

ODISHA FOREST SECTOR

ECOTOURISM POLICY

1. BACKGROUND

The state of Odisha with its rich natural and cultural heritage is one of the most attractive tourist destinations in the country. The tourists, who know Odisha for its temples, crafts and dance, deserve greater exposure to its hinterland of hills, forest and wildlife. Well-endowed with vast forest areas, rivers, coast line, beaches, lakes and lagoon, the state provides unique opportunities for ecotourism in the state.

Odisha has about 31% of its land covered with forests, supporting around 86 species of Mammals, 473 species of birds, 110 species of Reptiles, more than 3000 species of Plants including 132 species of orchids, 60 species of Mangrove Plants and 350 species of Medicinal Plants. The rich biodiversity of the state is conserved mainly through a network of protected areas comprising 2 National Parks and 18 Sanctuaries. This network is complemented by wilderness areas, wetlands and other bio diverse sites along the coasts including mangroves and turtle rookeries. Elephants, tigers, leopards, blackbucks, crocodiles, Olive ridley turtles, Irrawaddy dolphins and migratory birds provide special attraction to the tourists.

Ecotourism, distinguished from other forms of tourism in terms of its minimal impact on the visited areas, is defined as:

"Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people." (TIES, 1991)

Ecotourism offers an opportunity to showcase the state's unique natural and associated cultural heritage to visitors while enhancing the livelihood options for the local people.

2. VISION

Ecotourism will promote *responsible* travel to natural areas and provide opportunities for visitors to experience firsthand, understand and 'quietly' enjoy state's natural and cultural heritage. This will lead to conservation of nature, sustaining of ecological processes, increased respect for local culture and traditions and tangible improvement in the local economy.

3. GOAL

To provide recreation and promote understanding about nature and wildlife conservation with income generation and employment opportunity to local people while according priority to bio-diversity conservation, ecosystem functioning and socio-economic development.

4. OBJECTIVES

The above will be achieved through the following objectives:

- Objective 1 Promote amongst all stakeholders, awareness, experiential learning and understanding of the values and principles of *sustainable* and *responsible* community based *tourism*, particularly in relation to the state's protected areas and other areas of wilderness.
- Objective 2 Develop, brand and market an Odisha style of visitor experience, particularly with respect to promoting a 'quiet' enjoyment of its natural heritage.
- Objective 3 Invest in appropriate and eco- friendly infrastructure for ecotourism for tourists.

Objective 4 Establish partnerships between all stakeholders to develop and promote destinations and activities in accordance with defined principles, standards and legal requirements of community based ecotourism.

Objective 5 Build capacity of all stakeholders in natural and cultural heritage interpretation, hospitality, business and communication skills to successfully and sustainably manage tourist traffic.

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ECOTOURISM

5.1 Development of ecotourism action plan for important destinations:

Ecotourism policy should be the guiding principle for promotion of ecotourism and immediate steps should be taken for development of ecotourism action plan for important destinations within the state. Three important thrust areas for ecotourism remain (i) Simlipal, (ii) Satkosia and (iii) Bhitarkanika. These are to be planned and developed for the tourists from within and outside state and the procedure for online advance booking for accommodation and entry into the sanctuary should be streamlined and made simple. The tourist accommodations in the peripheral locations outside the Protected Areas and Forests can be developed by Tourism Department/ OTDC Ltd. /OFDC Ltd on its own or in PPP mode.

5.2 Infrastructure Development: Development of infrastructure, improvement of facilities, and tourist circuits within the Protected Areas should be the function of the Wildlife Wing of Forest Department in accordance with the rules and regulation for protected areas. The destination development for other potential forest areas outside the sanctuary should be carried out by the principal CCF (Odisha). While implementing the policy and developing and operating ecotourism at ecotourism destinations, the prevailing Acts and Rules shall be adhered to.

5.3 Eco-tourists facilitation: The facilitation of the ecotourists, tour packages, route management / development and movement needs to be carried out by some outside agency in coordination with the Protected Area manager or DFO concerned. For the present, Odisha Forest Development Corporation Ltd. can take up this responsibility. It should provide one-stop solution such as obtaining permission to visit the designated places from competent authority, provide accommodation, facilitate transport arrangements with the help of bus/ taxi operators etc. OFDC Ltd. may raise internal resources or avail assistance from the Tourism Department for developing infrastructure and building their staff capacity.

5.4 Ecotourism Principles: Ecotourism will be promoted and developed in accordance with the above vision, goal and objectives, based on the following core set of principles:

- Principle 1 Nature Area Focus - provide visitors with the opportunity to directly experience nature.
- Principle 2 Interpretation - provide opportunities to visitors to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment.
- Principle 3 Environmentally Sustainable Practice – ensure environmentally sustainable practices within carrying capacity of the area.
- Principle 4 Promotion of Conservation and Benefits to Local Communities - ensure promotion of conservation and tangible returns to the local communities.
- Principle 5 Respect Culture - be sensitive to understand oral local culture
- Principle 6 Strategic Marketing for Customer Satisfaction - to market and promote effectively so that realistic customer expectations are achieved.

6. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The objectives will be achieved through the implementation of a strategy based on the following key initiatives.

Strategy 1 The unique values (Unique Selling Points) of Odisha will be identified and agreed through a participatory, consensus-building process involving all stake holders such as key Government Departments, non-government organisations, private sector entrepreneurs and the community concerned. This will provide the basis for establishing an Odisha brand and responsible marketing of sustainable tourism, in which community-based ecotourism in and around protected areas will play a significant role. Outputs from this participatory process will include:

- Strategy for marketing a responsible and sustainable tourism in Odisha, of which community-based ecotourism will comprise the core.
- Establishment of partnership between the stakeholders namely Tourism, Industry, Forest Department and local communities, to steer and coordinate the development of community-based ecotourism in and around protected areas and other wilderness areas.
- The income generated from eco-tourism activity shall be ploughed back for the welfare of the community managing eco-tourism and for provision of eco-development and eco-tourism facilities.

Strategy 2 Capacity in the designing , establishment and management of ecotourism initiatives including destinations, will be strengthened and developed by:

- Establishment of a centre of excellence for responsible tourism to build capacity within the local communities, government and private sector to take responsibility for achieving sustainable tourism, and to create better places for people to live in and for people to visit.
- In-house training in responsible and sustainable tourism within public sectors (tourism, culture, forests, wildlife, etc.).
- Responsible and sustainable tourism will be reinforced through eco-clubs and Green Volunteers.
- Customised training courses for those engaged in community-based ecotourism enterprises; in natural and cultural heritage interpretation, hospitality, business management, communication skills etc.

- Preparation and promotion of best practices guidelines, codes, standards, audits, accreditation schemes and models concerned with different aspects of ecotourism.

Strategy 3 A web site will be established to promote, and coordinate the marketing of quality ecotourism initiatives in Odisha. The web site will promote ecotourism by:

- Explaining the concept of ecotourism and its principles, with examples of best practices.
- Highlighting Odisha's special values, thereby encouraging potential visitors to explore the website (and its links) further for potential destinations.
- Providing information on/ links to ecotourism destinations, eco-lodges, home-stays and other facilities in Odisha, including on-line booking.
- Providing a transparent and objective audit of ecotourism enterprises that indicates the extent to which eco-lodges, home-stays and other ventures meet a predefined set of best practice criteria. This will enable the responsible traveller to make an informed choice of their destination/accommodation facility, while also encouraging enterprises to adopt and develop best practice.

Strategy 4 The ecotourism market will be promoted by investing in the development of a network of prime ecotourism destinations, having good, reliable means of access and ecolodges (and home-stays) that demonstrate best practice in the use of renewable resources (materials, energy etc), community management and experiential learning and quiet enjoyment for the visitors. Destination outputs will:

- Promote use of renewable and biodegradable resources.
- Management by registered (Divisional level) ecotourism societies comprising Joint forest Management Committees.
- Promotion of non-motorised forms of transports as far as possible.
- Activities will be of an experiential nature, enabling the visitor to learn and see from 'doing'. Trained and knowledgeable local instructors and guides will be available to lead/facilitate/interpret such activities.
- Promotion of eco-friendly waste disposal methodologies.

Strategy 5 Research and monitoring will inform the outcomes and effectiveness of policy implementation, and the future development of ecotourism will be determined by environmental impact assessment, socioeconomic evaluation and its contribution to environmental conservation as well as the availability of benefits to the local community. In particular;

- Ecotourism will be monitored with respect to (a) visitor impacts on the environment and local communities, and (b) the conservation message conveyed to visitors. Eco tourism plan shall be an integral part of the Wild life Management Plan of Protected Areas.
- Research will focus on generating new knowledge, insights and modalities for sustainable ecotourism.

- Potential impacts of projects including construction and development of visitor facilities will be assessed.
- Monitoring of eco tourism as per the carrying capacity in Protected Areas (PAs) and delineation of tourism zone in PAs would be done by the CWLW.

Strategy 6 The Forest and Environment Department, Government of Odisha shall be the Nodal Department to promote ecotourism in the state.

- The department shall constitute the Odisha Ecotourism Development Board (OEDB) to act as the nodal agency.
- It shall be the Board's mandate to ensure the attainment of the objectives and goals set forth in this policy.
- The Board shall develop necessary systems and standards for the purpose.
- The Board shall be equipped with the required technical and financial resources.
- In case of any dispute, management of Protected Areas, Wildlife and Bio diversity shall take precedence over tourism.

Strategy 7 In Protected Areas where registered Eco-tourism and Eco-development Societies are functioning, the eco tourism will be managed / promoted by the same society. In the areas, where no such society has been formed, the eco tourism will be managed / promoted by involving the Local Advisory Committee (LAC) under the chairmanship of the collector of the district concerned. The LAC will have the following mandate and composition.

Mandate of LAC:

- To oversee the working of the State Ecotourism Strategy with respect to the concerned area and make recommendations to the State Government whenever necessary.
- To advise local and state government on issues relating to development of ecological tourism in non-forest areas, ecological-tourism zones etc.
- To ensure that at least 50% revenue from eco tourism flows to the local community.

In case of Protected Areas

- To ensure site specific restrictions on buildings and infrastructure in private areas in close proximity to core / critical wildlife habitat / National Park / Sanctuary or buffer zone, keeping in mind the corridor value.
- Regularly monitor all tourist facilities falling within 5 km of a Protected Area vis-a-vis environmental clearance, area of coverage, ownership, type of construction etc. For suggesting mitigation / retrofitting measures, if needed.
- Regularly monitor the activities of tour operators to ensure that they do not cause disturbance to the flora and fauna while taking visitors into the Protected Areas.

Composition of LAC:

- District collector (Chairman)
- Forest Range Officer in charge of the site(Member Secretary)

- Territorial DFO concerned
- Honourary Wildlife Warden (if present)
- Official of State Tourism Department
- Block Development Officer
- Members of local Panchayats (2)
- Wildlife Expert (1)
- Local conservationists (2)
- Representatives from Civil Society Institution (1)

Strategy 8 The Government will promote establishment of tourism facilities especially within 5 km of the boundary of the ecotourism area in a Public-Private-Community (PPC) partnership mode. The local community will be engaged for providing the services in such projects. The communities will be entitled to at least 30% of the net profit of such project run through PPC partnership.

Strategy 9 Govt. may levy a “Local conservation cess” as a percentage of turnover (to be determined by the Government), on all privately-run tourist facilities within 5 km of the boundary of the ecotourism area. The funds thus collected will be earmarked to fund the ecotourism area management, conservation and livelihood development. The rationale for a local conservation cess will be explained to the public at large, including through clear signage at local tourist facilities.

Strategy10 Development of private Guest Houses and tourist lodges enroute and outside the Protected Area / Forests limits should be planned and developed by the OFDC Ltd /OTDC Ltd / Private Operators for facilitation of ecotourism in compliance with the guidelines issued by Ministry of Environment and Forestry in this regard.

Strategy 11 The forest staff posted in the Protected Areas should be sensitized and trained to interact and facilitate the eco-tourists and explained about the various aspects of conservation and development of wilderness, forests & wildlife and natural resource. Good literature, Souvenir shops & signage etc. should also be developed to make the eco-tourism more attractive.

ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES

Ecotourism activities shall be site-specific. Following are some of the recommended ecotourism activities and facilities:

FACILITIES

- a. Nature Camps including day visitor centres and nature trails
- b. Eco-friendly accommodation including home stays
- c. Nature shops
- d. Nature Education and Interpretation Centres with guide service
- e. Amphitheatre
- f. Facilities for adventure sports (rock climbing, rappelling and parasailing along with water sports such as river rafting, boating and canoeing)
- g. Herbal Ecotourism with sale outlets
- h. Urban Ecotourism through Eco-Parks

ACTIVITIES

- 1. Trekking, cycling and Nature Walks.
- 2. Wildlife Viewing and River Cruise
- 3. Angling
- 4. Bird Watching
- 5. Elephant ride / Bullock cart ride
- 6. Any other depending on the site in question

ODISHA ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT BOARD (OEDB)

Odisha Ecotourism Development Board is proposed to be the apex body in the state engaged in promotion of ecotourism and development of requisite systems and standards for the same.

CONSTITUTION: The Board shall have the following composition

1. Chief Secretary - Chairperson
2. Secretary (Forest and Environment)
3. Secretary (Tourism)
4. Secretary (Finance)
5. Secretary (Revenue)
6. PCCF Odisha
7. CWLW Odisha
8. Nominated members
 - Travel and Tourism (1)
 - Wildlife Conservationist (1)
 - NGO (1)
9. CEO / Member Secretary

FUNCTIONS

- i. Plan, develop and facilitate ecotourism projects compatible with this policy.
- ii. Identifying and establishing an Odisha brand with unique values of the State, through consensus building process involving all stakeholders.
- iii. Developing and enforcing standards and norms for promotion and implementation of ecotourism destinations, based on specific carrying capacity studies conducted.
- iv. Identify and prioritize ecotourism destinations throughout the State based on parameters to be defined and approved by the Board.
- v. Establish partnerships between various government departments, local communities and other stakeholders.
- vi. Promote community based ecotourism enterprises in protected areas and other potential destinations through constitution of "Ecotourism Societies" at the forest division/PA level.
- vii. Capacity building of various stakeholders.
- viii. Develop marketing strategies and promote networking among ecotourism enterprises and operators.
- ix. Facilitate education, research, monitoring and evaluation of the ecotourism activities.