

## ECOTOURISM FOR WESTERN RAJASTHAN

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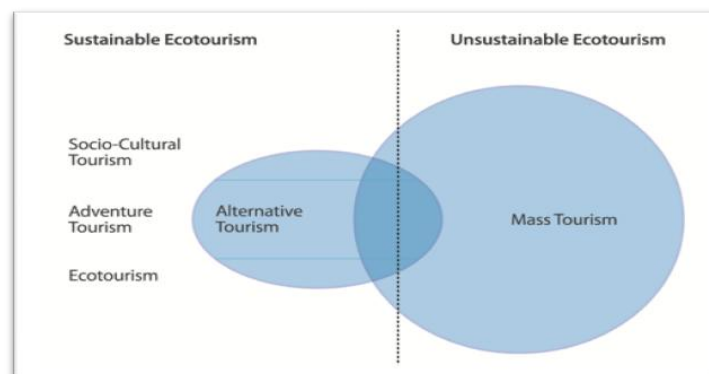
### ABSTRACT

*Ecotourism is tourism which takes tourists to experience natural environment in all its beauty. It serves the dual purpose of tourism as well as nature conservation. People travel to natural areas without damaging them or disturbing their habitats. It is tourism which is conducted responsibly to conserve the environment and sustain the well-being of the local people. Ecotourism enhances understanding of the environment and promotes responsible behaviour. It minimizes the negative impact of conventional tourism and fosters a greater appreciation of natural habitats. An integral part of ecotourism is the promotion of recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and creation of economic opportunities for local communities. (Randall, 1987) The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) which is a nonprofit organization founded in 1990 and which is dedicated to promoting ecotourism defines it as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education. Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests. (TIES,2021)*

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Western Rajasthan, International Ecotourism Society, Water Conservation.

### Introduction

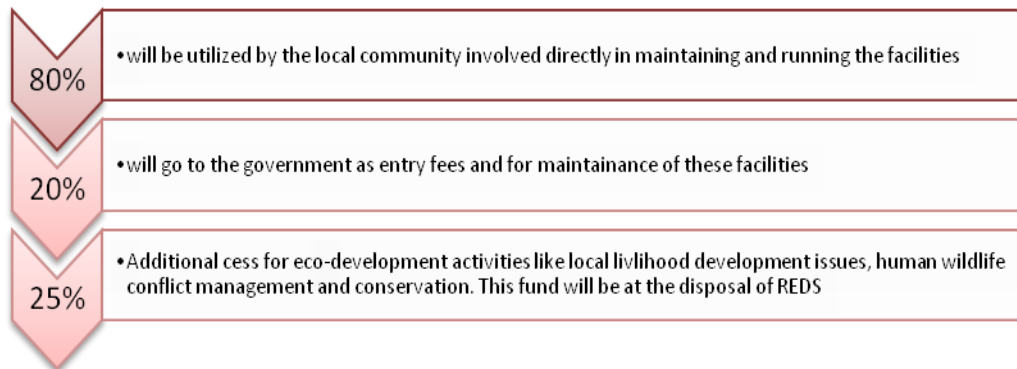
Ecotourism is a part of the larger concept of sustainable tourism. Herein lies a guarantee that all natural resources will be used in a sustainable way. At the same time economic opportunities for the benefit of the local is ensured (Kiper, 2013). According to Weaver, there are two categories of tourism – Mass tourism and Alternate tourism. Mass Tourism is the traditional form of travelling where the logics of free market dominate, short term gains are seen and income generation is paramount. It means that environment is marketed and maximum profit is the sole aim without any thought to the damage being done. (Weaver, 2001). Alternate Tourism on the other hand is consistent with natural, social and community values and it involves visits to relatively off beat, undisturbed areas with a view to admire, experience and enjoy pristine natural scenery and indigenous communities. It is tourism integrated into values and social concerns that traditional tourism somehow put at risk (Smith, Eadington, 1992). Weaver also considers ecotourism as a specific part of the broad concept of nature tourism (Weaver, 2001).



Conceptual model of tourism (Eriksson, 2003)

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Tourism as an industry is vital to our country, and for Rajasthan it has a tremendous potential. (Rathore, Ola, 2021) Money spent by the tourists can create a number of employment opportunities for the local people. We can cater to not only conventional tourism but also tourism that is essentially low impact and experiential in nature. Coming forward to meet the challenge, the state has formulated Rajasthan Ecotourism Policy 2020 that shall remain in effect for 10 years from the date of notification or for a period decided by the government or till a new policy is not made, whichever is earlier. Rajasthan State Ecotourism Society (REDS) registered under the Rajasthan Society registration Act, 1963 – is meant to be the vehicle for implementing this policy. The Forest department is to be the Nodal Agency working with close consultation with the Tourism department and other stakeholder departments for implementing this policy. (RAJASTHAN ECOTOURISM POLICY 2020) The policy also involves sharing of revenues as given:



The desert of Western Rajasthan is part of the Thar desert and it spreads in the districts of Shriganganagar, Bikaner, Churu, Nagaur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Pali, Sirohi, Jalaur, Sikar and Jhunjhunu covering an area of 1,75,000 sq.km. It is an area of barren hills, rocky plains and sandy plains. (Bhalla, 1989, pp.9-11) The newly formed district of Hanumangarh also falls in this area. (Rajras, 2021) On a recent personal visit from Delhi to Jaisalmer by air, what we saw below was miles and miles of sand with tiny green patches in between. Only few economic activities are possible here because of lack of water. A large segment of the population is dependent on agriculture and allied activities for its livelihood. But agriculture in this state is rain-fed. (DES, Government of Rajasthan, 2020-21) It is in this regard that we can talk of Ecotourism in Rajasthan. Places like Rajasthan attract tourists because of its varied climate and rich heritage. Moreover, desert is not available to be experienced everywhere and in all the countries. Above all, visiting India is cheaper than going to Egypt or to most of the countries of Europe. (A local shopkeeper selling handicrafts in Jaisalmer had the same opinion during my visit there in March 2021) So, we can take the advantage of these cheap prices and cater to foreign and domestic tourists at the same time.

Deserts have a beauty of their own. Sunsets, sunrise, local handicrafts, indigenous animals like camels, donkeys, lizards, desert fox, chameleons, their birds like peacocks, etc, their food specialities and their language, dance and traditions - all make up their culture. It is this culture that brings colour to the otherwise pale desert. Their culture fills the void that Nature has left. The special natural characteristics of the area as well as the local culture, together attract travellers from all over the world. However threats to these areas are rising due to increasing accessibility, overuse and arbitrary use of nature. Therefore new tools are needed to protect such fragile environments. (Santarém, Saarinen, Brito, 2020.)

Western Rajasthan can boast of several forts, palaces, temples and havelis. Architecture and location of these forts is what attracts the tourists. Each fort has a history behind it and also some charisma. Amongst these, the Golden fort of Jaisalmer is a living fort, meaning people still live inside the fort. Numerous temples in Yellow sandstone (in Jaisalmer and around) or marble or other types of sandstones with their beautiful sculptures are eyecatchers for the tourist, not only for their beauty but also for the tradition they display. The Jain temple at Lodrava and Osian, Karni Mata temple of Bikaner, Temples at Kiradu, Sandeshwar temple and more are worth visiting. Other attractions are Sam sand dunes, Khuri village Safari, Patwon li Haveli, Mandore Gardens, Marwar- the old capital of Jodhpur, etc. (Chandel, Kanga, 2020) And then the colourful handicrafts, bedspreads and clothes with embroidery or traditional prints like Bandhani, Lahariya, etc, jutis and bags of camel skin and many such things are huntworthy for the domestic as well as the foreign tourist.

Besides the already popular spots mentioned above, more areas can be developed for low impact tourism that we are talking about. A gradual shift to more varied ecotourism products like- Wildlife Ecotourism, Weekend Ecotourism or Conference Ecotourism can be encouraged (Chandel, Kanga , 2020). Value-added Desert Ecotourism which can include adventure, desert camps and safaris, dressing up in costumes of the locals, desert sports, star gazing in the night in the desert, desert landscape painting competitions etc. and developing less frequented locations like the havelis of Bundi, etc. can be the next step on this trajectory. But careful planning that involves the local community is the first step for this and a tourist friendly infrastructure is the basic requirement.

The Times of India had reported in Sep'2017 that Ecotourism was to be started in Jaisalmer. The state government of Rajasthan had planned that foreign tourists coming to the area will be shown the wildlife of the sandy desert like the gondawan, the desert fox, the wildcat and various species of the deer besides the camel rides. A few villages had been identified for tourism purpose and some huts had been chosen in the National Park where tourists could stay and experience the local art and culture. This was to be a joint venture of the state tourism department as well as the forest department (TOI, 17<sup>th</sup> Sep'2017). We do not know how far this project was successful but it was definitely a good effort.

Rajasthan needs to gear up its facilities and prepare a good basic infrastructure that can bear the added load of visitors. This will include well lighted roads with international standard road signs, hotels that can cater to tourists with varying paying capacity and good food joints that do the same. It must be borne in mind that tourists come to places which are high on security criteria, hence the provision of regular monitoring of the tourist spots by the police is necessary. We also lack in toilet facilities by the roadside. Such provisions need to be developed and regularly maintained every few kilometers. And then, cleanliness must be maintained in public places because lack of sewerage leaves a very bad impact on travellers. (News on ndtv.com by Dutta, 2017) At the same time domestic tourism must be promoted, and government shops selling local products at standard prices should be set up so that the tourists don't feel cheated.

Last but not the least, it is the behaviour of the local people that can make the stay of tourists pleasant and comfortable. So people must try to go out of their way and help or guide visitors, whenever and if need arises. Harrassing or misguiding the tourists should be made apunishable offence. Afterall, the centuries old tradition of welcoming the 'Athithi' (uninvited guests) is our tradition. In the same way the travellers have the responsibility to behave sensitively (Issam Atala, 2019). Western part of Rajasthan has a lot of untapped potential in terms of tourism. Ecotourism can come handy in this regard as it will keep our environment intact, our culture secure and our communities thriving.

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