

Nature Lovers, Picnickers and Bourgeois Environmentalism

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India's middle class visitors to the country's wildlife sanctuaries and protected areas are ignored in policy formulation as well as academic analyses of wildlife conservation. Traditionally, the conservation discourse has focused on the face-off between elite conservation institutions and the marginalised social groups, with domestic tourists being overlooked. At best, the latter are looked upon by the scientific-administrative elite as frivolous picnickers. But this neglect of an ever-increasing constituency is an opportunity lost to gain its support for conservation policies and practices. It also means that the considerable investment and planning needed to promote environmental education as part of a visit to a protected area is missing.

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Domestic visitors are largely overlooked as an analytical category in academic and policy literatures concerning the politics and management of India's protected areas (PAS).¹ We suggest that this neglect should be addressed for two reasons. The first is because we need to include this growing constituency (Bhardwaj et al 1999; Ghimire 2001) if we are to theorise adequately the multiple actors, networks and scales enrolled in the political ecology of wildlife conservation. At present, the economic and environmental effects of domestic tourism mostly range from being genuinely insignificant to important but underestimated. However, the increasing numbers of domestic tourists to India's PAS suggest that such insignificance and/or underestimation is unlikely to continue. For better or worse, directly and indirectly, domestic visitors are going to put more pressures upon, or indeed, perhaps contribute more to, the future of wildlife conservation. In doing so, they will affect the resource bases, livelihood options and policy environments that shape the developmental circumstances of India's marginalised, rural populations.

1 The 'Missing Middle'

Wildlife conservation in India has attracted an outstandingly rich and sophisticated literature. Just a small selection would include Sen 1992; Gooch 1999; Kothari et al 1996, 2000; Rangarajan 2001; Gadgil 2001; Saberwal et al 2001; Gold and Guja 2002; Saberwal and Rangarajan 2003; Guha 2003; Ghate 2003; Shaha-buddin and Rangarajan 2007a. As with cognate work on natural resource management and politics, much of this literature is characterised by an increasingly nuanced evaluation of the various actors and interests embroiled in the politics of parks. However, we suggest that the "urban middle classes", which are invoked in a number of studies, tend to remain rather anonymous and homogeneous, as does the more specific avatar of the tourist visitor to India's PAS. Although some analysts reflect critically (and very valuably) on more elite/cosmopolitan urban interests, effects and cultural preferences (e.g. Guha 2003; Sivarama-krishnan 2003), no academic analyses of which we are aware have actively researched the "everyday" tourist, drawn from the "ordinary" middle classes, as an actor enmeshed within the politics of wildlife conservation.² This is, of course, understandable in analyses of the historical patterns of hunting and the emergence of conservation zones in the pre-colonial, colonial and early post-independence periods. However, more recently the numbers of what we can loosely term "middle class"³ visitors, while variable between different PAS, show rising trends.

This neglect arises in part from a shared focus amongst otherwise very different theoretical perspectives on wildlife conservation in India, including elite conservationist, “neo-traditionalist” and more recently, political ecology frameworks (see Shahabuddin and Rangarajan 2007b for an excellent analysis of the different “cultures” in conservation). Despite differential alignments in sympathy, most accounts tend to privilege a politics of elites versus the marginalised – a binary not unjustified in a setting of tremendous colonial and post-colonial inequality, but which is now in danger of not responding to an emerging actor in the shape of the new middle classes. This leaning towards a “subaltern versus elite” view of wildlife politics is further reinforced by much of the international debate on conservation. Whether from a neo-Malthusian perspective blaming the poor (grazers, shifting cultivators, collectors of non-timber forest products, small farmers, etc), or the more recent fashion for participatory policies urging the positive involvement of poorer communities in conservation – the focus of analysis is on elite conservation institutions and policymakers on the one hand, and the variety of marginalised social groups on the other. The tendency of western and “global” mainstream environmental institutions to focus on proximate rather than more distant threats, and, in particular, their general failure to target consumption by urban/wealthier groups as a driver of change, contribute to policy and discourse regimes that continue to overlook (and indeed, exculpate) wealthier populations, national and international (Guha 2003).

This academic neglect of domestic visitors is reproduced in the training and management structures of Indian wildlife conservation. At present, the managers of state-run PAS are drawn from the forest department. However, they do not form a distinct cadre within the forest department, and training in wildlife conservation and PA management is relatively limited. Officers may find themselves being transferred from a classic forest management post (maximising timber output, for example) to running a tiger reserve. The skills and knowledge from one do not necessarily translate into the other. Concern has been raised about their conservation capacities in these circumstances, to which we would add likely shortfalls in experience and aptitude for managing visitors to PAS.⁴ Overall, as Sekhar (2003) suggests, the institutional framework to promote well-managed tourism in India’s PAS is weak (see also Maikhuri et al 2001; Hannam 2004, 2005; Shanker 2007).

If we turn now to a brief review of the environment and tourism literature, we also find a relative neglect of domestic tourism. The relationship between tourism and the environment emerged as a topic of critical analysis in the 1970s, and has rapidly evolved since into a very popular part of tourist studies across a variety of disciplines. Over time the field has expanded from documenting and analysing tourist impacts on the environment, to the idea of tourism for the environment (Holden 2000), notably with the advent of various forms of “eco-tourism”. Supporters argue that visitors to nature reserves can help provide the necessary income stream to support their survival and management; and moreover that these experiences help shape a more environmentally aware population with a broader commitment to sustainability. Recent official definitions of ecotourism have also started to include an

explicit commitment to a local “development” component, in line with the “mainstream” sustainable development paradigm. Critics point out that much that goes under the name of eco-tourism is tokenistic in its “green” credentials; that even well-managed schemes rarely take into account wider environmental impacts, such as flying to the destination; while the flow and distribution of revenue is usually very uneven, and rarely successful in compensating those who have paid direct and/or opportunity costs to retain “nature” for tourist consumption. Moreover, as we shall see, there are good reasons to question the airy claim that visiting “natural” areas encourages “greener” citizens and consumers.

A different approach to tourism and the environment comes from cultural theorists. John Urry (1992, 1996), for example, argues that much contemporary tourism is shaped by the ephemerality, disposability, temporariness, images and simulacra that characterise a world (for some) of accelerating “time-space compression” (Harvey 1990). Urry focuses on the (western) romantic tourist gaze, in which the centrality of visual consumption reflects a yearning for the extraordinary, and a desire for spiritual growth, freedom, solitude and privacy. He emphasises the selective nature of this romantic gaze, which works to delete any elements perceived to be unsightly, polluting, unnatural, controlled, or in some way negatively humanised. In doing so, he reveals the contradiction inherent in such demands for the unpolluted and “free”, when the very process of creating such aestheticised landscapes, travelling to them in ever increasing numbers, and concentrating numbers of people, infrastructure and commercialised services therein, is likely to lead to environmental and aesthetic loss. For Urry (1992) and other cultural theorists, tourism offers a particularly productive route into wider and long-standing questions about social and cultural constructions of nature (Schama 1995).

Two observations are relevant here. The first is that within Anglo-American academic circles, the focus of analysis has overwhelmingly been on western domestic tourists or international tourists – a category usually dominated by western visitors (Schevyens 2007; Gibson 2008). This is despite the fact that the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimates that international flows constitute only 20% of tourist activity. Domestic tourist numbers are far larger in many countries, and this is a trend that is increasing (Ghimire 2001; Bigano et al 2007). Yet to look at the western academic literature one would assume that the vast majority of tourists were overseas visitors and/or westerners. This neglect skews academic and policy understandings of the tourism sector – the specific demands and impacts of the spectrum of domestic visitors are likely to exhibit differences from those of various international visitors. Economic profiles (including seasonality, levels and nature of spending), cultural expectations (regarding desirable sites and sights of consumption, the differential construction and “appreciation” of “nature”), and environmental impacts (for example, resource consumption, waste behaviours, transport options), are all shaped by differential preferences and abilities (Bhardwaj et al 1999; Ghimire 2001; Schevyens 2007; Equations 2007).

The second observation is that a great deal of the environment and tourism literature assumes that simple “exposure” to “nature”

through visits to scenic beauty spots, national parks, wildlife reserves and so on, has the effect of enhancing the visitors' awareness and appreciation of the environment. However, a number of more recent studies directly and critically engage with this assumption, and invariably find that the relationship between observation/experience of "nature" on the one hand, and "environmental" knowledge, values or behaviours on the other is, at best, weak, and often non-existent (e.g. Beckmann 1989; Gillett et al 1991; Keen 1991). As Orams (1997) points out, the assumption that "experiencing nature" will result in a greater sense of empathetic care ignores all of the insights of cognitive theory and is not supported by empirical research. We too are sceptical of the claims that are widely made about the environmental benefits of visitor's "exposure to nature", finding them for the most part empirically unfounded and theoretically lax. However, like Orams, we suggest that this does not invalidate exploration of how a more active academic and policy engagement with domestic tourists might be tuned to more socially just and ecologically effective conservation efforts.

Whatever its limitations, the tourism-environment literature does endorse the idea that studying the experience of domestic tourists visiting PAS offers tremendous insights into the complex subject of environmental awareness, values and behaviours – or "environmental subjectivities" as Arun Agrawal (2005) has put it. At present, however, most research into the symbolic, affective and cognitive constructions of national parks has been limited to North America, Europe and Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Machlis 1996; McCool and Lime 1988; Jurowski et al 1995; Rollins and Robinson 2002). Huang et al's (2008) paper on visitor attitudes to national forest parks (NFPs) in China, and Cochrane (2006) on Indonesia are two useful exceptions. Issues that have been explored include the sorts of activities that individuals, classes and communities find appropriate for national parks (including public attitudes to the idea of what constitutes "quiet enjoyment"); different views on what the main mandate of parks should be (between recreation, economic development, ecological protection and so on); the extent to which visitors seek more facilities and services within parks; and the symbolic location of national parks within public culture.

Through this very brief tour of a number of rich and complex literatures, we have demonstrated that the relationship between India's middle classes and wildlife conservation areas and policies have been overlooked at several intersections. In the next part of the paper we describe a pilot project we undertook to start teasing out the main issues.

3 Project Methods and Site

This was a small pilot project, and the questionnaire element was very simple, devised only to draw out easily accessible stated opinions. It was not informed by cognitive theory, and we did not deploy other techniques like Q-methodology (Peritore and Galve-Peritore 2000; Eden et al 2005). Other elements of the research included interviews with key informants; interviews and discussions with the local guides to the park; and discussions with villagers living in or recently displaced from the park. In the case of the questionnaire a random sampling technique was used,

where tourists were requested to fill them in at the gate as they came out of the reserve. There was a choice of languages, and out of the total number of 303 respondents, 64 (21%) chose the Hindi version, 92 (30%) chose English, and 147 (49%) chose Marathi.⁵

Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) is located in Chandrapur district in Maharashtra, covering 625.40 km. Declared a tiger reserve in 1995, under Project Tiger, Tadoba is a composite area consisting of a core zone (116.55 km), which is Tadoba National Park, established in 1955, and a buffer zone (509.27 km), which is Andhari Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1986. When Tadoba National Park was created, two villages fell within its boundaries, but were relocated between 1973 and 1975 to comply with India's Wild Life (Protection) Act of 1972 (GOM 1973, 1997). The subsequent establishment of TATR, which included six further villages, once again put relocation on the agenda. In April/May 2007, the first of these (Botezari village) was relocated and another village (Kolsa) is currently in the process of being moved (see Ghate 2005; Beazley, forthcoming). In the last year, long-term plans to relocate the remaining four TATR villages have been further fuelled by the area's recent designation as a "critical wildlife habitat" under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006. In addition to the villages within TATR, 53 villages are situated just outside it, mostly on the northern and western boundary. On the southern and eastern sides, TATR is surrounded by state reserved forest and protected forest (Nagendra et al 2006).

According to observers in TATR and the official figures, tourist numbers have been on an upward trajectory. The data in Table 1 was compiled by the park authorities, and although incomplete and not quite commensurate, indicates rising trends.

Table 1: Visitor Numbers to TATR

Year	Number of Visitors	Number of Cars	Revenue
2003-04	35,944	5749	Rs 5,96,708
April 2007-Dec 2007	44,000+	6978	Rs 13,99,708
2007	61,563	N/D	N/D

According to the park records, of the 61,563 visitors in 2007, 60.1% were from Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts, 37.25% were from the rest of Maharashtra, 2.4% were from rest of India, and 153 people (0.25%) were foreign tourists. However, the field director of TATR told us that the tourist revenue constituted only a small fraction of the reserve's income (he did not specify the exact amount), the majority of which came from international wildlife conservation organisations and the state government. Moreover, the tourist income did not come direct to the reserve but went to general state coffers. The field director made it clear that there was very little financial incentive for the reserve managers to increase or even aim to sustain tourist revenues (interview, 13 December 2007).

There are various designated tourist zones within TATR, while entry times are limited and it is obligatory for all to be accompanied by an official TATR guide, most of whom are drawn from the surrounding villages. A Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) hotel is situated on the boundary of the reserve, and other private guest houses and hotels are now increasingly being set up around TATR, responding to a significant increase in the

popularity of the area among tourists in recent years. According to the local resort owners and guides this has had a direct impact on the land prices around the reserve, which have increased dramatically. However, most of these lodging facilities at the moment cater to high-income groups. A private firm, Tiger Trails, owns a luxury lodge on the edge of the reserve, which attracts a small number of wealthy Indian and overseas tourists. In addition to an “interpretation centre” at the main entrance to the reserve, certain other tourist facilities, including a canteen and forest department guest rooms, were, until recently, provided inside TATR. However, all these facilities have been closed down inside the reserve since 1 April 2008.⁷ Some of these facilities, like toilets and drinking water for tourists, have been shifted to Khatoda gate which is one of the intermediate gates after entering from Moharli gate. However, alternatives to the lodging and boarding facilities inside have not been developed as yet. In addition, many other changes have taken place from 1 April. Entry and guide fees have been doubled. Tourists are no longer allowed to disembark inside the reserve at points like Pandarpauni, which earlier had a machan. A limit on number of vehicles has also been imposed, restricting numbers to 50 at any one time. These changes had a bearing on the flows, nature and perceptions of tourists during the period of this study.

4 Tourists, Tigers and TATR

4.1 Visitor Profiles

We have suggested that existing social and political analyses of wildlife conservation tend not to critically address (or sometimes even mention) tourism, but where visitors are invoked, they are usually described as or assumed to be social and economic elites – cosmopolitan, knowledgeable and well-equipped “nature lovers”, binoculars around their necks, field guides at the ready. And indeed, some visitors to TATR conformed to this image. But a far larger proportion of visitors were lower-middle and middle-income family groups enjoying a day out, work mates on a trip, school groups, and even a large group of teacher trainers on a day outing. They travelled in crowded buses, small cars, hired Gypsies and taxis. Our income, ownership and education questions demonstrated that while almost all the visitors would fall within the top half of India’s wealth distribution, the vast majority could not be considered among the 0.4% of families designated “rich” by the NCAER. Indeed, many of our visitors fell into the “Aspirers” category within this schema, rather than the higher “Middle Class” (Shukla et al 2004; Bijapurkar 2007).

4.2 Visitor Experiences and Perceptions

Most visitors reported some enjoyment of their visit to TATR. We have roughly categorised the range of open responses to Q9 (“What did you most enjoy in your visit to Tadoba Andhari?”) as follows:

The “experiences of nature” included statements from the fairly explicit, such as: “The best thing was the bonding and enhancement we had with nature” (teenage girl); through to “serenity and many lakes” (older man). The category of “environmental observations” was restricted to comments that indicated more

ecological and/or conservation awareness, although the category was not unduly demanding. Statements included:

We like you people because you are helping in conservation of forests (teenage girl).

The reserve is a good attempt to preserve natural areas (man, late 20s/early 30s).

Ecological balance maintained (man, aged 18-25).

These rough categories point us to some tentative findings. The majority of our respondents rated most highly either the aesthetic experience of a very different visual and auditory landscape to that of their daily, urban lives; and/or the spectacle of wild animals. Only seven respondents expressed a pleasure in learning more (although in the question regarding what needed changing in TATR, 13 responses were requests for more information on the park and animals); while six related their visit to the park to wider environmental-conservation dynamics. Here we note that 17 respondents (5.7%) declared themselves to be members of a wildlife, nature or eco-club. As we shall see, these preferences guide other views on the role, functioning and management of the reserve. Twenty-two of the responses, on the other hand, made it clear that some people had emphatically enjoyed nothing at all about the day. When all of the respondents were asked what they least enjoyed about their visit, a substantial majority complained about three major deficits. The first concerned the general park facilities – only 15% visitors reported the park’s visitor facilities to be good (n 32) or very good (n 13), while 50% described them as adequate (somewhat generously), 17% as poor and 25% as very poor. This is reflected in the open statements regarding

Table 2: What Visitors Liked Most

Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
No response	23	8.1
Enjoyed absolutely nothing	22	7.4
“Environmental” observations	6	2.0
The learning experience	7	2.4
The experience of “nature”	105	35.4
Seeing animals and birds	134	45.1
Other	6	2.0

what was least enjoyable about their visit and what they would change. A huge proportion of respondents commented on the lack of enough places to stop for refreshments and the absence of toilets.

The second major complaint concerned the timing restrictions visitors faced. Visitors to the park were admitted at 6 am, and allowed to drive around until 11 am. Thereafter, all visitors had to leave the park (this involved a significant drive) until 3 pm, when again they could enter until 4.30 pm, for which they had to pay again. At the time of our research, visitors could choose to stay in the park during this period, but were restricted to the canteen area. This allowed people to eat and have tea, visit the small shrine and look at the lake (this has since been stopped – see above). The field director explained that this “quiet period” was to allow the animals to hunt and rest, although it was not clear whether this was standard practice. However, this was strongly resented by many visitors.

Finally, over a quarter of visitors reported their biggest disappointment at not seeing enough wildlife, above all, a tiger. Here we can note that only 32 reported bringing a field guide,

although 119 said they brought binoculars, and nine a telescope. There is no doubt that binoculars, especially good ones, can transform the experience of visiting the park. We accompanied a family group around the canteen area while we were all corralled during the lunch period. When provided with our binoculars and field guides they were astounded at how much there was to see – small brown dots in the distance were resolved into iridescent birds hunting around the water's edge and so forth. Indian wildlife tends not to offer itself up quite so conspicuously for consumption by the visitor as, say, African wildlife. There are less spectacular "big" species on show – tigers are usually solitary and reclusive, unlike a resting pack of lions; while the dense thickets of bamboo and forest can hide huge gaur and nilgai only feet away, unlike the sweep of the Savannah. It is clear from the responses we got that visitors demanded the charismatic species and were fundamentally disappointed when they did not see them.

You say that Tadoba has tigers but we roamed the whole day here and did not see a tiger. The children were very angry because of this (man, 35-50)

We went to see a tiger, but did not see one (woman, 18-25)

One humorous soul replied to the question on what should be changed: "I have a heartfelt request. Change the name of the reserve from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve to Tadoba-Andhari Deer Reserve!"

This disappointment was also reflected in the question asking for suggested changes and improvements. Second, only to the vociferous demands for improved facilities was the request for more wildlife to be displayed or procured. Ideas ranged from having cages/enclosures with animals in the park; more machans and water holes nearer the roads; better information and coordination amongst the guides (including walkie-talkies so they could coordinate with each other when a tiger is spotted); and cutting back the thick bamboo. Space precludes a discussion of these various options – our point here is to acknowledge preferences and demands that are widely perceived as not being met – the implications of which we discuss below.

The questionnaire also explored attitudes towards villagers living in the park. We were particularly interested in the extent to which respondents might depart from what is typically understood as an American construction of "wilderness", or the (more widely western/elite) notion of the separation of humans from "nature". Q 18 asked: "There are currently five villages inside the park boundaries. How do you think the park authorities should

Table 3: Visitor Perceptions of Villages Inside the Reserve

Leave them to carry on as they are	48
Allow them to stay in the reserve but impose restrictions on some activities	77
Relocate them outside of the reserve	178

manage this situation?"

Without further and more detailed research, including comparisons with international visitors and conservationist/administrative elites, this in itself tells us very little. We require a more ethnographic approach at this point to probe psycho-social attitudes more deeply (e.g. views on humans and nature; and ethnicity and class). However, given that 125 respondents (41% of the total)

agreed that they should be allowed to stay in the park, albeit with some restrictions, it would seem that domestic tourists are more comfortable with an ongoing human presence in the park than most conservation and management elites. Another question explored visitor's perceptions of the main threats to TATR, and found a substantial recognition of broader issues like urbanisation and industrialisation, with blame not just attributed to local villagers' activities or rural population growth.

4.3 Elite and Subaltern Views

The reserve authorities and other elite interviewees referred disparagingly to the majority of TATR's visitors as "the picnickers". From our interviews with the field director and others, it was clear that the "mass" tourists were largely disliked and/or disregarded as getting in the way of the ecological functioning of the reserve (see Hannam 2000, for a wider analysis of the training model and culture of the forest department). And, indeed, it was easy to observe a whole range of embodied styles and practices that contrasted sharply the "ideal type" conservationist/nature lover. Many of the visitors to TATR were eager, laughing, gaily dressed for a day's outing, and talking loudly as they drove around the reserve. Thus, as well as knowledges and preferences, many of these tourists do not conform to the elitist expectations of the bodily comportment and social practices expected of conservationists and "nature lovers" – an embodiment that was key in marking their low status in the eyes of the park authorities and more elite tourists. For example, one well-off visitor from Mumbai told Deepshika:

Have you seen the way people come dressed for visiting Tadoba. Such colours they wear!! Somebody should tell them to wear green or light yellow colours as such bright colours disturb the animals. Even white colour vehicles should not be allowed inside and only green vehicles should be (woman 35-50, 18 May 2008).

The view of the tourists "from below", however, suggests a markedly different interpretation of their status and financial importance. Although our findings point to a reserve administration that is poorly responsive to visitor needs and preferences, the villagers in and around TATR did not see the relationship between the tourists and conservation policies in the same way at all. Many of the villagers believed that it was precisely the demand from tourists to see animals that drove the heavy restrictions imposed upon their livelihood activities by the forest department, as well as the efforts to relocate them outside the PA:

How is it possible for us to think that the foreigners and all that are coming here are good for us? Because of the people like that coming, we are not being allowed to use the forests and collect the fuel wood and bamboo and all (discussion group 1, villager, 9 October 2007). The officials are liking the tourists because they are paying to come to ...Tadoba and see the animals so that is making the forest officials... rich men (discussion group 4, villager, 18 November 2007).

Ironically, as we have seen, at least in the case of TATR, the park authorities do not, in fact, appear to value tourist revenues very highly. Whatever the reality, the perceptual disconnection is not conducive to good relations. For other reasons too, tourism was frequently seen to have negative implications. Most villagers connected growing tourist interest in tigers to an increase in the

animal's abundance in TATR, and consequently to ever more common villager exposure to tiger threats of various kinds:

The officials are wanting to get more tigers so the tourists will be happy but that is bad for us because when the tigers are many then we are having our livestock taken (discussion group 1, villager, 9 October 2007).

Finally, tourists were widely described as failing to adhere to TATR regulations and thus partly responsible for damaging Tadoba's natural environment:

[Tourists] are throwing things like the plastic on the ground so that is not in the rules so then we are telling them that they cannot do that and sometimes they are accepting this, but sometimes they don't... [also] some of the children are shouting which is not good for the wild-life viewing (discussion group 2, villager, 17 November 2007).

However this is not to suggest that villager perspectives on tourism were universally negative. Some merely displayed no interest in, or knowledge about tourists, mostly because they had lacked much, if any previous interaction with them (see also Datta 2007):

We are not seeing the tourists and the vehicles and all much because they come here to see the tiger and the animals and not to our village (discussion group 2, villager, 17 November 2007).

Others empathised with tourist interest in viewing animals, but in light of their relative poverty, saw this avenue of enjoyment as not open to them:

My one dream is to be able to come as a tourist in a big vehicle into Tadoba to see the tiger but this is never possible ... I am still poor man and then am not having the vehicle or the money for coming as a tourist and seeing tiger for excitement (discussion group 4, villager, 18 November 2007).

Finally, a minority of villagers employed in the tourist industry, as TATR guides for example, perceived tourism in a positive way, as a source of income:

The tourism is good for me and we are getting many to come in one day so that is good for us ... I am happy [when I see a tiger] because then I am getting the tips from the tourists that I am being guide for (discussion group 2, villager, 17 November 2007).

5 Conclusions

We have argued that India's "ordinary" middle class visitors are being neglected in both policy formulation and academic analyses of wildlife conservation. There are three main reasons why this is the case:

- (1) Because of the historical origins of conservation areas and policies in the hunting zones and traditions of Mughal, princely state and British India; and their management in the post-colonial period by scientific, administrative and often social elites encultured within an exclusivist conservation ideology.
- (2) Because of financial structures, with tourist revenues flowing to general state funds, in some cases combined with the insulating effect of revenues from major international conservation organisations. Together this may dampen economic incentives to improve the visitor experience.
- (3) Because of the discursive positioning of tourists by the scientific-administrative elite as frivolous picnickers, who depart from the "proper conduct" of conservationists and "nature lovers". Here we could explore in more depth the performativity of status, as elites distinguish themselves from the aspirant

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arrivistes. So, we might ask, unlike the very damaging historical and ongoing alienation of poorer forest users, does this neglect of domestic visitors matter particularly? We propose three potential costs and/or benefits that are being overlooked:

(1) At present there appears to be a marked disconnect between the tourist revenue (which is being collected by private hotels and companies, but also, in the case of TATR, by the MTDC), and the functioning/role of the PA itself, or the wellbeing of the local population. Interviews with both TATR administrators and senior figures in the MTDC served to underline the lack of coordination or even information flows between them. As experience elsewhere demonstrates, distributing the revenues from conservation to the people who have been most affected by the limitations it has imposed on their livelihoods is extremely conceptually and practically difficult (e.g. Bookbinder et al 1998; Archabald and Naughton-Treves 2001). However, although India is at the forefront of joint forest management and community-based natural resource management schemes (which, for all of their faults and failings, have had some successes), these models appear not to have advanced far in relation to PAs (although there is some discussion of “joint protected area management”, see Sarabhai et al 1991; Rangarajan 2003; Kothari 2004). There was plenty of evidence from our talks with the local guides and the other villagers that they felt almost entirely excluded from the financial benefits of the tourist flows, while they paid the costs – cattle being killed by tigers, crop destruction by wild animals, the prohibition of bamboo collection from TATR, regular conflicts with TATR authorities over forest use, and so on. We would argue that if tourist revenues could be successfully hypothecated to serve local development interests, it could have potentially positive outcomes in terms of social justice and conservation goals.

(2) The management of each individual PA is strongly determined by the individual field director, who has considerable freedom in deciding on the regulatory regime in the reserve. There is a tremendous range of ground level policies and management styles across the vast range of India's PAs, and it should be emphasised that there is no single existing, or indeed desirable, model. However, our findings match those of Sekhar (2008) and others, in that we see a weak institutionalisation of tourist policy in PAs.⁸ We suggest that this “bare toleration” is not a sound basis for productive conservation policy or management of either the problems or potential benefits of (increasing) tourist flows.

(3) Perhaps, most importantly, the neglect of the domestic visitors represents an opportunity cost in terms of encouraging the emergence of a wider domestic constituency that might support (progressive) conservation policies and practices. As we have stated above, we reject the idea that simple “exposure to nature” will lead to more environmentally positive attitudes or behaviours. Rather, to realise even small gains, very considerable investment and planning is required to promote environmental education as a part of the experience of a visit to a PA. At present, tourist facilities (educational and for comfort) are extremely limited.

The problems we have described in relation to tourist policy have to be set within the context of India's changing political economy, and the increasing pressures to denotify protected areas so they can be opened up for industrial-commercial exploitation.

Just outside TATR, visible from the Chandrapur road, is a vast open cast mine. It is being worked by gigantic diggers that dwarf the long lines of trucks waiting to be loaded up. This mine is a part of India's booming economy, which for all of the talk of information technology (IT) and software, is also responding sharply to the growing profitability of coal, minerals and ores. Elsewhere in India, communities and activists are struggling against the latest face of primitive dispossession – the national, foreign and joint firms that are rolling into the mineral rich lands of central India and elsewhere. We suggest that *progressive* conservation actors will need all the supporters they can get – and that it is in the interests of poorer and wealthier groups, as well as non-human species and habitats, that conservation policy evolves with attention to environmental justice as well as ecological sustainability. PAs will come under more threat from commercial-industrial demands, and it is clear that many elements within the state are willing to sacrifice conservation goals and areas, as well as the needs and rights of the poor, to these economic goals. We argue that supporters of conservation have every good reason to attempt to cultivate an expanded domestic constituency – including regional and State middle classes – by encouraging both empathetic attachment, and greater knowledge of the wider value of PAs. Part of that effort (aside from schooling, the media and so on) should be the remit of the PA management and other conservation actors. Conservation policy-makers need to reappraise the picnickers – as do the political ecologists. At present, to the extent that the “urban middle classes” are invoked in political analyses of wildlife conservation, they tend to refer to cosmopolitan elites. Although this is an important constituency, it does not exhaust the category of “middle classes”. In an insightful analysis, Sivaramakrishnan (2003) states:

But is it simply a question of rural livelihoods versus urban values? When wildlife conservation-related conflicts are presented as a town-country, or elite-poor dilemma, does such dichotomisation not erase shades of difference within rural or poor people's opinions and identities?

This de-essentialisation of the rural marginalised poor is important, and we concur fully with his analysis. But we would add that much of the current literature perhaps erases the shades of difference within the urban, wealthier population – India's vast and heterogeneous “middle classes”, and that this side of the dichotomy also needs to be unpacked. This small project starts to address some of these issues, but we hope in doing so it has persuasively legitimised them as important issues in the activist, policy and academic field of India's environmental politics.

NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, protected areas refer to national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger reserves and biosphere reserves. In India, this term technically also includes reserved and protected forests.
- 2 Needless to say, we would welcome correction on this point. A number of non-governmental organisations and activist organisations, on the other hand, are engaging with the cultural, economic and environmental effects of tourism. See for example Equations (2007) and www.equitabletourism.org. This organisation is active at the activist-academic interface, for example, presenting at the Fifth International Conference of Critical Geography (Mumbai, 3-7 December 2007).
- 3 There are a tremendous range of theoretical differences and methodological challenges raised when attempting to define, situate and study the “middle classes”, and differentiate them from “elites”. While the term provides a convenient shorthand notation, its casual use can easily lead to sloppy thinking, inappropriate referents, and generalisation across a wide spectrum of groups with varying experiences, interests and opinions. This paper does not seek to resolve these, but see

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- Deshpande (2003), Shukla et al (2004), Fernandes (2006) and Bijapurkar (2007), amongst others.
- 4 Sharma and Kabra (2007) also highlight the lack of training or experience of conservation-driven relocation and rehabilitation.
 - 5 We were aware that there are inevitable slippages of meaning between different languages. While we did our best to minimise this, and reflect on possible effects, perfect translation was not possible. Our thanks to Megha Budruk for sharing a paper of hers in progress on this topic.
 - 6 Data collected on 31 May 2008 from TATR office at Chandrapur.
 - 7 As per directives issued by PCCF (Wildlife), Maharashtra State, Nagpur (via order no DESK 23(2)/Survey C.N. 6836/07/08, dated 12/2/2008).
 - 8 We should point out that this may have been particularly pronounced in the case of TATR's present field director precisely because he was very genuinely concerned with ecology and biodiversity. While we may disagree with his exclusivist logic, we respected his professional commitment to conservation in his domain.
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