

Sustainable Eco-Tourism - Lessons from Pench National Park

May last year saw us all packed and ready to go on our first tiger watching trip to India. Pench was the location and we were all set for 9 safaris into the park over 5 days. The guide assigned to us by our hotel would remain with us over the week. All the members in my group had visited our local wildlife sanctuaries periodically since their childhood and loved to spend every free moment in a jungle somewhere in the island. We thought we knew everything about going on a safari.

Pench Tiger Reserve was created in 1992, becoming the 19th Reserve in the Project Tiger network. The core zone of the Reserve, Pench National Park was created in 1983. This was carved out of the Pench Sanctuary created in 1977 with an area of 449.39sq.km.

The area of the Park is 292.85sq.km., which is divided almost equally into two districts. The high habitat diversity of Pench Tiger Reserve favors rich and abundant population of wild animals. Pench Tiger Reserve serves as the prime habitat of Indian Tiger and Leopard, the key species in these areas along with other species of the cat family. The mammalian population comprises of mainly species like *Sambhar*, *Chital*, *Barking Deer*, *Nilgai*, *Gaur*, *Wildboar*, *Chausingha*, *Sloth bear*, *Wilddog*, *Langur*, *Rhesus monkey*, *Mouse deer*, *Black naped hare*, *Jackal*, *Fox*, *Hyena*, *Porcupine*, *Flying squirrel*, etc as well as a wide variety of aquatic life, amphibians, reptiles and avi-fauna.

Pench also has a very good Tiger density. As per May 2007 wildlife census, there are about 13-15 Tigers, 12 Panthers, and 7620 other individuals, including 310 Gaurs, 966 Sambhars, 2032 Chitals, etc in Pench Tiger Reserve areas.

The first thing we realized early morning was that we were to travel in an open Gypsy (Indian equivalent of a Jeep). This was virtually silent as it was a model which used a quieter diesel than the ones we were used to seeing in our local parks. We came to the park entrance at 5.30 am the next morning well before the assigned opening time of 6am. There we discovered that all jeeps at the entrance were similar. All drivers and guides assigned by the park as well as the hotels in the area were in a distinctive uniform; smartly dressed and polite though some did not speak in English.

At the entrance there were about 20-30 Gypsies carrying visitors to the park.



All were parked neatly on one side of the road in a queue without blocking the entrance. All the guides alighted from the vehicles at this point and walked up. Our guide explained that the routes are assigned in the morning by way of a draw and only 50 vehicles are allowed into the park in the morning and 50 in the evening in the order of arrival. We waited about 10-15 minutes at the gate and were given a pass with a route number and a Wildlife official to accompany us into the park. At the gate we were flagged in by the

park warden himself, something new to us once again. We proceeded along the given route and saw our very first tiger after about one hour sojourn into the Park lying in the water to manage the scorching heat. Our collective hearts skipped a beat at this magnificence in front of us and once we recovered we duly took pictures to file away with our memories of one of Creation's marvels. Thus progressed our week long amazing safari into the Pench Tiger Reserve.

During this time we realized that our assigned Wildlife official that changed with each safari was a stickler to the route that was given, adamantly refused to reverse, detour or change the route in any way. Spoilt by the practices we were used to all our life we offered rewards of cash, gifts and even were very friendly to our driver as well as the Wildlife official. All our requests fell on deaf ears although they remained polite and courteous at all times. We also discovered that a Tigress had had cubs recently and that they had completely closed down any access routes into that area so as to leave the cubs and the new mother undisturbed till she was ready to bring her cubs out in public.

The best chance of seeing a tiger is in or near a water hole but Pench officials give routes past 2/3 of the water holes leaving another 1/3 inaccessible to the public, and each year the park closes down for the rainy season so as to ensure minimum stress to the wildlife in the Park. We had many encounters and photo opportunities with the magnificent tiger as well as the rich wildlife offered by the park and came away wiser on conserving and protecting endangered wildlife whilst running a successful and *sustainable* tourist operation.



What we realized was at Pench it started at the top. The Park Warden was the person who flagged each jeep in every day after checking the papers; a task which would take a maximum of 1-1.30 hours in the morning and a similar time in the afternoon. Uniforms and training were given to its members by the jeep drivers association attached to the park, which functions as a welfare society; which has enhanced the knowledge of all drivers and guides. There were strict rules against any miscreants such as confiscating the jeep for a time period up to 3 months depending on the misdeed. No mobile phones or cigarettes were allowed in the park and each wildlife official assigned to the vehicle strictly enforced that rule. The routes were designed keeping the welfare and comfort of the wildlife in mind at all times.

There was no downside to this law and order. One does not need to create chaos in a wildlife park and drive like maniacs all over the park at break neck speed whilst calling each other to find out any favorable sightings to enjoy the experience. One does not need to get out of a vehicle putting their lives at risk to take a photograph.



These are some of the common visuals we have observed in the recent past in our local wildlife sanctuaries and steadily getting worse. As true naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts we left Pench with the knowledge that our footprint in the park had been minimal and humbled by the knowledge that there are many lessons to be learnt on being a tree hugger or wildlife enthusiast from our neighbor, India.

Photo credit: Cecile Schreder

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