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STRIKING A BALANCE: THE NEW GENERATION OF TIGER TOURISM IN INDIA.

By

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Professional Paper

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ABSTRACT TEMPLATE

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Striking a Balance: The New Generation of Tiger Tourism in India.

Chairperson: Henriette Lowisch

Abstract Content: In rural central India, thousands of domestic and foreign tourists flock to see wild Bengal tigers each year. An international debate about whether tourism is good or bad for tigers was heard by India's Supreme Court in 2012. After new guidelines were implemented, tiger reserves across the country had to review and manage their tourism policies.

Set 550 miles east of the city of Mumbai, the Tadoba-Andhari tiger reserve is on the cusp of 'tiger tourism'. The reserve's eco-tourism policy was recently extended by using it as precedence for other protected areas in the state of Maharashtra. A cap on vehicle numbers, limited tourism infrastructure and a conservation-oriented park management are some of the reserve's strengths but authorities need to tread carefully and avoid mistakes made by India's older tiger reserves. Frequent tiger sightings are driving tourism up, subsequently increasing consumer-oriented demands of tourists looking to find luxury amidst wilderness.

Co-existing adjacent to this hobnob of tourists and tigers, is a village of 1200 people, most of whom are employed within the tourism sector directly or indirectly. Despite the increase in tourism revenue, this village – Moharli, has a long way to go before it can make substantial progress. Tourism has flourished in other tiger reserves at the cost of the locals' livelihood and the ecosystem's health. This project looks at what it would take for the Tadoba-Andhari tiger reserve to avoid being enlisted with those reserves and carve a niche for itself as a sustainable tourism destination.

On a December afternoon, the air was quiet in the central Indian village of Moharli, the silence punctuated only by baby chicks picking pieces of grain from the cobbled streets. Wafts from a fresh pot of ginger-chai drifted lazily through a brick house, competing with the unmistakable smell of wet paint.

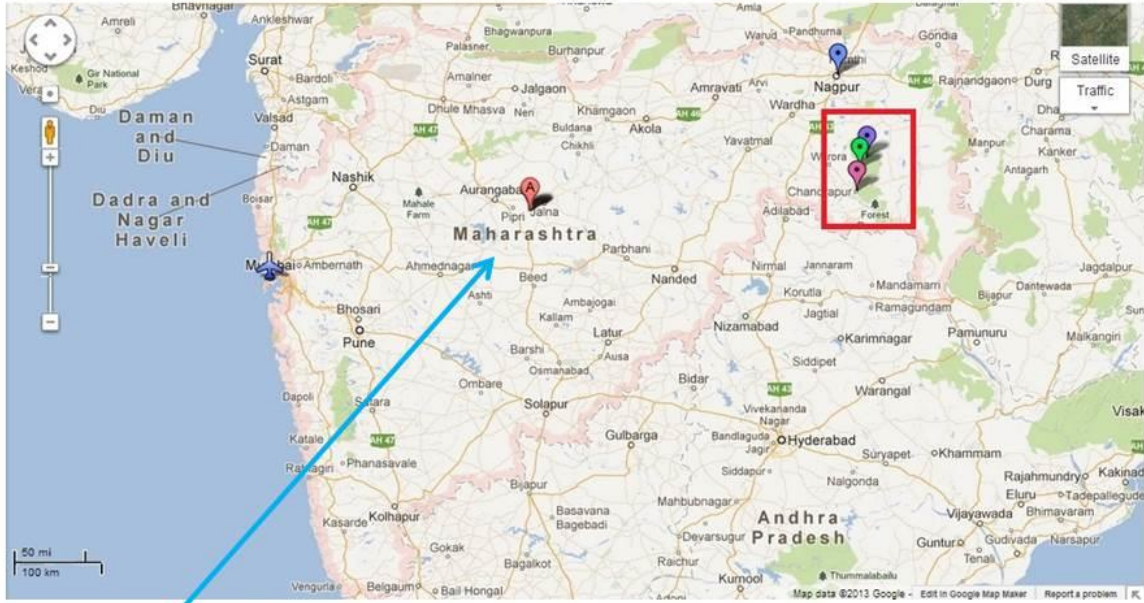
Suleman Baig knelt to dip his brush in a can of brown paint, adding finishing touches to the wall of his passageway. The rest of his homestay had already been spruced up in anticipation of the tourist season. Droplets of paint narrowly missed his light blue jeans. He took off his glasses and wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his green hoodie, before heading to the kitchen for some of that chai.

A few minutes later, the loud rattling of metal on uneven roads broke the calm. An old, rusty Maruti Suzuki Gypsy car whizzed past, dodging potholes and ignoring speed bumps on its way to the main entrance of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, just outside the cluster of village houses.

On the single beat-up road leading to the gate that opens every day at 2:30 p.m. for afternoon safaris, the Gypsy jerked to a stop. Within 20 minutes, 24 other drivers lined up to sign the register. As they completed the paperwork, the old gatekeeper hobbled over on his one good leg to open the creaking gate. Tourists strolling about to stretch their legs quickly clambered back onto cars. One word stood out, floating above the thickening cloud of excited, multilingual whispers: *Vaagh. Baagh. Tiger.*

Set 550 miles east of Mumbai, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, Tadoba-Andhari is on the cusp of tiger tourism. With a cap on vehicle numbers, limited tourism infrastructure and a conservation-oriented park management, it could avoid mistakes made by India's older tiger reserves. But frequent tiger sightings are increasing consumer-oriented demands, straining people and resources.

High hopes and fears are permeating the air of what used to be a secret paradise. While the state government is planning to use Tadoba-Andhari's eco-tourism policies as a model for four other protected areas, local conservationists are less sanguine about the future. "I don't think after ten years there will be tigers left in Tadoba," Suleman Baig said, blaming administrators for a lack of collaboration on the ground.

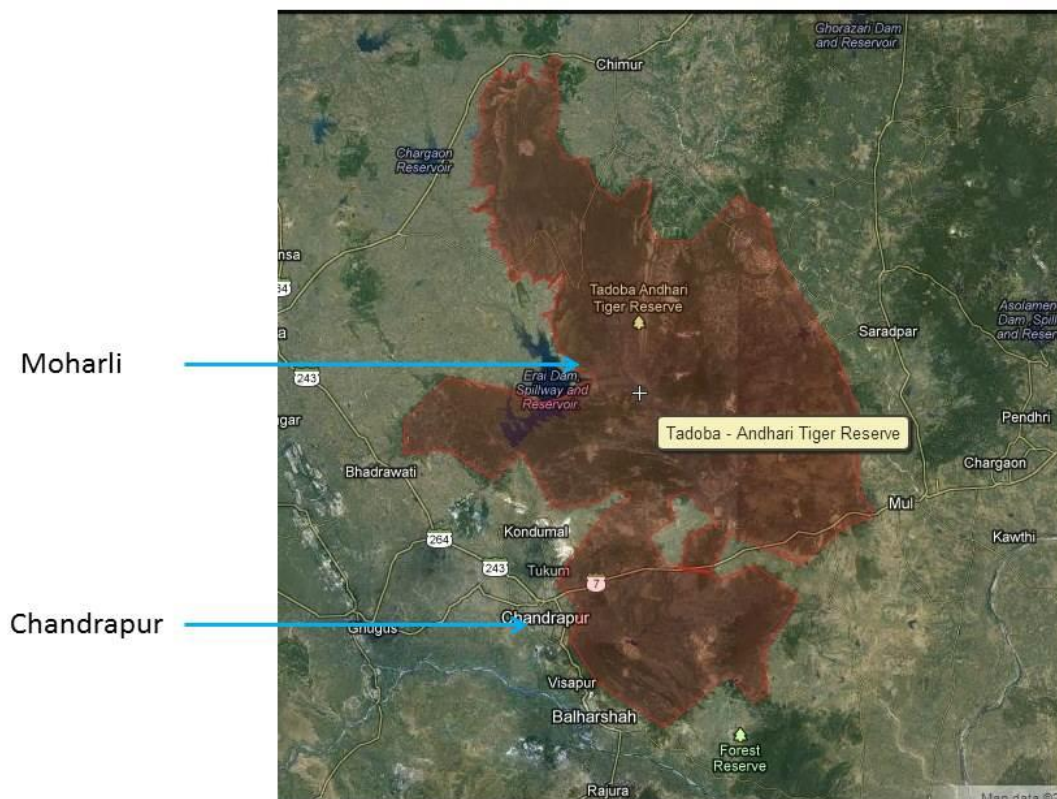


When India's Prime Minister, the late Indira Gandhi, first launched Project Tiger in 1973, the national plan for the recovery of wild royal Bengal tigers was touted as one of the world's most successful conservation schemes. Tiger numbers rose from a record low of 1,200 in the 1970s to 3,500 in the 1990s. Emboldened, the federal government designated several other protected areas as tiger reserves, bringing the current total to 41 reserves. Among this younger generation of reserves is Tadoba-Andhari, born in 1995 out of a union between the Tadoba National Park and the Andhari Wildlife Sanctuary.

From the newly combined landscape, a healthy, dense patch of forest was chosen as the core area. In this core area tigers could breed, raise cubs and find ample shelter and food, all free from human disturbance. Parts of the surrounding habitat were declared a buffer zone, where humans and animals would co-exist.

Tiger reserves are not fenced. Tigers can and do migrate from the core to the buffer, frequently encountering people. Until recently, India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 required core areas to be left inviolate, while buffers could accommodate a limited human presence, allowing some farming, cattle grazing and tourism.

Located in the buffer area of Tadoba-Andhari, the village of Moharli is at the heart of this co-existence. Official estimates put tiger numbers in this rural part of Maharashtra at over 65, of a total of 1,165 to 1,657 wild tigers in India.



Shehnaaz Baig grew up in a village in the depth of the core area, which was relocated like several other settlements to make way for tigers when the reserve was formed. At the time, the main entrance was situated deep inside the forest, with accommodation restricted to a forest guesthouse in the core area. "No one even knew where Moharli was before tourists started coming here," she said. "All we saw were some families from nearby towns who came here for picnics."

In 2008, authorities moved the gate to Moharli, on the core-buffer boundary. New facilities and hotels meant that tourists from the rest of the country could visit and

count on a place to stay. Today, hotels around the reserve cater to thousands of tourists from across India and the world. "Villagers are just about getting used to interacting with outsiders who come here to see tigers," Shehnaaz Baig said.

Like most of Moharli's 1,200 residents, Shehnaaz and her husband, Suleman, rely on tourism for much of their income. The couple runs Moharli's only homestay, which caters to local and foreign tourists. To make ends meet, Suleman Baig also sells insurance policies as a part-time agent. But those sales are few and far between. The homestay remains the breadwinner for the family, with Shehnaaz Baig's home-cooked food built into the daily rate of \$24 per person.

The Baigs channel their mutual passion for the environment into the Saving and Conserving Forests Trust, a non-profit organization founded in 2004 by Claudia Vijge, a Dutch environmental technologist. Vijge first travelled to Tadoba-Andhari 12 years ago, as part of a college internship. When a range officer took her on a tour and she saw her first tiger, she fell in love. "Compared to what I saw on TV, in real life it was, like, 1000 times better," she said. She learned the local language, started to raise money and has since revisited the area about 15 times, working with the Baigs to try and launch handicraft and education projects to empower local women.

Livelihood options in the largely tourism-based Moharli are restricted. Agriculture, the otherwise primary source of employment in this part of Maharashtra, is not a viable option here. Deer and wild pigs often wander into fields and destroy crops causing significant losses in crop output and revenue. Predators like tigers and leopards roaming the area are an added threat to farmers.

Before tourism came to Moharli, villagers took up seasonal jobs with the forest department, a state-specific branch of the national forest service that safeguards and manages protected areas like tiger reserves and national parks. They were assigned maintenance work in what was, at the time, the Tadoba National Park. These jobs were few and the pay was meagre. Often, the skill of weaving baskets and panels from native bamboo grass, handed down through generations, provided an additional source of income. But when the area came under tiger reserve protection, bamboo cutting from the forest became illegal.

Most local villagers belong to an indigenous tribe, the Gond. They claim that when their village was declared part of the buffer zone, the forest department promised them rights to basic forest produce including limited stocks of bamboo and firewood. The Forest Rights Act of 1981 grants tribal people the use of certain forest resources, but those provisions conflict with the Wildlife Protection Act.

The range forest officer at Moharli, Sachin Shinde, says villagers who enter the core area of the reserve to collect forest produce are in clear violation of the law. Dressed in a crisp khaki uniform, with thin-rimmed spectacles, curly hair and a carefully trimmed moustache, Shinde is younger than most of his counterparts in other ranges of the reserve. Fresh out of training, with a degree in agricultural science and a forest officer exam under his belt, he is a by-the-book sort of fellow. "The law says you cannot extract a single leaf from the core area," he said.

Shinde explained that eco-development committees have been formed in each village in the reserve's buffer zone. Villagers have been allocated a certain area within the buffer to meet the demand for forest produce to supplement their basic needs. Bamboo is crafted into sheets that can be used as mobile fencing. Other handicraft skills are undeveloped. If the craftsmen were specially trained to design various artefacts like candles or wall mountings by using material like discarded metal, they could make more money by selling their products in the local souvenir shop. But so far, development efforts have met with mixed success at best.

Shehnaaz Baig says she teamed up with business owners a couple of years ago, to clean up the access road to the gate, which was often used as a public toilet. "I remember how much patience it took us to convince our fellow villagers that it was going to harm them eventually," she said. Despite the money that tourism has brought to this region, signs of social progress are few. While the access road to the gate is clean today, the main tar road leading to the village itself remains a different story. Tourists have to brave long stretches of bad roads and unsanitary roadside conditions before they get a shot at spotting the coveted cat.

On the other hand, there's no doubt that tourism has generated much-needed employment in Moharli. Some 40 people in the village now work as permanent forest guides in the reserve, while others are temporary guides, waiters or cleaning staff in the local hotels. "I would say people are happier today than they were before," said Sanjay Mondhe, a forest safari guide at Tadoba-Andhari for 14 years.

Wearing a camouflage guides' uniform and a pleasant smile, Mondhe stands at a distance from the crowd of tourists gathered at the gate. Unlike them, he is calm, soft spoken and in no hurry. Streaks of silver are visible in his otherwise black moustache. "Today, people in the village are not desperately looking for odd jobs in nearby towns because tourism has created jobs right here in our village," he said. "100 percent of the future of this village depends on tourism in some way."

Even cab services in Nagpur, the nearest city 100 miles away, have a stake in tourism here. They ferry guests to and from the airport, railway station and bus stands. One tourist helps support the livelihoods of about 15 people, said Bandu Wekhande, who

set up Moharli's first hotel. "From the guy who owns the safari vehicles and the guy who sells beetle-nut leaves on the street corner to the local grocery store owner, the people who sell poultry, the labourers and the people in nearby cities - everyone in this region is dependent on this park," he said.

Approximately 117 vehicles enter the reserve every day from five access points or gates. Advance safari reservations must be made in person at the booking office in the town of Chandrapur, 18 miles away. Especially during vacation season, visitors must have the foresight to make their reservation a month or two in advance, by hiring a local agent to stand in lines for them at the Chandrapur office.

"So many people who want to spend a weekend in nature get irritated when they make the journey to Moharli and realize that bookings are full," Suleman Baig said. "The forest department should have made online booking available a long time ago."

The process disgruntles many visitors headed to Tadoba-Andhari. But on an off day, cancellations can prove lucky for people who decide to visit last minute. In a reserve known for frequent tiger sightings, another day is always worth another try.

In Moharli, the next morning was a cold and cloudy one, not the perfect weather for winter tiger sightings. The sun warms the tall grass and the reservoir, and its absence means chances of seeing tiger cubs playing in the water are slim. No sun, no tigers.

The gate opened at 6 a.m. for the morning safari, and when it swung open, the Maruti Suzuki Gypsy car dashed down the road. Drowsy pairs of eyes peered through the dawn light, trying to identify anything that moves. But nothing did.

The car headed straight to the Tolia meadow, famous for its resident tiger family including four cubs. Testament to the concept of teamwork, some tourists carefully scanned the dirt tracks for fresh pugmarks, while others focused their gazes into the trees and bushes, all in an effort to spot a tiger.

At the next turn a fresh pugmark sighting nearly stopped time. The car came to a halt, and locked eyes followed the tiger's trail to a patch of grass where it went cold. After 20 minutes of waiting that seemed like two hours, the key in the ignition turned and the car moved on.

Much like the tourists torn between hope and disappointment, Moharli seesaws between the tangible advantages and the deep-rooted hurdles that tiger tourism needs to clear before it can claim to be sustainable.

This was brought to light when a heated legal battle in the fall of 2012 made international news as the Supreme Court of India heard a tiger-versus-tourism case. An environmental NGO alleged that several tiger reserves in the country had not clearly demarcated distinct core and buffer zones as the law requires. It accused the authorities of defying India's Wildlife Protection Act by allowing tourism to function in core areas.

Pro-tourism and anti-tourism lobbies went head-to-head in a debate on whether present day-tourism was helping or harming tigers. In a surprise move, the court announced a temporary ban on all tourism in reserves that had failed to identify the distinct zones.

The court also asked the National Tiger Conservation Authority, the federal agency that controls the purse strings for tiger reserves, to revise its tourism guidelines and incorporate sustainability. Meanwhile, the ban caused uproar among sections of society that feared it would have drastic economic repercussions with losses in tourism revenue. But with an improved set of guidelines in hand, the court lifted the ban just before the winter tourist season.

Using the new guidelines, the law was amended to allow tourism in 20 percent of the total core area. It also calls for environmentally friendly practices and sustainability to be merged with tourism. It does not, however, outline practices that hoteliers and other tourism stakeholders are expected to follow. Also lacking in these guidelines are mentions of a monitoring effort and penalties for those who give sustainability a miss.

Sustainability is a moving target, and as such, is hard to define. It is not a visible goal that, once achieved, can be checked off a to-do list. To be sustainable, a tourism destination needs to aim for environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability. An integrated plan needs to involve and address all stakeholders.

As a visual aid, think of the epicentre of an earthquake. There is one focal point, in this case, the tiger reserve's core area. If concentric circles are drawn around the core area, impacts become less intense as the circles move away from the epicentre.

Similarly, the primary stakeholders, and most affected by tourism, are the locals who live in the buffer areas around the core. The secondary stakeholders would be villages or towns in the fringe areas, including farmers, hotel managers, even a gas station. From airport taxis that bring tourists to the reserve and airlines that transport

customers from cities across the world, to the village doctor and wildlife in the reserve, stakeholders in the tourism industry are spread far and wide.

Tourism in India accounts for 6.6 percent of the country's total GDP, twice as much as the automotive industry, says the World Travel and Tourism Council's 2012 report. Travel and tourism support over 39 million jobs in India. India's foreign exchange earnings from tourism were \$ 16.56 billion in 2011, up 27.5 percent from the previous year, according to Ministry of Tourism's most recent report. But in the state of Maharashtra, domestic tourism has been the main contributor to tourism revenue.

When a sector of the economy involves many separate industries, sustainability becomes more complicated to incorporate. Unless all concerned choose sustainable practices, tourism itself can never really claim to be sustainable.

Tadoba-Andhari features opportunities for sustainable tourism beyond the tiger business, Claudia Vijge said. "The problem is that the local people have to take initiative and take responsibility and work with that."

Vijge and the Baigs set up SCF India to help locals make their own living. Suleman Baig holds an undergraduate degree in commerce and has taught women how to paint cushion covers or napkins, which were then put up for sale in The Netherlands. Meanwhile, his wife focused on sewing instruction as a part of their handicrafts project. "We tried to teach them how to use a sewing machine but that fell through for several reasons," he said.

Their idealism turned to frustration when village women refused to take initiatives and work with their organization. Despite their best efforts, they could not convince fellow villagers that there were no vested interests in the organization's willingness to help them. Vijge says she had to clarify that the money earned through the sale of handicrafts was being re-invested into the foundation's projects. The women found it absurd, she said, that they were not trying to run a profit.

Still, Shenaaz Baig is well respected in Moharli, as became apparent one evening, when there was a commotion in the village square. A crowd had gathered, and a couple of women were screaming curses at a drunken boy who was brandishing a hammer. If anyone got closer, he threatened, he would throw the hammer at them.

The boy's father, a vice-leader of the village, asked Suleman Baig to call his wife to the scene. Shehnaaz Baig is the local leader of a women's group campaigning to make Moharli alcohol-free. "Alcohol is a big problem here. Some women actually brew it

right here in their houses and men, who drink, come home and beat their wives and children,” she said. “We want it to stop. I feel it hampers our progress.”

But before Suleman could call his wife, a group of women, who work with Shenaaz to rid Moharli of alcohol, convinced the crowd to move away. Without public attention, they said, the boy would lose his audience and eventually come to his senses. Leaving the hammer-wielding youngster alone, the crowd started to disperse. The next morning, things were back to normal.

Shehnaaz Baig attributes her activism in part to consistent interactions with educated people who come to her house for internships and projects or simply as tourists. Education is the other major contributing factor. “It empowers you to take charge of your own life without blindly depending on what others say,” Suleman Baig said.

Baig, who frequently voiced his misgivings against the forest department, would be surprised that Sachin Shinde, the new range forest officer at Moharli, echoed his thoughts. During his training in the Sunderbans, a marshland tiger reserve in Eastern India, Shinde saw the benefits of cultural exchanges in a small village. There, adjoining the world’s largest delta, he witnessed a village smaller than Moharli benefit economically and culturally from tourism. “There’s no reason why that cannot happen here,” he said.

The women campaigning against alcohol could possibly take up other social causes in the future. If villagers are trained to work in tourism, the industry won’t need to outsource its skilled labour. Eventually they could move up the rank from working as cleaners to potentially working as managers. Sustainability may be intangible but it’s not impossible to aim for.

So far, however, Moharli has a long way to go. While some hotels have solar panels installed for heating water, there is no sign of rain water harvesting systems. The only garbage recycling system is the use of vermicomposting pits. Burning of trash, including non-degradable items like plastic, is common. Groceries, fruits and vegetables are imported either from Chandrapur or Nagpur because the handful of farmers in Moharli can’t produce enough food to sell to local hotels.

Any destination that depends entirely on tourism for its sustenance is essentially unsustainable. Without the tigers, Moharli residents would be left high and dry. But given what uncontrolled tourism has done to other Indian reserves like Corbett and Kanha, the lack of infrastructure in Tadoba-Andhari might actually be a blessing.

In 2010, Prerna Bindra, a senior consultant with the Wildlife Conservation Society, published a report outlining and explaining the damage caused to sensitive wildlife habitats by uncontrolled tourism in Corbett, a tiger reserve in Northern India. It charged that tourism in Corbett was out of sync with conservation objectives, as tourist resorts have almost entirely blocked the river corridor that links the reserve to the surrounding habitat.

Musical events and wedding parties are hosted next door to the tiger's home by three-fourths of the resorts, the report found, with illegal night safaris an open secret.

To Poonam Dhanwatey, a wildlife conservationist working in the Tadoba-Andhari landscape, the state of Maharashtra has been lucky to be late to the game. "We started in 2005-06 when tourism suddenly took a boom and (other) places were already screwed up," she said. "So we learned from their mistakes."

Brought up in Nagpur, a city 100 miles to the north, Dhanwatey often visited the reserve as a child, long before tourism boomed in the region. An interior designer by professional qualification, she is now a founder-trustee of Tiger Research and Conservation Trust, or TRACT, which has been working in the region for over 12 years. Considered the local authority on Tadoba-Andhari, Dhanwatey and her husband are members of one of the most prominent families in this part of the country.

Back from a field visit to a village where a tiger death was reported, Poonam Dhanwatey sat in the stylish guest lounge of her Nagpur home, wearing beige trousers and a printed top, her thick curly hair tied up. With back-to-back field visits and no time for lunch, she settled for a fresh hot cup of coffee that her maid brought over. It wasn't her NGO work that took her to the tiger death site that morning. She is also one of the Honorary Wildlife Wardens for the Chandrapur district and the go-to person in such cases.

In the light of what uncontrolled tourism has done to wildlife habitats in India, Dhanwatey considers the forest department's policy of keeping tourism regulated and low-key as integral to Tadoba-Andhari's future. "The cap on vehicle numbers came only about five years ago," she said. Until tourism in Tadoba-Andhari started booming in 2005-06, there were no limits on the number of vehicles that could go in, even inside the core. The restrictions enforced in 2008 came at a time when tourism hadn't yet gotten out of hand.

The state of Maharashtra is India's largest industrial state responsible for 13 percent of India's industrial output. With Mumbai as the hub, agriculture, information technology and textiles dwarf tourism. In contrast, neighbouring Madhya Pradesh depends heavily on the tourism industry for its revenue. About a decade ago, the

latter launched an aggressive marketing scheme to encourage tourism, prompting a dramatic rise of revenue from its tiger reserves starting in 2004-2005. To this day, Tadoba-Andhari safari guides say that most foreign tourists go to Pench, Kanha and other reserves next door where luxurious accommodation is abundant.

In a report on tiger tourism published in 2011, Susanna Curtin, a lecturer at Bournemouth University, estimated that a tiger in a popular tourist reserve generates some U.S. \$130 million in direct tourism revenue over its adult lifespan. But Dhanwatey is adamant that tourism doesn't really help local communities, because people are employed only at low-level jobs. Local villagers don't have access to quality education; some don't have their own houses. Most are not given training specific to their job and they are not offered insurance or perks, and above all, their jobs are not permanent, she said. "Even if the culture of homestays picks up, tourism will only ever improve the life of the one village where the gate is," she said. "So if only 200 people from one village are actually seeing the dividends from tourism, that is not called benefiting the local community."

Suleman Baig related the story of a man who lived near one of the other gates to the reserve and sold his land to an hotelier. Today, the man stands guard at the hotel built on what was once his own land for a meagre wage. "It has come down to this - the real owners of the land adjoining this famous forest, the villagers, are being hired as servants while outsiders are taking over and becoming owners," Baig said.

In the meantime, all signs point to further expansion: In the spring of 2013, the leader of one of Maharashtra's prominent political parties, Raj Thackeray, met with business giant and former Chairman of the Tata Group, Ratan Tata in Mumbai to discuss the fate of Tadoba-Andhari's tigers. The Tata Group, which operates luxury hotels across the world, is one of India's largest companies. Thackeray urged Tata to set up a new resort in Tadoba-Andhari as part of his famous Taj Group of Hotels. The conversation might have brought public support to Thackeray and his party, but the presence of a Taj hotel will surely pave the way for a growing tourism infrastructure in an as-yet undamaged reserve.

While Moharli's six hotels can at best be rated as semi-luxury accommodations, featuring restaurants and sometimes children's play areas, an upscale expansion is already taking place in Bhamdeli, a village half a mile down the road. It is home to three luxury resorts, one of which is owned by Poonam Dhanwatey's brother-in-law. Polished wood furniture, expensive tiger paintings lining hallways, fancy restaurants, room service, housekeeping and swimming pools are on offer in a village that is less developed and smaller than Moharli. In Bhamdeli, young, unemployed boys are still idling on the corners, according to Dhanwatey, smoking *beedis*, or clove cigarettes, because they have no jobs and nothing to do.

Dhanwatey had rather forest officials use their time to protect tigers instead of looking after tourists. That said, she understands the cultural significance of tourism.

“Tourism is the only way to connect the general public to wildlife,” she said. “But as a conservationist all I have to say is that tourism is incidental. People would never come here if we didn’t have tigers. So obviously, protecting them is our first priority.”

The forest department’s track record for protection was sullied about a year ago when a dead tiger was found hacked into 11 pieces. That prompted replacement of the reserve’s field director, the officer who controls who gets to enter the reserve or to buy land for non-agricultural purposes in the buffer zone. He also supervises range and divisional forest officers.

With individual states controlling their parks, and a clear disparity between federal resources and state resources, the scope for corruption increases. The lack of accountability within state departments and between state and federal authorities bears some of the blame.

Still, the odds for conservation seem better in Tadoba-Andhari than in other reserves around the country. Even though most of the tourist facilities are within half a mile of the core area, there are not enough resorts to actually pose a physical threat to corridors or the landscape, thus providing a more natural, unique experience.

Large portions of the surrounding land are owned by local tribes and cannot be sold as non-agricultural land without requisite permits from the field director and the district collector, making it harder for commercial interests to set up shop.

Maintaining the quality of wildlife corridors around Tadoba-Andhari is especially important considering open cast coal mines loom in the picture. In a country where coal-generated power is still the norm, the area is constantly under pressure from mining companies. There is a major coal block towards Chandrapur, not to mention a power plant supplied by coal mines nearby. Back in 2010, Adani Power Ltd., an Indian company, was denied an environmental clearance to mine coal about 8 miles south of the reserve. Then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh denied the clearance on grounds that the allocated coal block, situated in the reserve’s buffer area, was a threat to tiger corridors. In 2012, the company launched a fresh bid for the coal block which includes 1402 hectares of forest land. If India’s new minister for environment and forests, Jayanthi Natarajan, were to grant clearance, a large part of the reserve’s southern buffer zone near the Lohara village would fall prey to mining and could be cut off from an essential corridor, thus isolating wildlife.

Without such corridors, Tadoba-Andhari's connectivity to other habitat would be lost, further isolating the resident tiger population and hampering genetic diversity. Given the external pressures on its habitat, it might just be a good thing that this reserve is not as developed as some others. It does not have to undo extensive, irreversible damage as yet, granting its tigers an extended lease of life. Poonam Dhanwatey believes that the reason tourists keep coming back to Tadoba-Andhari is because the reserve has managed to retain its pristine wilderness despite serious threats to its ecosystem. Maharashtra's prioritization of conservation and protection over tourism has been the key, she said.

"Tadoba is not there for the tourists. Tadoba is there for the tigers and the management is doing an excellent job of protecting the tigers," Dhanwatey said. Tigers in this reserve are comfortable and safe in their home, "and if the management can ensure that," she said, "they are doing a great job." It looks like for now, Tadoba-Andhari's tigers, including over 25 cubs, can continue being the kings of their jungle.

That morning, with seemingly lousy luck, the Telia meadow was left behind as the Gypsy safari vehicle ambled down the main tar road inside the reserve heading for the Tadoba range. Sunlight finally began to penetrate the canopy, revealing, once again, massive tiger pugmarks at the base of a hill.

Stalking the pugmarks, the car climbed the hill and followed the new trail to the very top, where the prints smudged and eventually faded into the dry leaf-litter. Driver and guide consulted for a few seconds before deciding to head back down the hill. The tiger had apparently walked this route that very morning.

The vehicle turned around and, in absolutely blind faith to those pugmarks in the sand, followed the trail for about 15 minutes. Any hopes of seeing a tiger that might have existed were beginning to vanish. With heads drooped in dismay, the group was on its way back, just as a deer sounded an alarm.

All four vehicles in the area headed to the source of the sound and shut off their engines. A few minutes later, the deer calls started getting fainter and moved away. Each vehicle chose its own spot on the roadside, with tourists perched on their seats, cameras at the ready. Ten minutes later, a large head appeared from the shrubs.

The head transformed into a massive tiger emerging from the bushes, strolling across a patch of grass into another expanse of forest, without so much as a glance at the

line-up of tourist vehicles. For less than half a minute, at 9:33 a.m., the star of the show had finally shown up.



SOURCES:

Anil Tiwade, Forest Guide, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Bandu Kumbhre, Forest Guide, Moharli

Bandu Wekhande, Hotel Owner, Moharli

Claudia Vijge, Environmental Technologist, The Netherlands

Harshawardhan Dhanwatey, Tiger Research and Conservation Trust, Nagpur

Mr Dhawale, Vice-Leader, Moharli

Mr Kotwal, Bamboo handicraft worker, Moharli

Mr Moharle, Resident, Moharli

Mrs Chaaya, Manager, Tadoba Tiger Resort

Nisha Seshan, Tourist, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Poonam Dhanwatey, Honorary Wildlife Warden, Chandrapur

Ravi Gedam, Manager, Royal Tiger Resort, Moharli

S K Ghosh, Tourist, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Sachin Shinde, Range Forest Officer, Moharli

Sameer Shaikh, Gypsy Driver, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Sanjay Mondhe, Forest Guide, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Shehnaaz Baig, Resident, Moharli

Suleman Baig, Resident, Moharli

Varsha Seshan, Tourist, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

Varun Thakkar, Tourist and photographer, Nagpur

Virendra Tiwari, Field Director, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve

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