

# Crocodile baiting and the pitfalls of wildlife tourism

By Praveen Bhargav

The dastardly assault on an assistant conservator of forests which ultimately resulted in his tragic death has once again highlighted the perils of mushrooming resorts around our wildlife reserves. Conservationists have been highlighting the urgent need for regulation since all that is being labelled as 'eco-tourism' does not portend well for wildlife. Several irresponsible operators are trying to make a fast buck by indulging in activities that range from being completely illegal (as in the case of crocodile baiting near Dandeli Tiger Reserve) to other serious deviations like fencing off crucial wildlife corridors, organising night safaris with powerful search lights and noisy parties and fireworks that disturb wildlife.

Doubts have been raised in some quarters as to how the mere act of feeding crocodiles by the owner of a resort which is located outside the reserve constitutes an offence under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA). Sub-section (36) of Section 2 defines a wild animal as any species listed in Schedule I to IV and found wild in

nature. Crocodile is listed in Schedule I. The definition of hunting contained in sub-section (16) of section 2 includes baiting any captive or wild animal and every attempt to do so. Further, disturbing the eggs or nest of reptiles is also defined as hunting.

Therefore feeding of crocodiles in the Kali River near Dandeli and conducting a 'show' for tourists amounts to baiting (hunting) of crocodiles. This is categorised as a violation of section 9 which prohibits hunting either in a sanctuary/national park or in any area outside including private land. The punishment specified under sub-section (1) of Section 51 is imprisonment for a period 3 to 7 years and with fine of not less than Rs10,000. This applies even to those who have abetted the offence. Further all offences with a minimum period of imprisonment cannot be compounded.

Legalities apart, to minimise the negative impact of such ill-planned wildlife tourism, we must first realise that India with just under 4 per cent of its landscape notified as Wildlife Reserves can ill-afford to crashland an African wildlife tourism



model with high intensity vehicle borne safaris, animal shows and the like. For, our scattered Wildlife Reserves are relatively small areas of just 500-800 sq km with hard edges that abut villages and highways. Most reserves do not have large buffer areas and migratory corridors for wildlife to range freely.

There are other underlying issues that need to be carefully considered. High end luxury tourism also creates resentment

amongst local communities since they are either stopped from entering reserves or even relocated outside while urbanites in swanky vehicles are allowed to drive in and watch wildlife. Such a tourism model as is now being followed has nothing to offer by way of a responsible revenue sharing mechanism with local communities. Merely employing a few locals as drivers and tour guides and organising a traditional dance by the camp fire is grossly inadequate to address this deeper social issue.

## Negative impact

Another lesser known aspect of wildlife tourism which is extremely worrisome is the manipulation of wildlife habitats to accommodate the hedonistic wildlife viewing demands of tourists. This has already caused severe impacts. Wide 20-30 metre linear view lines which have opened up closed forest canopies and triggered the spread of invasive weeds, innumerable forest roads that have fragmented wildlife habitats and construction of unnecessary water holes and salt licks at inappropriate locations are just some of the examples of the negative impact of wildlife tourism.

There are other dangerous proposals lurking around which include introduction of elephant safaris, river rafting and re-starting sport hunting. 'Tiger Shows' are organised in some north Indian reserves by using elephants to encircle and harass a tiger feeding on a kill for a grand photo opportunity. And then there are fishing camps and resorts that are operating within the limits of wildlife reserves which are actually not permissible under the WLPA.

It is also an established fact that the tourism lobby hires retired senior officers of the forest department for lobbying with the government to push ill-conceived proposals. Even mining companies are trying to reinvent themselves as 'mine tourism' and wildlife resorts. KIOCL after causing severe devastation in Kudremukh National Park is now pushing for permission to start a commercial luxury tourism resort within the limits of the national park with an 18 hole golf course, a helipad and facilities for adventure sports, water sports etc. Not only is it impermissible under the WLPA, the KIOCL has absolutely no legal right over the lapsed mining lease area after the Supreme Court ordered the closure of

mining in response to a petition filed by Wildlife First.

In response to these challenges the National Tiger Conservation Authority has issued advisories to states to regulate and even phase out existing tourism infrastructure of the forest department and the Supreme Court is presently examining the issue of completely prohibiting tourism from core/critical tiger habitats. Guidelines have also been issued by the ministry of environment and forests to notify eco-sensitive zones in which wildlife tourism is listed in the category of regulated activities.

For the wildlife tourism sector it may no longer be business as usual. They not only need to strictly comply with new regulations but also act responsibly and proactively shelve plans that are inimical to conservation of wildlife which is vital for their own survival. On its part, the government needs to speed up the implementation of various salutary measures in order to ensure that the wildlife tourism footprint is minimised on fragile wildlife habitats. *(The writer is a trustee of Wildlife First, and has served on the National Board for Wildlife)*