

# SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

## 6 WAYS TO BUILD BACK BETTER

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**The writer is an experienced travel expert in Britain and has floated a new global partnership with hotels and tour operators: TOFTigers. - Editors**

It is not really such a long time ago that I first visited Ranthambhor Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. In fact, it was 1998, just 23 years ago. I checked into one of only two small hotels, the Maharaja Man Singh's old hunting lodge on the bend of a tree-lined road, not far from a small sleepy town, and backing onto the reserve itself. I had heard there was a good chance of seeing a tiger here, the only place in the world where this was a really good possibility.

The place is unrecognizable today. A revolution has happened. Sawai Madhopur is a large bustling town that has spread across the landscape and for miles down that tree-lined road. This strip bordering the reserve is now dotted with expensive resorts, lodgings, and bed and breakfasts of every conceivable design and shape, from the ubiquitous concrete monstrosities to fake forts and mini palaces, complete with bulbous domes and minarets, designed to attract the new moneyed Indian fraternity on their holidays and weekends away.

Wow – so is this good for tigers I hear you ask? Yes and no would be my answer.

Yes, because having declared in 2003 that the Royal Bengal Tiger was about to go extinct with only 11 left in this area, India's most famous park, now has over 70 wild cats. The park's borders have expanded, many locals have benefitted hugely with thousands of jobs and new livelihood opportunities in this once remote marginal farming community. Great schools and hospitals have been built with visitor income. Furthermore, the park's finances had never been better (before Covid!) from the 500,000 visitors each year, allowing better protection, community support, and compensation for livestock loss. Today the vast majority of visitors are domestic - a sea

change from when I visited in 1998 – all wishing to see their own natural heritage - and this is the only sure-fire way to ensure nature conservation remains at the top of any politician's agenda in this fast-developing nation.

No, because none of this was really planned. No thought was given to the key infrastructure needed for such wholesale change, no town or park long term planning, no carrying capacity thought through, no developmental plans which allocate land to use - and land not to use - that may be injurious to the park and its wildlife, no understanding as to aquifer drawn water needs and damage in this desert land, no thought on the incentives and disincentives for poor buildings, poor operations or waste and other pollutants beside a world-famous park. Without this, the real benefits of this new nature-based tourism sector have probably failed to materialize in the best, most judicious, and just way for both wildlife and communities – and certainly not sustainably.

Sadly, the Indian tourism sector is very unsustainable at the moment. This is not just me saying it – having predicted this 20 years ago when I first started TOFTigers - but both UNWTO and Euromonitor Research put India at or

near the bottom of the sustainability global travel and tourism ranking. So, what needs to happen to change this. Here are my six key needs for a building-back better strategy.

**Recognize that tourism can be beneficial:** To destinations and communities, it can incentivize conservation and support protection and enrich all our lives, economically, socially, and culturally. Yet irresponsible and unsustainable actions can do the exact opposite, so better planning and understanding of it is needed by Forest Departments, key ministries, and the private sector.

**Need to move away from Quantity to Quality:** Manage tourism for the quality of the experience and its value to the host, the local communities, and nature. This requires active/intensive destination management. Today this may even need to contain or stop tourism's land use.

With today's social media great places and destinations highlight themselves – so federal and state tourism boards need to move away from simple promotion and far more into destination management, alongside park services, private sector, area authorities, civic society, and panchayats.

**Redefine success:**

This should no longer be on simple numbers of visitors, but favor customer satisfaction, community development, small business development, job creation, fair income distribution as measures of success. Set an early baseline and then monitor it. There is a



*What 'responsibility' do they register while clicking Tigers in wild?  
A usual tourism scene at Tiger Reserves in India.*

need to ensure investment in destinations. It will be a net positive for communities and environment with monetary incentives and tax advantages.

### **Set Sustainable Standards:**

Set minimum standards of operations, using international standards like those of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and Sustainable *Tourism* Criteria for *India* (STCI), and then incentivize and encourage monitoring of these standards in destinations. Use taxes, awards, visitor benefits, or special passes to encourage and maintain best practices.

For the benefits of tourism to be

materialized, it needs endless collaboration and partnerships between all stakeholders – but it also needs good and judicious policies, regulations, and laws that both incentivize the encourage best practice – but also discourage and dis-incentivize the worst practices.

### **Governments should not be the sole arbitrators:**

It is critical to realize that everyone can conserve nature, it should not just be a mandate for governments.

We need to allow communities to collaborate with the private sector to protect, restore, reforest, and conserve lands bordering or connecting parks,

around towns and cities, or in rural areas too.

We have all become accustomed to the idea that tourism is a basic human right. It is not – and if it were - more than just one in five of the world population would be doing it.

Travel and tourism are an undoubted privilege for a small part of society – and so it is all travelers' ultimate responsibility to demand that tourism is better, fairer, and more sustainable.

Travelers need to be prepared to pay for it. The pandemic may well have highlighted this to an extent that we could never have done without it.