

OPINION

**Ecotourism**, responsible nature-based tourism, has grown hugely in popularity since the 1980s and is widely regarded as important for the **conservation of wildlife**. However, recent reports from India and Uganda suggest that some tourists and parts of the tourism industry are negatively affecting **tigers and gorillas**. In April, the Head of India's National Tiger Conservation Authority was reported in *The Times* as recommending that tiger tourism be phased out. So, is ecotourism a saint or a sinner? **Justin Francis** reports

A step in the right direction. Ecotourism activities, like this walking safari led by local guides in Kenya's Samburu Game Reserve, can benefit both wildlife conservation and the livelihoods of local communities.

RICHARD NOWITZ/GETTY IMAGES



# ecotourism

SAINT OR SINNER? →

## OPINION

TONY HEAD / NATUREPL.COM



Big cat paparazzi - safari jeeps jostle for space to give their occupants a glimpse of a tiger in India's Bandhavgarh National Park

**A**frica has a long history with ecotourism, particularly with the concept of community-based conservation and tourism. These approaches were developed in response to park managers facing severe issues with often very poor local communities living adjacent to parks and reserves. These communities saw little or no benefit from the parks. They had few options but to denude them for firewood and bush meat, to water and graze cattle in them and to kill dangerous wildlife to protect their families, crops and cattle. The thinking was that without the support of these local communities, conservation initiatives would be untenable.

The snappily named Campfire program (short for Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources) was established in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s. Its central idea was to link conservation to the development of local communities through a combination of allowing communities limited use of parks and reserves and trying to find alternative and sustainable sources of income and livelihoods – which is where ecotourism and other initiatives came in.

This approach was strongly advocated by Dr David Western, formerly head of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) who put its principles into practice in Kenya. However, in truth, its record is far from convincing. Peter Frost and Ivan Bond's 2006 report for The International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED) concluded that: 'The track record of such assumed "win-win" initiatives has been patchy at best. They have generally proved to be complex to implement, and seem to be neither cost-effective nor sustainable. Some commentators query whether they have even produced sustained development or lasting conservation benefits, let alone both.'

Richard Leakey, who preceded Western as head of the KWS from 1989 until 1994, subsequently became a critic of Western's approach. A pragmatist, he believed KWS should concentrate on protecting the parks rather than taking on the seemingly impossible task of providing alternative livelihoods for Kenya's rapidly growing poor and rural populations from its relatively modest budgets and incomes from tourism.

## BENEFITS FOR COMMUNITIES

In essence, the key test of community-based conservation, including ecotourism, is whether it can generate sufficient income for communities to make conservation a financial viability compared to other less sustainable uses. Western thought it could generate enough income to achieve this; Leakey did not.

The answer varies in different places. For example, on arid lightly populated land around protected areas in Namibia that cannot be used for farming, the economic case for tourism and conservation over other land uses is compelling. Elsewhere, with dense populations and good farmland, the case is harder to make.

In Kenya, tourism entrepreneur Jake Grieves-Cook did the maths with the Maasai community on their lands around Amboseli and the Masai Mara. He asked them how much they could earn from using this land – vital zones that wildlife ebb and flow between – for farming. From his experience with tourism he calculated that he could afford to lease the land from the community for tourism and conservation, pay them greater fees than they might earn from farming the land, and still support a successful tourism business.

In consultation with the community this is what they decided to do. Their two camps – Amboseli Porini Camp within the Selenkay Conservancy and Mara Porini Camp in the conservancy of Ol Kinyei – are terrific examples of the economics of community-based conservation and ecotourism making sense.

Another good example is Basecamp Masai Mara and their new Wilderness Camp – run in partnership and largely staffed by local Maasai. Conversations between the community and Basecamp about the future of their lands outside the reserve culminated in them agreeing to create a new conservancy to protect the wildlife and generate income from ecotourism.

It's not just the economics of conservation at Basecamp that makes sense – it's the experience for tourists. As well as game drives in a lovely old 1965 Landcruiser with Moses, the Maasai Camp Manager, my visit included a walking safari with the Maasai, during which I learnt about the community's relationship with wildlife and the use of plants in rituals, storytelling and medicines. I also visited a village with local guides to meet the women and children, watch dances and buy crafts →



**THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE INCOME FROM ECOTOURISM CONTRIBUTES VITAL FUNDS TO ANTI-POACHING PROGRAMS**

## OPINION

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from them. In short, I enjoyed a very authentic experience that was a million miles away from being cooped up in a striped mini bus or in a larger lodge more remote from the wildlife.

### TACKLING THE POACHERS

In places where ecotourism and other sustainable livelihoods do not generate sufficient income for communities to make conservation a financial viability, local governments have a choice. They either focus on protecting the parks and wildlife as part of Kenya's natural heritage, and find ways to compensate the communities in other ways, or they accept that they probably have no long-term future.

Of course, there are other contributors to the loss of wildlife, one of them being poaching. Tiger and rhino parts, in particular, are much sought-after for traditional Chinese medicine. Both species are poached on demand by gangs – a kilo of tiger bones can fetch up to US\$600. Much effort has been put into consumer education programs in Asia about the consequences of these 'medicines' to endangered wildlife. But the poaching continues. It requires money, resources and constant attention to protect the parks and wildlife.

There is no doubt that the income from ecotourism contributes vital funds to anti-poaching programs. In addition, many private tourism businesses support anti-poaching measures through their own funds, tourist donations and in other ways. Forsyth's Lodge in Satpura National Park, India, is an environmentally friendly lodge that works closely with park authorities and has donated several vehicles for use by rangers. The Travel Operators for Tigers is an industry-led campaign for more responsible use of wilderness areas and tiger conservation.

In addition, ecotourism creates jobs for local communities as guides, drivers, cooks, housekeepers, mechanics, handymen, security guides and in house-keeping and provision of other services. Income from these jobs often supports extended families, and establishes the value of conservation to these communities in very real terms although, as before, the key issue is that it often does not provide sufficient income to make conservation a reality.

The presence of ecotourists in national parks and reserves, and the tourism infrastructure that supports them, has been argued as being a deterrent to poaching. While this is no doubt true to some extent, it has not stopped

determined gangs poaching at night or in remote areas.

### LOVING WILDLIFE TO DEATH

One of the principles of ecotourism is that strict guidelines are put in place to ensure that the tourists do not disturb wildlife. The best ecotourism operators are exceptionally committed to this. They ensure that guides are not put under pressure by tourists to 'just get a little bit closer so I can get a good shot,' and that they obey regulations about noise and night driving, and understand and respect wildlife enough to recognise situations that might cause stress.

However, there have been concerns for some time that so-called eco tourists can disturb and impact wildlife negatively. The IIED Report, *Take only Photographs Leave Only Footprints* from 1997 concluded that: "Tourism based on wildlife has been widely believed to be inherently sustainable. Nevertheless few attempts have been made to verify this assumption."

The report goes on to quote additional research findings: 'Cheetahs are thought to suffer badly as a result of tourism, because their diurnal activity pattern and relative timidity make them particularly susceptible to visitors disrupting their hunts and driving them from kills. This contrasts with the situation with lions, which generally hunt at night and are less disturbed by tourists.'

In April this year, M K Ranjitsinh, chairman of the Wildlife Trust of India, told *The Times* in the UK: "Tourists, whether in vehicles or on top of elephants, destroy the high grassland in which the big cats hunt and drive away their prey. In many parks, lodges have been built in core reserve areas, while hotels block the corridors that tigers use to travel from one territory or reserve to another. Seeing a wild tiger has become a kind of status symbol. People do not realize the harm to the broader ecosystem. They are loving the tiger to death."

We should not forget that tiger reserves are primarily for conserving the endangered tiger, and tourism is just a secondary outcome. Our reserves are small and prone to disturbance caused by tourism. They cannot compete with large African savanna parks, which can stand large numbers of tourists."

His statement reveals a debate that goes to the heart of the role of the parks: are they primarily for the preservation of wildlife, or to sustain tourism and local communities? Ranjitsinh took the former view and went on to recommend a ban on tiger tourism, something →

Missed opportunity?  
Is the hunting success  
of cheetahs adversely  
affected by tourism?



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### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR TOUR OPERATOR OR LODGE OWNER

Can I see your responsible tourism policy?

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Can I see your wildlife watching guidelines for drivers/guides?

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How do you ensure compliance with them?

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What support and employment do you provide for local communities and conservation?

# OPINION

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF BASECAMP EXPLORER

his government did not support. Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, responding to his comments, said:

“Our policy is to develop a set of guidelines where ecotourism takes place in a sustainable way, linked to the capacity of the reserves. We are not at all interested in stopping tiger tourism.”

Either way, most experts agree that something has to change fast considering the steep decline in tiger numbers and the prospect of extinction in the wild within five years a possibility. Efforts to put in place ecotourism guidelines have been tried before and failed, and with time running out I argued for a temporary ban, with support for local communities, while they sort out the good tiger tourism from the bad. Many responsible tiger tour operators disagreed with me and preferred to put their faith in the successful implementation of the guidelines.

## FORCE FOR CONSERVATION

In May this year, researchers from Stirling University published a yearlong study of the great apes at Bai Hokou in the Central African Republic in *The American Journal of Primatology*. They concluded that gorillas are being dangerously stressed by tourists whose attentions are disrupting the animals’ feeding routines and making them aggressive. In addition, great apes are known to be vulnerable to human diseases – common colds transmitted from humans can kill an entire family group.

They went on to recommend that the minimum distance between humans and gorillas be increased from seven to eighteen metres, and that tourists wear face masks. At the same time they acknowledged that eighteen metres was probably not realistic in dense forests with short views for tourists, and acknowledged the role of ecotourism in providing direct funding for conservation and generating incomes for communities linked to sustainable use of the forests.

So where does this leave us? Ecotourism is probably never a saint, but it can, and often is, a positive force for conservation. Most vitally, it provides at least some income and jobs for local communities. Although this might not be enough to make conservation of natural resources viable for these communities, especially those with fast growing populations, it’s better than nothing and it’s hard to see the alternatives – unless or until local or international donor governments are prepared to invest in alternative livelihoods for these communities.

In other cases, poor ecotourism is a sinner, and actively contributes to the demise of the wildlife it claims to help protect. The sooner this type of tourism is stamped out, the better. Tourists have a key role to play by asking tough questions of their tour operator or lodge owner before booking their trip. If the answers don’t convince you, tell them this is why you did not book with them.

\* Justin Francis is managing director of the travel agency [responsibletravel.com](http://responsibletravel.com), travel Q&A site [iknowagreatplace.com](http://iknowagreatplace.com) and Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards

**LEFT:** Germ warfare. The human common cold can prove fatal to mountain gorillas. **ABOVE:** Keeping it local. Basecamp Explorer’s Masai Mara camps have won awards (and commendations from Barack Obama) for their sustainable approach to business and commitment to the Maasai people.

## 10 WAYS TO BOOK AN ECO TOUR IN AFRICA

All of the following tour companies and properties have been screened by [responsibletravel.com](http://responsibletravel.com)

### 1 BASECAMP MARA AND WILDERNESS CAMP, KENYA

A lodge and new conservancy developed in partnership with the Maasai in the Masai Mara. Wonderful game viewing, and opportunities to spend time with Maasai guides and community.

[www.basecampexplorer.co.uk](http://www.basecampexplorer.co.uk)

### 2 AMBOSELI PORINI CAMP, KENYA

Luxurious, but simple, bush camp of nine guest tents in the Selenkey Conservancy, a private reserve beside Amboseli National Park.

[www.porini.com](http://www.porini.com)

### 3 WORLD PRIMATE SAFARIS

Gorilla and primate Safaris in Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Gabon, Madagascar, Congo, and the Central African Republic.

[www.worldprimatesafaris.com](http://www.worldprimatesafaris.com)

### 4 KICHECHE CAMP, KENYA

Luxury bush camp in the Mara’s Olare Orok Conservancy. An intimate camp accommodating just 12 guests under canvas. [www.kicheche.com](http://www.kicheche.com)

### 5 NKWICHI LODGE, MALAWI

Nkwichi Lodge is located on the Mozambican shore of Lake Malawi and helps support the Manda Wilderness

Community Conservation Area.

[www.mandawilderness.org](http://www.mandawilderness.org)

### 6 TURTLE BAY BEACH CLUB, KENYA

This 145-room hotel is situated on 200m of beach on the edge of the Watamu National Marine Park.

[www.turtlebay.co.ke](http://www.turtlebay.co.ke)

### 7 OLARRO KENYA

Strong community ties and a carbon-neutral approach lie at the heart of this luxury lodge in Kenya’s Loita Hills.

[www.olarrokenya.com](http://www.olarrokenya.com)

### 8 MARA BUSHTOPS, KENYA

Solar power, waste recycling, local employment and community support are part of the ecotourism approach at this exclusive tented camp in the Masai Mara.

[www.orion-hotels.net](http://www.orion-hotels.net)

### 9 TRIBES TRAVEL

Tour operator based on fair trade travel principles, offering trips to 13 African countries [www.tribes.co.uk](http://www.tribes.co.uk)

### 10 SAROVA HOTELS

This popular chain of resorts and lodges in East Africa has a comprehensive community program centred on education, health and the environment.

[www.sarovahotels.com](http://www.sarovahotels.com)

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