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Ecotourism tries to ensure local population will reap its benefits

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With its lush forests and sparkling blue lakes, India's Ranthambhore Wildlife Sanctuary could easily be mistaken for the Garden of Eden. Throw in the chance to see a tiger or two, and the park becomes a tourist hot spot.

But like the Biblical garden, the story of India's famed wildlife sanctuary is one of banishment.



SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

An Indian tiger pictured in 200 at the Ranthambhore National Park near Rajasthan, India.

Each time the park grows in size, and each time another five-star hotel is built around its perimeter to accommodate hoards of foreign travellers, locals are forced out of their land to make room for this expansion. That means uprooting their lives, relocating their homes, and finding new places for their cattle to graze.

For these impoverished villagers, Ranthambhore's success comes at a high cost. They're left to watch from the sidelines as the sanctuary and its surrounding hotels flourish from the constant flow of tourist dollars – money the locals never see, even though it is made and spent on their land.

This is the ugly tension rarely seen by the foreign visitors of this beautiful wildlife sanctuary. It's one that occasionally makes its way to the surface though, as frustrated and desperate locals have been known to shoot the tigers. The animals may be revered in India and endangered around the world but, to the locals, their popularity has become a curse.

These Indian villagers are not the only ones on the wrong end of modern travel. As tourism booms and fewer destinations remain off-limits to travellers, greater numbers of local people are finding their homes and cultures threatened by an influx of visitors.

Their plight is catching the attention of the ecotourism industry. Normally seen as nature-based travel, this kind of responsible tourism is becoming increasingly focused on ensuring that local people are protected and celebrated, and that they are allowed to benefit from the tourism around them.

"Ecotourism has to be not just about the immediate environment of a tiger and its landscape," explains Don Young, a veteran safari guide and expert on nature tourism in India and other developing countries. "It has to be about the people whose livelihoods are being impacted by that tiger and its ripple effects."

Ecotourism has quickly become a fundamental element of the travel industry. Since the 1990s, it has grown by 20 to 30 per cent every year, according to the International Ecotourism Society. By 2004, it was growing three times as fast as regular tourism.

The Internet has swung open the doors for less traditional forms of travel. Now with a few clicks of a mouse, socially-conscious travellers can book an educational tour with Peru's indigenous population, dive with local scuba companies in Zanzibar, or stay in communally owned lodges in Thailand.

"This is travelling, which we should do, and celebrating our planet, which we should do," Young says. "But it demands of us, not an impulse buy, but a degree of research, standards and ethics."

Travellers can have a huge impact, either positive or negative, on places they visit and their presence in developing countries can be a powerful tool for poverty reduction – if locals get the chance to benefit. Ecotourism does just that.

In Canada, Quebec leads the way in promoting ethical travel. It has developed an Ecotourism Code of Conduct that encourages tourists at home and abroad to respect local cultures by participating in regional traditions, learning about indigenous people and supporting local economies.

Honouring the world's environmental and cultural diversity isn't just something you do while on vacation. "You are an ecotourist the minute you walk out of your door," Young explains. "You have to know that the air you breathe and the birds that sing from the trees are your responsibility. Whatever you do impacts them."

Craig and Marc Kielburger are children's rights activists and co-founded Free The Children, which is active in the developing world. Online: The Kielburgers discuss global issues every Monday in the World & Comment section. Take part online at thestar.com/globalvoices.