

Tigers of Bandhavgarh

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The large number of tour operators within the Bandhavgarh National Park make it impossible for visitors to enjoy and savour the quietness of nature.



Can you leave me alone for a while? I'd like to sleep.

Most tour operators around Bandhavgarh National Park have a manic, single-point agenda: to allow their visitors a glimpse of the tiger in the quickest possible time. When jeeps pass each other in the park the conversation goes something like this —

"*Dekha kya?*" (Have you seen?)

"*Kahan hai?*"(Where is it?)

"*Kab dekha?*" (When did you see?) and so on.

The Park actually has a delightful diversity of things to see and experience. Situated in the heart of Central India, in Madhya Pradesh, Bandhavgarh National Park is a 448 sq. km. protected area. A part of the Vindhyas rises dramatically in the middle of the park forming a natural fort, from which many kingdoms have ruled over the last 2000 years. In fact, the fort, its caves, temples, tanks, and buildings make a fascinating trip in itself. Before being declared a national park, the area was the hunting reserve of the Maharaja of Rewa.

In the 108 sq. km. of the park set aside for tourism activities, you can see mixed sal-bamboo forests, luxuriant green grasslands, chital, sambar, barking deer, chinkara, wild pig, a variety of birds, and different kinds of insects. On a typical jeep ride through the park (one cannot travel on foot within the park, except when climbing up to the fort from a specified point), visitors can

easily see more than 50 species of birds. You see the barks of the Tendu trees have been stripped off by hungry porcupines, and maybe even get a glimpse of wolves loping by at dusk. One highlight of my visit was seeing four species of vulture at the Raj Bahera grassland. But wait, all this is not quite what makes Bandhavgarh worth coming to, according to the tourism lobby at least. For them the idea of a tour through the reserve means first to get visitors to pay Rs. 500 for a jeep, rush them to the spot where the tiger has been tracked by the Forest Department's elephants, get them to scramble onto the elephants to go into the grass or forest and get a glimpse of the magnificent cat, and then bring them back once the "Tiger Show" is over. Since there is no regulation on the number of jeeps that can be in the park at the same time, you can count more than 25 jeeps at a time lined up, with the tour operators arguing with the Ranger about who gets the first elephant ride. This is if the tiger is resting.

If the tiger is on the move, all hell breaks loose. Jeeps rush about madly between points where the animal has been supposedly sighted. Clouds of dust envelop you, as engines rev up. Once the tiger is actually spotted, you hear people shout, while they try and get their jeeps to the best vantage point, sometimes ramming into each other and swearing. Each of them wants to be the first to see the tiger. The tourists are mostly quiet through all this, stretching and straining their necks. The experience is not sacred or precious any more. Of course once the "hunt" is over, tour operators don't want to take people around the park anymore....what's worth seeing anyway and why throw away their profits?

The Forest Department does see how unsustainable this is in the long run, and is considering stopping the "Tiger Show", or severely regulating it so only a small number of vehicles is allowed in at a time. This way, visitors can also get to experience the thrill of seeing this magnificent animal without the accompanying cacophony and disregard. Studies show that animals are quite stressed in heavy tourism areas. The practice of "Tiger Shows" needs to be seriously questioned, and an alternative pushed for.

Do you feel strongly about this? If you do care about wildlife and the ethics of wildlife tourism, send in your views and suggestions to:

The Field Director, Bandhavgarh National Park, P.O. Umaria, Umaria District, Madhya Pradesh.

There are people there willing to listen and act, if only there are enough voices to support a saner way of viewing and enjoying wildlife.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group