

Addressing ‘overtourism’ in the Corbett landscape

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Abstract

Tourism has from time immemorial been promoted as a benevolent, non-consumptive activity that provides enjoyment and entertainment to the traveller. However, it can cause inordinate harm too. The media and the travel industry have acknowledged the negative impacts from tourism, and thus there is the emergence of a new term: 'Overtourism'. Corbett Tiger Reserve is showing all signs of overtourism. There is a need to look at more innovative approaches to tourism, in the larger Corbett landscape. This case study looks at the ecological significance of this landscape and highlights two local initiatives that involve homestays through a local youth group, thus providing alternate livelihoods as also an incentive to conserve the landscape.

Author's profile

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Addressing ‘overtourism’ in the Corbett landscape

Tourism has from time immemorial been promoted as a benevolent, non-consumptive activity that provides enjoyment and entertainment to the traveller. It has also brought to many communities and countries substantial revenue, helped conserve endangered species, and rejuvenated and revived cultural heritage. However, this is only one side of the coin. What many have now seen coming for several decades is the fact that tourism can cause inordinate harm when it goes beyond the carrying capacity of a place.

In the summer of 2017, the media and the travel industry finally acknowledged the negative impacts of tourism and thus came into existence the term ‘overtourism’. Very simply, overtourism takes place when there are far too many visitors at a particular destination. However, the term ‘too many’ itself is site-specific and would be defined by local residents, travel entrepreneurs and tourists themselves. For protected areas, it is determined by the health of the ecosystem and species therein.

The signs of overtourism are many. When local communities are forced to sell their land to hoteliers, forest roads get jammed by tourist vehicles, tourists cannot view wildlife because of the crowds, subsequently disturbing wildlife, and when fragile ecosystems get degraded is when overtourism is taking place.

The Corbett Tiger Reserve is showing all signs of overtourism. This case study is presented in this context. There is a need to look at more innovative approaches to tourism, particularly in the larger Corbett landscape. The case study looks at the ecological significance of this landscape and highlights a local initiative called Eco Harryman’s. It describes how this initiative and the declaration of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve have both played a catalytic role in promoting an alternative framework of tourism in the landscape. Taking the lead in this direction is the Pawalgarh Prakriti Prahari (PPP)¹, a local youth group supporting innovation in infrastructure through community-based tourism.

The larger Corbett landscape

Encompassing the river Yamuna in India, river Bhagmati in Nepal and Shivalik hills, is the landscape that covers some of India’s well-known tiger reserves and protected areas. Perhaps one of the most celebrated parks in this landscape and in India is the Corbett National Park that spreads across Nainital, Pauri and Almora districts of Uttarakhand. The landscape is an amazing blend of high hills, the mighty river Ramganga, riverside belts, and

¹ www.pawalgarh.org

grasslands. It is a unique blend of Bhabar that is characterised by boulders and sal trees (*Shorea robusta*) and other mixed vegetation, and the Terai characterised by clay rich swamps which support a mosaic of tall grasslands, wetlands and mixed deciduous forests. Corbett is one of India's best-preserved parks with 164 tigers and over 600 elephants. More than 600 species of trees, shrubs, herbs, bamboos, grasses, climbers and ferns have been identified in the park. With approximately 550-recorded species of birds, this landscape is one of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs).



The Corbett Landscape. Photo by Seema Bhatt

Before 1820, most of these forests were the private properties of local rulers. Once the ownership was passed onto the British that year, these forests were ruthlessly felled for timber. Sal (*Shorea robusta*) for which these forests are known was the favoured timber. Teak, the more precious of the timbers, was planted on the periphery and was used for making railway sleepers in later times.

It was in 1858 that the first comprehensive plan to protect these forests was made by Major Ramsey and after over 36 years of careful vigilance, the condition of these forests improved. In 1879, they were declared as reserved forests. From 1907, many a dedicated

British forest officers attempted to get protected area status for the forests. In 1934, the governor of the United Provinces (later Uttar Pradesh and now Uttarakhand), Malcolm Hailey, supported the idea of making this area a game sanctuary. Subsequently, Smythies attempted to get it declared a national park through legislative means.

It was during this time that Colonel Jim Corbett roamed these forests in his quest for man-eaters and his knowledge about the area was commendable. Smythies, in consultation with Jim Corbett, demarcated the boundaries of the proposed national park with adequate room for expansion. In 1936, the United Provinces National Parks Act was enacted and as a result, the Hailey National Park became India's first national park and the world's third. In 1952, the park's name was changed to Ramganga National Park after the famed river that forms the lifeline for the park and its inhabitants. However, in 1957 subsequent to the death of Jim Corbett, it was renamed Corbett National Park after the man who played a significant role in demarcating its boundaries and whose name remains synonymous with this area.

The year 1973 was a landmark for India in the context of wildlife conservation as the country launched its pioneering overarching conservation project in the name of 'Project Tiger'. The Corbett National Park became the venue of this momentous launch and became the first tiger reserve in the country. The Corbett National Park and Tiger Reserve today has an area of 1288.31 square kilometres (sq km), and is a part of the greater Corbett landscape. It has long been referred to as the 'land of roar, trumpet and song' – the roar of tigers, the trumpet of elephants and the melodious song of birds.

Pawalgarh conservation reserve

At a distance of less than half an hour from the Corbett Tiger Reserve lies the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, a part of the larger tiger landscape. Jim Corbett made Pawalgarh famous for having hunted the largest ever tiger – titled 'The Bachelor of Pawalgarh' – in these forests. Corbett recounted his tale of tracking and killing this tiger that took him over a decade in his famous book, *The Man-Eaters of Kumaon*.

The amendments made to the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 in 2002 provided for the formation of two new categories of protected areas. One category was that of conservation reserves, which the state government might declare after consultations with relevant local communities. Areas adjacent to existing protected areas or those connecting one protected area to another were a priority. Pursuant to this, the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve was established in 2012.



The Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve. Photo by Seema Bhatt.

The landscape is crisscrossed by three rivers, the Kosi, Buar and Dabka, and has large tracts of undisturbed forests. This 58.25 sq km reserve is a birding paradise with 365 species of birds. Unlike Corbett Tiger Reserve, the trails here can be traversed by foot. The reserve also has 32 species of mammals and more than 125 species of butterflies.

Eco Harryman's resort: An innovation in infrastructure

In close proximity to the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is a unique homestay called Eco Harryman's (Eco Harryman's is actually an acronym based on all the people who were part of the formation of the first coordinating committee). It is owned and managed by the dynamic Manralji, who belongs to a family where several members were part of the Indian Army. He too wanted to join the Army, but his family wanted him to look at other options. He got a Diploma in Electronics Engineering from Delhi and was exploring employment opportunities when a series of events brought him back to Uttarakhand, the significant one being the ongoing struggle for independent statehood. He wanted to be part of the

movement and also in some ways promote the natural beauty of the state. He decided to then start a tourism initiative from his family house in Pawalgarh. In the year 2000, when the state forest department started looking at ecotourism in earnestness, Manralji's place was the obvious choice for the launch of the movement.



Eco Harryman's Homestay. Photo by Seema Bhatt

Eco Harryman's has three rooms on the ground floor and three on the first floor with varying number of beds. The rooms themselves are comfortable and clean. There is a common set of toilets and bathrooms at the back. Across from this is another building that has on the first floor an outdoor venue for meetings. A look at the vast collection books and the wildlife related artwork on the walls indicates that one is in the company of a true naturalist. One walks across a beautiful fruit orchard to get to the dining hall that can also double up as a dormitory. The walls throughout the resort are adorned with nature-related paintings by local artists, making the place vibrant and attractive. This is an ideal venue for school/college camps. Manralji's wife supervises the cooking of delicious organic local cuisine.

Eco Harryman's offers a range of activities to travellers that include nature walks, camping on the campus, adventure activities and also some traditional games. There are many who come on a regular basis to just relax in the wonderful surroundings, eat healthy food and enjoy the tranquillity. There are naturalists who make the resort their base and then

go and explore the conservation reserve. At any given time, there are also a few youngsters who come here to volunteer and help in a range of activities at the resort. The resort also hosts many conservation-related meetings and events. With an annual turnover of Rs.3 lakh to Rs.5 lakh, the resort is sustainable and able to support other relevant activities.



Eco Harryman's Homestay. Photo by Seema Bhatt

Birding festivals in Uttarakhand: A unique endeavour

Recognising the amazing bird diversity in Uttarakhand and the need to conserve it, the Uttarakhand forest department in 2011 started bird watching camps across the state. Between 2011 and 2016, the ecotourism wing of the forest department supported 25-30 such camps. These camps culminated in birding festivals, the first of which was held in Asan in 2014. This commendable initiative to promote birding in the state and subsequently create awareness was the brainchild of the then chief conservator of forests in charge of ecotourism, Rajiv Bhartari. There has been an overwhelming response to these and in collaboration with other groups that include Titli Trust, Kalpavriksh and Himal Prakriti birding festivals have become a regular feature in the state. These festivals are opportunities where forest staff, local community members, tour guides and others learn the basics of birding, and also become conservation ambassadors.

The second birding festival was held in Pawalgarh in 2015. From a workshop on community-based tourism convened during the festival emerged the need for more trained nature guides, particularly with the delineation of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve. Titli Trust² urged the forest department to support a nature guide training programme that would help link rural youth to conservation. It was this need that led to the establishment of the Pawalgarh Prakriti Prahari (PPP). PPP was registered as a not-for-profit nature conservation society in December 2015.

The main objective of the society is to support nature conservation, environment protection and sustainable living by promoting alternate livelihoods such as ecotourism through village homestays, nature tours with experienced guides and promoting local produce and cuisine in the landscape of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve. PPP also supports the sale of nature interpretation products such as books, brochures, handicrafts and paintings. The society focuses its efforts mainly in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve landscape and its members are from the villages around it including Pawalgarh, Mankanthpur, Kyari, Kotabagh, Syat, Ramnagar, Gabua, Chhoi and Amtoli.

Once established, an intensive training of nature guides began through the Titli Trust for over 70 men-days. This included training on basic skills of bird watching followed by bi-monthly practice sessions, first aid, soft skills such as communication and storytelling. There were also other training sessions conducted by organisations such as the Wildlife Trust of India, and the Uttarakhand forest department. These trainings included those for advanced

² Titli Trust (www.titlitrust.org) is a not-for-profit nature conservation organisation based in Dehradun, India. It is primarily focused on conservation and livelihoods in the Himalayas.

nature guides and a course for trekking leaders. A four-day test was conducted at the end of 2016. A total of 65 youth took the test out of which 30 were selected as requested by the forest department. It was at this point that the forest department seemed to go back on its word and did not take on the trained nature guides as agreed upon earlier. There was no clarity on why this happened. A lot of expectations had been raised and this led to a considerable disappointment for the trained youth. Almost two years after the initial agreement, recently, there has been a move to register guides as part of the nature guide programme. Unfortunately, many of the youth trained as nature guides have taken to other occupations. There are few that remain.

Towards more community-based tourism

In the wake of the delay in taking trained youth as nature guides, the PPP, with the help of the Titli Trust and Manralji, is attempting to move towards a model of community-based tourism in the Pawalgarh region. It hopes to:

- provide livelihoods to local youth in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve landscape by offering a range of “products” for tourists.
- ensure that the tourism at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is eco-friendly, sustainable and equitable with benefits flowing to local community.
- support nature conservation activities in Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve, as determined by and in consultation with the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve management.

With the above background, PPP has initiated homestays, at both the community and individual levels. Following a unique mode, PPP will sign an agreement with individual homestay owners who will then comply with the terms and conditions laid down by PPP and in turn avail the benefits of this agreement. As part of the agreement, PPP will be responsible for marketing of homestays, customer engagement, planning of schedules and itineraries, managing bookings and financial transactions, registration of homestays, and ongoing training and capacity building. PPP retains the right to conduct annual performance assessments of the homestays based on pre-determined standards. These standards may be revised from time to time based on customer feedback.

Homestay owners will be responsible for, all onsite customer management that includes boarding and lodging, and nature guiding upkeep of homestay property, payment of bills for all utilities used, and sharing onsite customer feedback. Homestay owners will inform PPP in case of direct engagement in any marketing activity and also with large groups/schools/institutions. Homestay owners should be geared to provide to the visitors' guides for bird watching and nature and heritage walks and introduction to other activities such as traditional games.



Paryavarani Prakriti Prahari (PPP). Photo by Seema Bhatt

‘Overtourism’ in the Corbett landscape responsible tourism: Need for innovation

The Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) is one of the most popular protected areas in the country. The reserve records over 200,000 visitors annually. The CTR authorities state that over 150 vehicles with about 600 people are permitted in on a daily basis during the season. There is accommodation for over 3,000 visitors around the reserve³. The Wildlife Institute of India

³ www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/corbett_tourism_report.pdf

carried out a study in the village of Dhikuli situated just outside the eastern edge of the Corbett National Park to look at tourism related impacts. The study found that tourism is resulting in social disruption in the villages surrounding the park by creating islands of prosperity resulting in financial disparity, resentment and conflict. Luxury resorts in the area are also resulting in water scarcity in villages because of the high demand of water by these resorts⁴.

The Corbett landscape is in a crisis situation in terms of tourism. Given the popularity of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, and the alarming growth of luxury resorts in the buffer zone, the landscape is in danger of being smothered by mass tourism. It is being loved to death. Often in the 'five-star resort' culture of tourism, tourists care precious little about wildlife, but are there only to have a good time. There are others who care only about seeing the tiger and will go to any extent to see it. Finally, there are the true nature lovers and conservationists who want to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the wilderness and soak in nature. Ironically, while they are the greatest allies of the reserve, they now hesitate to visit it.

Tourism in the Corbett landscape and many others needs to diversify and go beyond just the parks. In this context, the declaration of the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve and the PPP initiative are indeed timely. There is a need to spread tourism activities beyond the Corbett Tiger Reserve and it is critical that tourism be promoted in other parts of the larger landscape. And for this, the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is ideally suited. Further, the PPP model supports the participation of local youth in tourism whereby giving them a larger scope as stakeholders in conservation. At present, the Corbett authorities are under tremendous pressure to best manage the reserve, particularly the sheer number and kind of tourism being promoted. PPP is the ally that can provide services in providing nature guides as also alternate accommodation. Further, the PPP code of conduct ensures that tourism in the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is sustainable and responsible.

Disclaimer: This article was prepared with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung India. The views and analysis contained in the publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

This article is adapted from a more detailed case study titled, "Community-based Tourism in Pawalgarh" specially written for Vikalp Sangam and 'People in Conservation' newsletter. <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/community-based-tourism-in-pawalgarh/#.XRH6JGQzY1g>

⁴ <http://www.sanctuaryasia.com/magazines/cover-story/10094-tourists-from-the-dark-side.html>

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Manralji and Sanjay Sondhi for sharing with me the background and history of the place and initiative.