

## There are no innovative ideas in the MoEF's new action plan

The new National Wildlife Action Plan (2017 – 31) that has been recently unveiled sets out goals and targets for coordination among various government agencies and attempts to chart a plan to increase the co-operation of communities with government agencies for the conservation and protection of wildlife and forests in the country. This is the third such plan, and it lays down the way forward for the next 15 years for the ministry of environment, forests and climate change. One of the focus areas in the new plan is the need to involve local communities into the conservation of wildlife. This spills over into the plans for management of tourism in wildlife areas.

As wildlife tourism becomes more and more popular in India, with the increasing popularity of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, the problems of encouraging such interest without destroying the spaces that attract this attention has been a problem. Studies show that tourist facilities, many are privately owned, are often located too close to sensitive areas. A study published in Conservation India shows that 72% of tourist facilities near national parks were established after the year 2000, and 85% of them are located within 5 km of national park boundaries. These resorts and hotels use local resources, draw water and wood from the area around the park — sometimes at the cost of the animals themselves, and dump garbage with no regard for the environment.

The action plan makes the usual recommendations for making wildlife tourism viable, such as the need to “develop standards and guidelines to prevent damage to wildlife and habitats” and even delineates a “priority project” to “bring in a mechanism for implementation of sustainable tourism in Wildlife Areas, WPAs, CMPAs and the mountain eco-systems, in accordance with the prescribed guidelines.”

None of the recommendations are new, and given that successful implementation of each requires co-ordination between agencies, ministries and private players, it is hard to feel positive about the plan. Impact assessments of eco tourism plans, imposing a ceiling on the number of tourists and vehicles that enter a park, and framing rules for visitor behaviour within reserves, are all measures that should already have been in place. But even if these basic guidelines can be put in place now, and if inter-agency co-ordination can improve now, it will not be too late.

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