Economies are the real driving force behind conservation today. Two contrasting issues that were in news last month help to highlight this point. The first that the Kawal Tiger Reserve in Telangana, a park nobody has ever heard of and few care about, had lost its only remaining tiger to poaching. The other article was the exact opposite. Many tiger parks, all of which I knew well, have visited often and have thriving rural economies, were now full of tigers and the authorities could not cope with any more Panthera tigris.

So why this extraordinary difference between tiger reserves? They do, after all, have the same rules and regulations, government funds and charity dollars that 45 years of tiger conservation have thrown at them. I believe it’s largely a question of economies. You could call it ‘conservation dependent’ economies – but I call it ‘tigeronomics’.

NATURE-FOCUSED TOURISM
The principles of economies work for conservation – helping to value product and services and now, thankfully, are increasingly being applied to nature’s hidden products and resources too. The reality is that free water, clean air and warm sunshine – our natural capital – sadly doesn’t pay the day to day bills in today’s world. A local villager living warm sunshine – our natural capital – sadly doesn’t pay the day to day bills in today’s world. A local villager living alongside a river that borders a rich biodiversity forest, cannot exchange the water that flows past his house, the clean air he breathes and the warm sunshine on his back to ensure daily food. He still has to cut down the trees for fuel make new fields from the clearance and graze his cows in the forest peripheries.

As a society, therefore, we should look far more cleverly at the opportunity to use this very same economic system to save our own planet from the wholesale destruction it is facing. ‘Turn nature’ – all too often seen as free and by this reckoning, valueless to humankind – into something that is invaluable.

Yes, this does sound like a dangerous paradox – but this economy is already working wonders in parts of India and Nepal, (and across the globe) using the one creature society does seem to value beyond any real logical reasoning - the tiger. We’re now creating valuable rural economies out of the huge industry of watching – rather than hunting – these beautiful wild cats.

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Visitors pay handsomely to see the mystical cat in its mythical land. Many return home to friends and family to advocate passionately for their long term protection, becoming lifelong ambassadors for nature. Furthermore, safari goers make authorities and protectors accountable for what lives in these wild landscapes day in day out. Their interests fund the building of an economy that generates rural jobs, new livelihoods and sustenance that make a landscape and its creatures worth preserving, economically and intrinsically. No other business does this quite so well, or quite so effectively. My organisation, TOFTigers, in 2010, calculated that a single tiger the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve generated an astonishing US $101 million to the local economy in visitor fees and revenues over the decade of her rule. Now no government can say it’s not worth saving tigers – they simply cannot afford not to invest in habitat protection and long-term conservation.

Visitors, so often disparaged in the media, should be feted as tiger’s saviours. They put their hard earned money, their precious time and often their voices into ensuring parks and wild places remain for future generations. Their visits breed the wildlife advocates, scientists, foresters and conservationists of the future. Their interest turns local communities from conservation victims into wildlife beneficiaries and nature’s stakeholders, more than any other economy can. Harness and educate visitors rather than castigate and exclude them.

The evidence is overwhelming. The well-known tiger reserves like Corbett, Nagarhole, Ranthambhore, Kanha.

CAN INDIA AFFORD NOT TO SAVE ITS TIGERS?
JULIAN MATTHEWS EXPLAINS WHY THE ECONOMIES BEHIND TIGERS PLAY A CRITICAL, YET A LARGELY UNRECOGNISED ROLE IN INDIA’S CONSERVATION EFFORTS

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Pench and Bandhavgarh – those most well visited, having thriving tiger populations. The government’s own Wildlife Institute of India researchers now say many are ‘overfull’. Many parks have been brought back from the brink of collapse, only a decade or more ago, a time in which the growth of this new and dynamic rural economy has boomed. Domestic visitors too have flocked to enjoy these sanctuaries’ extraordinary offerings. However, other parks remain in the conservation doldrums, like Kawal, as are many others that are struggling to save their remaining tigers. The reality is that it’s not until excited visitors and politicians start to see tigers (and an abundance of other creatures) that anyone becomes excited about a park’s future, and sees the opportunities and monies that are possible to make from it. Good old capitalism at work. Park visitors are effectively the ‘dry wood’ that furnaces the conservation flames. The authorities’ blinkered approach to this ‘economy’ manifested itself in 2012 when an activist accused tourism of killing tigers in the Delhi Central Court and the parks were closed for four months. The National Tiger Conservation Authority’s cohorts, far from defending the right of citizens to visit and enjoy their own natural heritage, (as their own project mission prescribed), decided instead that this ‘evil scourge’ should be bottled up in 20 per cent of a tiger reserve’s natural landscape. As a result the real value of ecotourism to local communities and parks has not been allowed to fully manifest. Visitors are a nuisance to many forest authorities, but really the problem is not the visitor per se. The problem is the complete lack of planning and investment for rural economies that exist in the shadow of all our Protected Areas. Nature-based tourism is a business like any other and needs the same forward planning, infrastructure investment, expertise and regulation as any other enterprise, to ensure its visitors experiences and long-term sustainability. Particularly if we wish to make certain that local communities become the primary beneficiaries of high-value, low-impact tourism.

Planning the Future

Today the Madhya Pradesh park management not only have state and central funds every year of INR387 crore for protection and community support, but a further INR194 crore, or an extra 33 per cent funds from visitor park fees to help too. Furthermore, a rural tourism economy worth INR566 crore, with 2,525 new full-time jobs (and probably treble that in ancillary jobs and services) dependent on their Protected Area and its wild inhabitants remaining alive. That’s a lot of revenue, and Government tax too. But the back of it, that was not there just 20 years ago.

Do the Perils of Tourism Make it Worth the Risks?

So, if this is such a brilliant idea for saving India’s parks, and the domestic demand is there – why hasn’t it happened across India’s Protected Area network and why is the Kawal Tiger Reserve still where the Pench ‘Tiger Reserve’ was 20 years ago? The authorities’ blinkered approach to this ‘economy’ manifested itself in 2012 when an activist accused tourism of killing tigers in the Delhi Central Court and the parks were closed for four months. The National Tiger Conservation Authority’s cohorts, far from defending the right of citizens to visit and enjoy their own natural heritage, (as their own project mission prescribed), decided instead that this ‘evil scourge’ should be bottled up in 20 per cent of a tiger reserve’s natural landscape. As a result the real value of ecotourism to local communities and parks has not been allowed to fully manifest. Visitors are a nuisance to many forest authorities, but really the problem is not the visitor per se. The problem is the complete lack of planning and investment for rural economies that exist in the shadow of all our Protected Areas. Nature-based tourism is a business like any other and needs the same forward planning, infrastructure investment, expertise and regulation as any other enterprise, to ensure its visitors experiences and long-term sustainability. Particularly if we wish to make certain that local communities become the primary beneficiaries of high-value, low-impact tourism.

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