

Andy Rouse @AP

Thoughts from a wildlife photographer's world



TIGERS, as Andy Rouse so eruditely points out, benefit from responsible tourism and not from irresponsible behaviour as was so tragically illustrated recently when a tigress was killed by the overzealous driver of a Jeep in Bandhavgarh, India.

Wild tigers in India and Nepal attract hundreds of thousands of visitors (and their funds) to national parks and reserves, and these important habitats contain many other species that benefit, too.

To help, travel with a Tour Operator for Tigers (TOFT) member (www.toftigers.org) and support projects that benefit wild tigers. The organisation 21st Century Tiger carefully chooses projects that address the greatest threats to wild tigers, with the help of respected conservation scientists and experts. They give 100% of all donations received to projects funding education, monitoring, anti-poaching and ending illegal trade.

'We are very grateful to Andy, who has raised thousands of pounds for wild tiger conservation projects – he's earned his stripes!' says Sophie Darlington of 21st Century Tiger.

For more information on the projects supported, how to raise funds and the latest tiger conservation news, visit www.21stCenturyTiger.org.



ANDY ROUSE is one of the world's most prominent wildlife photographers and a passionate

conservationist. A professional photographer for more than ten years, he has a dozen books to his name and regularly appears on TV. He has also won multiple wildlife photography awards. In this weekly column, Andy recounts some of his experiences from the wildlife world. You can see his work at www.andyrouse.co.uk and read his blog at www.andyrouse.co.uk/blog.asp. You can even become a fan and keep up to date with 'Andy Rouse Wildlife Photography' on Facebook.

Tourism gives the tiger a value in its local communities



TIGER TOURISM



IT WAS either the biggest PR gaff in history or an intuitive piece of marketing, when the Indian government – specifically

the Environment Ministry and the National Tiger Conservation Authority – announced recently that it was going to phase out tiger tourism in India in the name of tiger conservation. It caused a worldwide outcry and triggered a passionate online debate between respected travel professionals. So what was behind it?

We all know the tiger is in dire straits, with the main threats being illegal poaching (of tigers and prey) and habitat encroachment. Poaching is a complex issue and as well as tackling the problem at source we need to tackle it internationally. The Chinese government has banned tiger products,

Tiger tourism does need controls to stop these animals being harried and stressed

and organisations like Freeland and the EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency) work to expose and stop trafficking routes through Asia. India must do its part, too, by ensuring that the tiger population is worth more alive than dead to the local population. This approach has worked very successfully in Rwanda, where the locals get a revenue share from tourist permit fees to see gorillas. It is therefore in the locals' interests to stop poaching, and gorilla numbers in Rwanda have increased since this was adopted.

I have seen the benefits with my own eyes and it is an eco-tourism model that India needs to follow. In other words, the forest department and the local communities need to benefit directly from tourist revenue rather than the situation now where all monies go to the government. Put simply, tiger tourism gives the tiger a value to the local community that exceeds its value as skin and bones. Responsible tiger tourism must involve the local community as well in tiger tourism, not just by benefiting from revenue share but with local projects that attract tourists.

Of course, tiger tourism in India does need some controls, as it can be a circus. I have seen tigers harried and stressed by over-zealous drivers. It's a minority of drivers who do this, but they are sometimes encouraged by their fare-paying tourists who think it is their right to see a tiger. It is not a right, it is a privilege, and it is my fear that seeing a tiger is becoming a trophy.

All these issues, though, can be dealt with by sensible park management at the local level, such as I have seen myself in Ranthambore National Park in India. The problem the park authorities have, though, is that their resources are stretched to the limit and they rely heavily on dedicated park wardens who literally spend their lives trying to protect the last remaining wild tigers. If we were to ban tiger tourism then the parks would not have the manpower to patrol 24 hours a day, seven days per week, and tigers will be gone in just a few years. Clearly the park authorities need this revenue share from tourism and they need it quickly to ensure that tigers can survive.

As I write this, the Indian government has done a U-turn and stated it is not going to stop tiger tourism, although it may introduce controls. So was this a PR gaff or just a clever way to get tiger tourism into the world's press? Either way, it has caused the plight of the tiger to be discussed in the media, and the more press we get the better. **AP**