

EVENT ROUNDUP

Aligning natural heritage with tourism

In a series of workshops organised by the Ecotourism Society of India, the effort has been to create awareness and preserve the fast vanishing natural heritage that the country has. The 11th ESOI workshop, held at Aurangabad, Maharashtra brought together the fraternity from the town and surrounding areas to discuss issues, challenges and the way forward. By Sayoni Bhaduri



Ecotourism Society of India (ESOI) workshops have been designed to bring together different stakeholders who are working intrinsically in areas of eco-tourism. And the 11th edition of the workshop held in Aurangabad, Maharashtra brought to life issues and challenges as well as showcased case studies of success. In the introductory session, Rakesh Mathur, director and principal advisor Zinc InVision Hospitality as well as honorary VP and founding member of ESOI expressed that in the last 10 years there has been a quantum jump in domestic tourism and with that huge concerns have also arisen. He considers these workshops to be small steps

towards a big vision of giving something back to the environments and eco-system. Similar workshops have already been conducted in Delhi, Kerala, Bhopal, Mahabalipuram, Jammu, Yercaud, Leh and Guwahati. The 11th workshop in Aurangabad was also a success with more than 80 participants from in and around the region trooping into knowing what they could do to better tourism situation.

Tourism has great role to play in an economy, both at macro and micro level. As stakeholders need to consider that the most important stakeholders - the local communities - are important. Seema Bhatt, independent consultant for climate, con-

servation and ecotourism said, "Of every US\$ 100 spent only US\$ five stays within the local economy." This is apart from other challenges that tourism has brought in, like vulnerability of children, health challenges, drug trafficking. Also the environment itself, code of conduct and ethics, degradation, pollution, carrying capacity is subjects that need to be first understood and then discussed to bring in reforms.

While there are serious challenges, it is also tourism which has the solutions as well. Homestays for instance said Bhatt allow locals to have additional source of income. In places like Manas in Assam, extremists and infiltrators are now the ones

protecting the park and its animals. Similarly in Periyar, the forest department is working with people who were earlier cinnamon bark poachers to be guides for people coming in. These positive stories were achieved by paying attention to things like training and capacity building, education and awareness, feedback and cross site visits.

Hotels are a key player in the tourism industry and they are a high consumption industry as well. While huge amounts of energy and resources are consumed per unit, huge amounts of waste and pollutants are also generated by hotels. "In the effort to create a better experience for guests, hotels are causing huge costs to the environment and even the consumer," said Mathur. There is a need to check and audit the usage and inculcate the habit of recycle and reuse as much as possible. The biggest concern however remains the huge divide between the organised and un-organised segments in the hotel industry.

Communities being a vital element of eco-tourism, also need to be conserved and developed as an intrinsic element. Swathi Seshadri of Equations discussed the need to look at communities



according to the specific site. Tourism as an industry needs to generate fund for conservation which further needs to be segregated. "Tourism needs to be a source of alternative livelihood but not the only source of livelihood," she added. When providing livelihood it needs to provide dignity to these communities. The employment opportunities provided today are seasonal, menial labour based and provide no scope to grow. Seshadri also brought to light the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as employed by corporate companies which she believes is tokenistic at the moment. "The intentions behind such moves need to be explored deeper," she said.

Niranjan Khatri, GM - environment, ITC WelcomGroup further elaborated on how it is important to have accounting methods and practices inculcated even within the practices of sustainability. He elucidated on steps taken by ITC Hotels, like the use of only FSC certified wood, safeguarding water and being water efficient, sustainable site planning. Giving an example of uncontrolled use of resources Khatri said, "In 1947, people had six lakh litres of water per person per annum. In 2020, the same ratio will go down to one lakh litres of water per person per annum. This is a case of water stress."

Understanding the forest as a crucial element of eco-tourism HS Pabla, IFS (retd) former PCCF, government of Madhya Pradesh expressed that drawing a balance between tourism and purist

conservation is important. "Tourism offers a motive and means of promoting conservation," he said. It can never be an either or situation, and he continued to elaborate on the good and bad of tourism for wildlife. Tourism as an industry needs to support the local communities and community infrastructure. Limited number of lodging is also important, along with providing employment for the locals.

Success stories

Of the success stories within India, Vinay Luthra, additional principal chief conservator of forests, government of Karnataka elucidated on the Jungle Lodges and Resorts. He brought to light that jungles are not just about the big mammals but also the flora and fauna. "There have to be trained nature guides and naturalists who are able to interpret the nature in a way that interests and enthralls the tourists coming," he added. Activities make eco-tourism more interesting, there have to be experiences that a tourist can take back. For all of this local communities have to be closely involved as no one knows the forest better than them. Infrastructure should be designed and built in such a way that it is not a misfit in the surroundings, best would be use locally available resources to develop this. Lastly, casual tourists need to be discouraged; sensitive areas like forests need quality tourists and not just quantities, especially since carrying capacity is a challenge.

The caves of Ajanta, have also undergone restoration and conservation from fund-



ing received from JBRC and AEDP. The conservation included no unplanned growth around the caves, no cars zone and no pollution zone. "We are also looking at completing a four kilometres long bicycle track made with a total investment of ₹ four crore," said, Chandrashekhar Jaiswal, senior regional manager, MTDC, Aurangabad.

Non-tourism related private sector companies also have a vision towards conservation. Hyder Ali from Kinetic Engineering gave a demonstration as to how battery operated vehicles provide an opportunity to reduce pollution to sensitive environmental zones. Some of these vehicles can be customised to ferry tourists from point-to-point.

The workshop also brought to fore projects which have already been established on the lines of eco-tourism and sustainable tourism. Pandurang Taware, president and MD, Agri Tourism initiated Agri Tourism in Maharashtra as a pilot project in 2004. He now helps other farm owners to set up similar units across Maharashtra. Anirudh Chaoji, director, Pugmark Ecotours works with young

students to appreciate nature. He also works with local youths who have great knowledge about the forests, train them to become naturalists and weave stories of the innumerable lives in the forests for the students. Ramashish Joshi, who works with Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra and the conservation of Olive Ridley Turtles on the Maharashtra beaches elaborated on how through a collaborative approach, they were able to progress with the conservation as well as promote tourism in the region. While there are still challenges, Joshi is sure things can only get better. "The motto was to involve, enable and empower," he added. INTACH representative from Pune, Supriya explained how Pune is now trying to preserve elements of urban heritage, like the 200 year old Shaniwarwada and the lives of local copper-smiths with the Copper Crafts Revival programme.

The two-day workshop concluded on a hopeful note. It was observed that a lot had been achieved, while there is a tremendous opportunity to achieve more. All it requires is an aim and ability to look at situations differently. ■



Glimpses of ESOI workshop, Aurangabad

