

## Tora Eco Resort, Bali Island, West Bengal, Sundarbans Conservation and Community-Based Tourism Working Hand in Hand



*Helping to protect a UNESCO world heritage site through sustainable tourism*

Step in Tora Eco Resort, the successful brainchild of a collaboration between WWF's State Director, Lt Col Shakti Ranjan Banerjee (Retd), the West Bengal Forest Department and the Bali Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society (BNWCS). Land was donated by conservationist Sri Anil Mistry, the Society's Chairman and four cottages built by Vivada Hospitality Services Pvt Ltd who own the enterprise. Land ownership remains with BNWCS. Community benefits are spelt out in the agreement and a community leader is a member of Vivada's Board of Directors.

Tora Eco Resort, a community-based ecotourism project, is helping to protect a pocket of the Sundarbans, a UNESCO world heritage site, through providing new livelihood opportunities and reducing dependency on forest resources. This has become particularly pressing in the wake of climate change pressures on the region.

The resort is located on Bali Island in West Bengal, an area with 37,000 inhabitants spread across fifteen villages. With limited resources and a growing population, the island was a hotspot for the illegal wildlife trade with constant pressure on youth to find new opportunities for employment.



*Low impact buildings reflecting local culture.*



*Guest accommodation supporting local livelihoods.*

Guest cottages built in the rural style from local materials with mud walls and thatch are designed to minimise impact on the area. Planting with indigenous trees, shrubs and grasses in the grounds and a natural pond recharge ground water. Trees provide natural shading and cooling; there is no air conditioning to minimise energy use.

Over 90% of the resort's team which employs thirteen people are from local communities who would otherwise be dependent on ecosystem resources. The resort also has a positive multiplier effect on the local economy. Local produce is purchased for the traditional Bengali cuisine served to guests.

Laundry is done by a local women's self-help group. Local theatre and dance performances for visitors provide a further income source. Locals have been trained as guides, naturalists and in hospitality with a range of other tourism-related enterprises springing up. The resort's small souvenir shop promotes locally made products such as honey.

A Tiger Conservation Centre set up by the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) located at the resort is used for wildlife film shows, educational activities, community meetings and medical camps for the island's inhabitants and houses an office for WPSI.



*WPSI Serenity School supported by the resort.*

The resort supports WPSI in running a small school located on the resort's boundary and has also contributed to a hospital managed by Samarpan Foundation. WPSI's other activities from its base on the island include assisting the Forest Department with anti-poaching activities, outreach conservation awareness programmes in outlying villages and environmental education in local schools.

Visiting tourists are given an opportunity to get an insight into community life and encouraged to make donations. One such

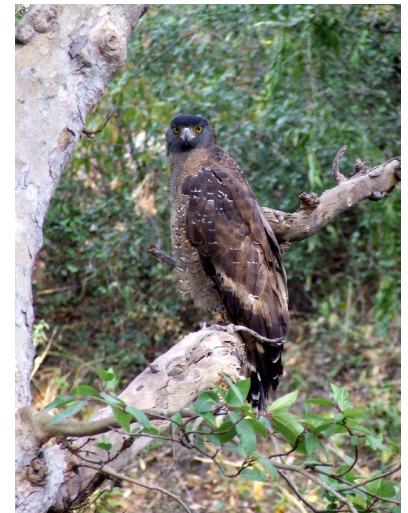
donation financed the purchase of an ambulance to transfer emergency patients to hospital.

The resort has become a hub for a broader range of new livelihood programmes to reduce the island's dependency on forest resources and poaching. A fish hatchery developed by the Indian Council for Agriculture and Research (ICAR) in association with WPSI and Tora Eco Resort is providing hatchlings for local communities. Run by WPSI and BNWCS, the hatcheries produce over 300,000 young fish each year for distribution to locals for alternative livelihoods. Training in developing ponds was provided by the Centre of Inland and Freshwater Aquaculture, part of ICAR.

The combined social and livelihood improvements provided by WPSI, BNWCS and Tora Eco Resort are having a positive impact on conservation. Poaching has practically been reduced to zero and when a tiger strays onto the island, the community assists the Forest Department to capture and release it back to the wild. A win-win situation for wildlife and communities.



*Health Check-up camp organised at WPSI's centre in the resort's grounds*



*Photo: Himani Kala / Tora Eco*

*Wildlife flourishing in the area*



*Photo: Apurba Chakraborty / Tora Eco Resort*



*Photo: Anil Mistry / Tora Eco Resort*