

TIGER TOURISM

Development In Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve*
In Maharashtra: Is It Leading To Mass Tourism?

Dr. Suvarna Sathe

Introduction

The research article addresses the issue of increased number of tourists visits to TATR* as an effect of Government policy to promote "Tiger Tourism". Tiger Tourism can be considered as a niche segment in wild life tourism. Being a niche tourism it has its own dimensions and the concern is, if the current aggressive promotion would let it retain its niche from or would it be another disastrous, unplanned mass tourism development?

As we all know the tiger population in India is on the blink of extinction. According to tiger census in 2015, there are around 2000 tigers left in the wild in India. Being on the top of the food chain the very existence of the jungle and the delicate eco system balance is retained by tiger.

Poaching, growing human population, mining and industrial development around jungles, forests

and reserves is a common problem in India.

Should the Tiger Tourism be promoted heavily in such a scenario? Is it worth or will it lead to a disaster? There is a huge difference between promoting Wild Life Tourism and promoting Tiger Tourism; the focus in wild life tourism is to educate a tourist in admiring the jungle and the wild life as a whole. In Tiger Tourism the focus is only on locating and following a tiger. Further in the article, the problem in doing so would be discussed at a length.

About TATR

Maharashtra boasts of five tiger reserves namely:

Pench (Nagpur)

Melghat (Amravati)

Tadoba Andhari (Chandrapur)

Nagzira-Navegaon (Gondia)

Sahyadri (Kolhapur)

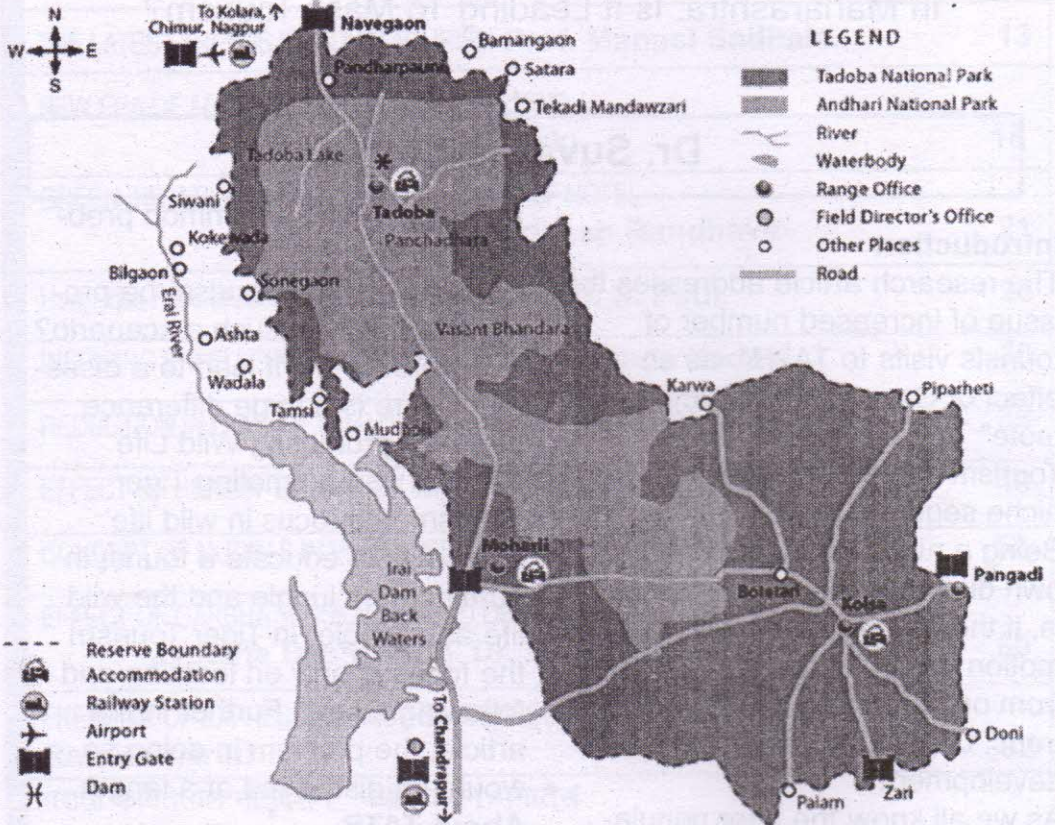
Out of the five, four are located in Vidharbha region of Maharashtra.

TATR is located 40 kms. away from nearest railway station and

160 kms. from nearest airport Nagpur.
 Established in the year 1955, as a National park with a core area of 116.25 sq. kms. at that time; today

be less human interference in such areas and human activity is restricted.

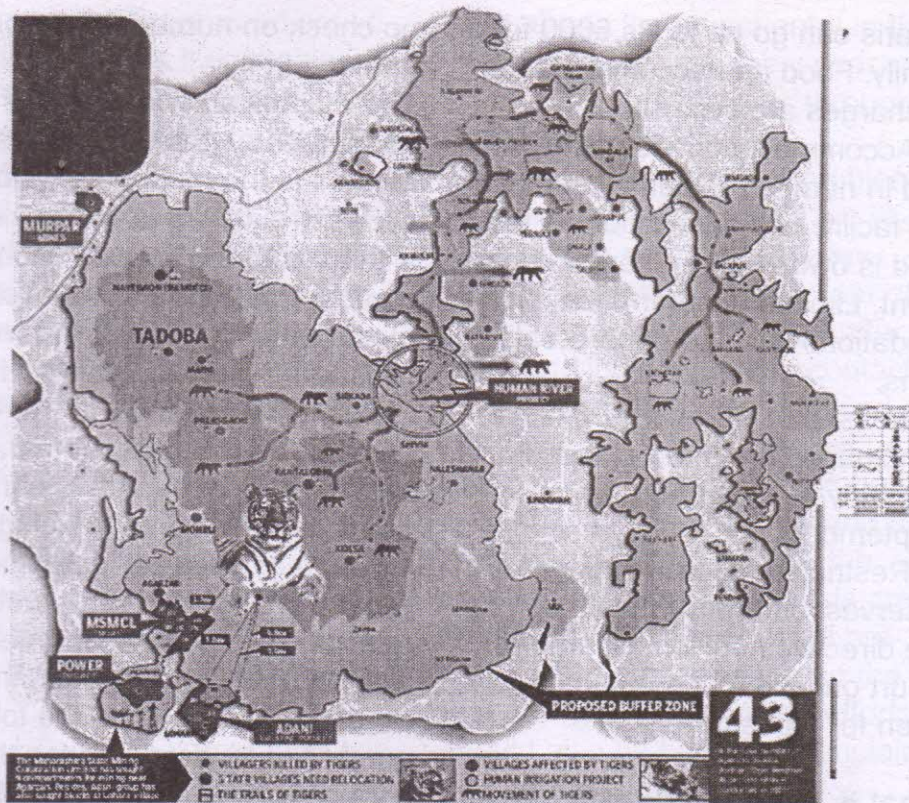
Map of TATR (not to the scale)



it has a core area of 625 sq. kms. with buffer area of 1100 sq. kms. It has been awarded a status of Tiger Reserve in 1995 and called popularly as TATR (Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve). The idea behind establishing tiger reserves in India was to protect and conserve the endangered big cat in India. It implies that there should

(Map courtesy Forest Department TATR)

One has to understand the concept of Niche Tourism as Wild Life Tourism falls under it: Niche tourism is opted and chosen by limited number of people for



reasons like interest, affordability (monitory, physical endurance). The limited number is also a result of sustainability issue of such tourism. E.g.: Indigenous Tourism, where large number of tourists are never encouraged to prevent affecting indigenous cultural.

Wild life tourism in addition to this has following dimensions to consider:

1) Limited accessibility : being located in the remote parts, rail or air access is limited and number of flights or railways plying to such destinations are few. In case

of TATR Wardha. (120kms), Chandrapur (40kms.) and Nagpur (160kms.) are three railway stations and one airport Nagpur. But the railways reaching these stations are very few. Direct flights from Mumbai and Pune are available, but they are limited to 2-3 flights per day. So number of tourists who can is limited.

2) Price: usually the game safaris are relatively expensive. In India it ranges between Rs 2500 to Rs 3000 per safari for 6 pax. Guide fees and park entry fee per pax is separate. When one reaches the reserve jungle safaris is the only activity and per day expense of

safaris can go up to Rs 6000 for a family. Food and accommodation charges are separate.

3) Accommodation: is usually limited in number. Expansion of lodging facility has a limitation as the land is owned by the forest department. Limited number of accommodations leads to price escalations.

4) Seasonal nature: The wild life sanctuaries are mostly closed during rainy season, (June to September).

5) Restricted access in the reserves: currently in India as per the directives of Hon. Supreme Court only 20% of the core area is open for tourism.

What is the ground reality at TATR

With a core area of 625 sq. kms., the accessibility to tourists is only to 100 sq. miles. It includes water bodies, unaccessible dense forest, hills. The road network is not spread in all this 100 sq. kms. So if the number of tourists are increased, the area could hardly accommodate increasing traffic. The roads are not meant for heavy vehicles like cantours or buses. The roads are not wide enough for such traffic. In TATR from June 2016, 3 buses and 2 canters are plying along with around 100 gypsies every morning and evening. In addition to that private vehicles are also allowed in the reserve with

no check on number of people entering in it.

The map given above shows total 6 entry gates to the reserve. Mohurli is the main gate which allows around 25 to 30 gypsies with minimum 6 tourists each. 2 cantours with 20 tourists each, 3 buses with 20 tourists each and minimum 10 private vehicles with no restrictions on tourist number...which is about 380 tourists from one gate. Other 5 gates allow the entry ranging from 12 to 10 gypsies per gate and some private vehicles as well. (refer to the official government web site www.mahaecotourism.com for gypsy number). So the total number of tourists entering the core area every morning and evening is reaching 600-800 per session. We are talking about accommodating this traffic in limited roads spread in 100 sq. kms. and it is not the network of 100 sq. kms. of roads we are talking about.

Another point is what happens to the vehicles who enter the reserve from different gates? Elsewhere in other reserves in India one would see that different entry gates are allocated to different reserve zones and vehicles do not cross or meet each other. But at TATR vehicles entering from Navegaon, Kolar, Mohurli and Khutwanda all meet and intersect each other at all the roads. It leads to the traffic

congestion, traffic jam and crowded atmosphere. Is it desirable in a Tiger Reserve? With exception of Kolsa region all other zones are interlinkd.

Vehicles are honking and overtaking each other, hunting to see the tiger on the narrow roads of the reserve. The tourists visiting the reserve are motivated to see the tiger and they are obsessed with it. This obsession leads to racing and taking vehicles close to the tiger. What are we really promoting by doing this?

In the year 2012 the main entry gate Mohurli had only 2-3 resorts for the tourists. Now there are around 12 resorts around the vicinity, one MTDC resort and one Forest Department accomodation facility. Homestays are coming up in the villges. Is it all a sustainable development? It is a result of Tiger Tourism promotion by Government of Maharashtra? Khutwanda and Navegoan gates have come up with MTDC and private resorts around it. But the point is, the area of the reserve open for tourists has not increased in proportion to the increased number of tourists. But number of tourists flowing in the reserve has increased. More number of can-tours are waiting to join the fleet. This year the season has increased by 15 days and the park would now close on 30 th June instead of 15 th June. The Mohurli

gate allows the tourist entry in the reserve even in the rainy season by a tar road which runs through the reserve.

The reserve has its own problems like pending relocation of the vil-lages in the core area(please refer to the map), displacment of the tiger population to the buffer zone and increased tiger contact with human settlements around the reserve. Unauthorised wood and bamboo cutting in the jungle, poaching, jungle fires, low and mal equiped staff. Inspite of all the adversities the forest officials are fighting hard to upkeep and pre-serve the precious wildlife in the reserve. The conservation efforts should also be backed by sustain-able means of tourism develop-ment.

Many natural disasters like the one occured in Utrakhand are as a result of exceeding the sustain-able capacity of a destination. Loss of natural resources may not always be renewable. It is more so in case of wild life and specially tigers which is on the blink of extinction.

Is it more practical to promote wild life tourism as a whole rather than promoting only "Tiger Tourism?" Educating tourists about the fragili-ty of the ecosystem in resreve and vitality to conserve the wild life as a whole is also required.
