prices downwards, creating little incentive or dividend to improve their business model to support the very resource they depended on for their existence.

Sounds familiar yet?

At this low point in 1989, there was a dramatic sea change in Kenya's approach, driven by the visionary appointment by the then President of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, of the tough-talking Richard Leakey to run the service. He went on to introduce a 'zero tolerance' policy to poaching and a focused strategy for the preservation of Kenya's wildlife. At the same time, the double whammy of a downturn in tourism and increased competition for safaris from other African countries meant a collapse in the 'price only' driven safari tourism market.

Almost overnight, everything changed. From the prophetic ashes of mass tourism has risen a better, stronger, more diverse wildlife tourism

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and ecotourism sector, combining publicly-owned and managed national parks with more stable income sources, superb privately-run conservancies and visionary community-owned conservancies. All this now offers visitors an extraordinarily diverse and impressive range of experiences and activities, but more importantly turns millions of acres back to wildlife conservation from previously degraded and often overgrazed landscape, devoid of wildlife.

So could this transformation ever be achieved in India?

India has many of the same problems common to all developing countries – powerful institutional, political and attitudinal barriers. However, India has good and comprehensive wildlife laws, a strong judiciary, a passionate lobby of conservationists, world-class wildlife scientists and millions of people keen to save its precious landscapes and natural heritage. India also has two other advantages, a growing demand for leisure activities from its aspiring business classes and a huge well of potential investors.

Colin Bell, the ex-CEO of one of Africa's most visionary and successful private lodge operators, Wilderness Safaris, is often heard to quote the old adage 'If it pays, it stays', and he should know. Today, Wilderness Safaris manages over 2.7 million hectares of wilderness, some private lands, some Protected Areas and many community-owned conservancies. The sheer scale of the resources that the company's manpower, conservation expertise and the tourism capital that they could bring to these landscapes far outweighed the monetary resources and expertise that governments or NGOs were prepared to or even capable of committing and the results are outstanding, for both wildlife and the local community.

CCAfrica/Taj group, already with four wilderness lodges in Madhya Pradesh, have set some important benchmarks, showing just what people are prepared to pay for wildlife safaris, and in doing so, they have driven up the quality of naturalist guiding and interpretation needed to satisfy their demanding client base. Furthermore CCAfrica's own Africa Foundation raises upwards of US\$ one million per year from safari goers' contributions, connecting their visitors with the need to support communities and conservation. Its 57,000 acre Phinda Reserve in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa, was originally a simple uneconomical pineapple farm. Today, Phinda is a thriving wilderness with seven small luxury lodges, has scientifically reintroduced over 1,000 animals, including elephants and lions, stitched important wilderness areas back together, employs 300 locals and offers hope to rural communities that had few opportunities 17 years ago. In fact, it now does not even own its landscape, having given it back to its ancestral landowners and pays a yearly rent instead! Its Foundation funds 90 classrooms, 19 preschools, a medical clinic, skills development and communication centres, water access, bursaries, thousands of conservation lessons and more. As Nelson Mandela says, "Ultimately conservation is about people. If you don't have sustainable development around these (wildlife) parks, then people will have no

interest in them, and the parks will not survive." I believe we could replicate this model to suit India's forests.

Let's consider now the statement that tiger tourism is, in fact, already saving tigers in India, even if it is not living up to its ecotourism *mantra*. Empirical evidence suggests that parks with both tigers and tourism hold the greatest number and often the greatest density of tigers left in India today.

Strange bedfellows? No, it's the same all over Africa. In the 1980s, wildlife was in steep decline in Namibia with elephant numbers at a precarious 250, springbok and mountain zebra down to paltry 600 and 450 animals respectively. Today, 20 years on, with 54 community conservancies, and huge private ranches and concessions dedicated to wildlife tourism, elephant numbers have doubled, zebra numbers hover around 14,000 and springbok well over 90,000. With this smorgasbord of prey species, predator populations are predictably doing well too! Rural communities have not been moved out, but have instead become stakeholders and beneficiaries of the resource, accepting and helping to manage some of the conflicts that do still surface.

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Furthermore, tourism has a significant impact on the perceived status of a park and its ability to attract local, governmental or international funding. Tourism also enhances the motivation and quality of its rangers and management, whilst the constant vigil and attention from politicians, conservationists, naturalist guides, visitors and hotel owners concerned over 'their' invaluable wildlife resource, ensures that park staff and management are kept on their toes.

What India needs is its own Richard Leakey, with his own direct phone line to the Prime Minister, a zero tolerance mandate to stop poaching and illegal practices, a huge dollop of visionary zeal and a wildlife tourism industry that works with local communities, field biologists and park managers and actually practices what it so readily preaches. 🐾

Julian Matthews is Founder of Nature Tour Operator, Discovery Initiatives and is Chairman of the Travel Operators for Tigers campaign (TOFT), founded to change the passive role of wildlife tourism into a more proactive role. It seeks to collectively spread best practice tourism and its indirect and direct revenues help manage visitors and their experiences more effectively, and use eco-tourism's extraordinary spending power and ability to change local lives and livelihoods to save the forest habitats of India. www.toftigers.org



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