

RAJASTHAN ECOTOURISM POLICY 2020

1. Background

Rajasthan is one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in South East Asia owing to its cultural, geographical and ecological diversity. Culture, historical, monuments, palaces, forts, heritage sites along with the landscapes and wildlife form the most lasting memory when it comes to touristic impression of Rajasthan. A large state of 34.22 million ha, Rajasthan is approximately 10% of India. Around 9% of this land is under the administrative control of the forest department. With 3 National Parks, 3 Tiger Reserves, 27 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 2 Ramsar Sites, 14 Conservation Reserves and many niche faunal habitats in addition to vast expanse of desert ecosystem and the old Aravallis hill range, the State offers the most amazing and unique canvas for those interested in mingling with the elements of nature. rich biodiversity, dense forests, host of water bodies and scenic places. These provide ample space for variety of nature based activities like trekking, trailing, camping, birding, etc. Some of the finest monuments and wilderness areas which form the core of the touristic product, lies within the forests.

Tourism as an industry is extremely vital to the country in general and Rajasthan in particular. The money spent by the tourist in the state changes hands multiple times, thereby creating numerous direct and indirect livelihood opportunities. In current scenario there is sufficient space within the tourism sector to cater for not just conventional tourism but also tourism that is essentially low impact and experiential in nature. Hence there is a need of having a policy document that enables, certifies and facilitates the efforts of the tourism sector in a manner which is eco-friendly in natural areas.

2. Ecotourism

2.1. Ecotourism: Is a form of sustainable tourism within a natural or cultural heritage area where community participation, protection and management of natural resources, culture, indigenous knowledge and practices, environmental education and ethics, as well as economic benefits are fostered and pursued for the enrichment of host community and satisfaction of visitors.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change describes Ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people'. Such tourism is low-impact, educational, and conserves the environment while directly benefiting the economic development of local communities¹.

¹Guidelines for ecotourism in and around protected areas, Ministry of Environment and Forest, 2nd June 2011

Therefore, the focus of ecotourism is on its educational as well as economic benefits and at the same time is compatible with fragile natural ecosystems.

This policy is based on the basic understanding that local communities are the most vital pillar of ecotourism in the state. Ecotourism is an important vehicle for reconciling conservation and economic considerations for local stakeholders and includes most of the low impact tourism in the natural heritage areas which are facilitated by the local communities as partners in the process.

Ecotourism is unique among commercial opportunities in rural areas because, unlike so many other activities, ecotourism works best when it builds on local knowledge and authenticity. A carefully designed ecotourism initiative shall have the potential to contribute both to biodiversity conservation and local community development.

2.2 Three pillars of ecotourism: The three important pillars on which ecotourism is based are conservation, communities and interpretation.

2.2.1 Conservation: Ecotourism will provide effective economic incentives for conserving and enhancing bio-cultural diversity and help protect the natural and cultural heritage of our beautiful state.

2.2.2 Community participation: With increased local community participation ecotourism can prove to be an effective vehicle for empowering local communities to fight against poverty and to achieve sustainable development.

2.2.3 Interpretation: With an emphasis on enriching personal experiences and environmental awareness through interpretation, ecotourism will promote greater understanding and appreciation for nature, local society and culture. Interpretation includes facts, but also reveals the reason for the importance of those facts so that visitors are able to understand why the resources should matter to the individual visitors. Interpreter is a person who provides interpretation in natural and cultural areas, interpretation centre, parks etc.

Since Rajasthan's ecotourism assets comprise natural, geographic as well as cultural attractions, wildlife tourism and rural tourism at pre-identified nature-based sites also fall under ecotourism.

2.3 Ecotourism Scope: The scope of ecotourism in the state of Rajasthan will include one or more of the following:

Tourism aimed at observing / appreciating nature, traditional cultural heritage

- Organized for environmentally conscious small groups
- Reduces negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment

- Promotes protection of natural areas, restoration of heritage / culture
- Supports local livelihoods by active community participation
- Increases awareness for conservation of natural and cultural heritage through participatory, interactive, educational and interpretative, experiences.

2.4. Limitations of Ecotourism Policy & initiatives: While developing a policy for successful implementation of ecotourism with community empowerment & sustainable livelihoods as the focus and conservation, education and interpretation as spinoffs, we must realize and understand that;

- Ecotourism cannot work everywhere and solve all problems of conservation and development; it requires special natural attractions or draws, and even then, it should be but part of a bundle of complementary activities for conservation and development.
- Community involvement in ecotourism is a predictor of success with regard to development as well as conservation; more than a matter of economic benefits alone, successful involvement entails decision making authority.
- Ecotourism is empowering for marginalized and disenfranchised people, and can help in their efforts to gain recognition, rights and resources.
- Ongoing adaptive management (with feedback and corrective responses) is crucial to the long-term viability of ecotourism efforts.
- Although tourists appreciate many different aspects of ecotourism (aesthetics, entertainment, communion with nature, etc.), what sustains successful ecotourism is its educational/interpretive value.

2.5. Ecotourism Principles: Ecotourism aims at uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel thereby meaning that those who implement, participate and market ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles:

- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- Minimize physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people other stakeholders and conservation efforts.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host communities' environmental, and social values.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People.

2.6. Ecotourism activities: Ecotourism activities are defined as those nature-based activities that are exclusively performed to sensitize people about the beauty, richness and fragility of the state's natural and cultural heritage, and shall not just focus on creating destinations in natural area or using natural environment for outdoor activities.

Ecotourism activities are to be coordinated by a qualified nature and cultural interpreter trained to entertain and educate the visitors.

- Trekking, nature walk, bird and wildlife watching, hiking, flora and fauna observation, photography, etc;
- Boating / River Cruising to view wildlife and experience wilderness
- Overnight Camping /Star Gazing in designated sites / forts / other monuments.
- Any travel focussed on experiencing Rajasthan's fairs and festivals which promote eco-tourism and sustainability of local traditions;
- Lodging in campsites, eco-lodges, homestays and guesthouses that are located in an area of natural and/or cultural beauty, and involves local specificities;
- Activities in specified areas of the forests such as jungle safari in vehicles or elephant / camel safari, trekking/nature walk, overnight camping in designated sites, bird watching and study of flora & fauna, etc.

2.7. Ecotourism Assets: Natural and cultural features that attract visitors, such as landscapes, endemic or rare flora and fauna, local agricultural products, local culture including festivals, folklore, history, monuments and heritage sites.

2.8. Ecotourism Facilities: Accommodation, lodging facilities and related amenities which blend with the natural and cultural environment of the area in terms of design, building materials, and energy, water and waste efficiency measures.

2.9. Ecotourism Services: Basic services for ecotourism activities including but not limited to transportation, food, guiding, and interpretation. These services should promote a better understanding of the natural and cultural aspects of an areawith minimum damage to local culture and natural resources.

2.10. Ecotourism Certification: Certification plays an important role in contributing to the quality of eco-tourism experiences and assuring visitors that the ecotourism operators are committed to the best practices and high-quality nature-based experiences aimed at conservation. Therefore, accreditation of goods and services will be an essential guiding principle.

Certification will also provide price premium and access to new ecotourism markets and will necessitate state of art management planning for target ecotourism destination in consultation with the local community (traditional knowledge) and other stakeholders.

2.11. Eco-tourism as a Forestry Activity: Eco-tourism being the experiencing of natural areas while fostering environmental and cultural understanding, and encouraging preservation of wildlife and forests, is a responsible form of tourism. Therefore, the State shall endeavour to identify eco-tourism with forestry activities so that necessary and meaningful development can take place within the sites for benefit of eco-tourists and local people.

3.1 Vision and Objectives:

The vision of this policy is to encourage and develop access to unique, high quality, low impact ecotourism destinations in Rajasthan that are centred around the conservation of natural and cultural heritage including flora and fauna, generation of quality educational experiences, and contribution towards local employment generation, poverty alleviation, and promotion of conservation in the state.

The main objectives of the Rajasthan Ecotourism Policy are as follows:

- Ensure prior informed participation of all stakeholders by bringing them together on a common platform of understanding ecotourism;
- Ensure equal, effective and active participation of all stakeholders;
- Promote ecotourism in a sustainable manner based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) based on the four pillars including sustainable management, socioeconomic impacts, cultural impacts, and environmental impacts;
- Offer memorable and high-quality learning experience to visitors, and encouraging responsible behaviour during their visits and their collaboration for nature conservation efforts
- Promote the sustainable use of bio-diversity by generating income, jobs and business opportunities in ecotourism and related business network with an emphasis on socially and economically disadvantaged people;
- Share the benefits of ecotourism development equitably with the local communities and indigenous people;
- Provide opportunities to local communities to determine the appropriate presentation of their cultural values by obtaining their informed consent and full participation in planning and management of ecotourism business;
- Conserve the existing biodiversity, ecosystems, religious monuments, culture and traditions of the state of Rajasthan;
- Reduce negative impacts of tourism in over exposed areas and divert traffic to other lesser explored destinations

3.2 To achieve the vision and objectives; ecotourism programs / projects will align with the following guidelines:

- Ecotourism plans for target destinations shall be conservation centric and in consonance with Tourism Policy of the State, Management Plan in case of Protected Areas and Working Plans in case of other forest areas.
- All ecotourism activities shall be in conformity with the existing environmental laws of the country, including Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980, the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, the Environment (Protection) rules 1986 and rules for Eco sensitive zones, NTCA guidelines, Rajasthan Tourism Policy 2020, Rajasthan Forest Policy, directives of Hon'ble Supreme Court of India and National Green Tribunal.
- Ecotourism activities will aim at building awareness among all stakeholders of the value and benefit of conserving the natural heritage area.
- All ecotourism activities shall have the local communities and conservation at its foci and shall strive for providing stimulus to local economy by generating livelihoods.

3.3 Rajasthan Ecotourism Policy, 2020: Policy Period

The Rajasthan Ecotourism Policy 2020 shall remain in operation for a period of 10 years from the date of its notification or for a period as may be determined by the Government or until substituted by another policy, whichever is earlier.

4. Strategies:

The strategy outlined will be in conformity with the guiding principles and is a means to achieve the objectives of the Ecotourism Policy

4.1 Organizational Strategy and Institutional Arrangements: The Forest Department shall be the Nodal Department for implementing the policy through a special purpose vehicle, Rajasthan State Ecotourism Society (REDS) registered under the Rajasthan Society Registration Act, 1963. This society shall assist in delivering the vision and the objectives of Ecotourism Policy forests, protected areas and other natural areas not under the control of Rajasthan Forest Department. The Society shall be headed by the Hon'ble Forest Minister of Rajasthan and assisted by the officers of Forest Department, Tourism Department and other stakeholder departments in implementation of the Eco-tourism policies and activities. The Society shall be equipped with required technical and financial resources to implement this policy. The Society in consultation with the Tourism Department, Govt of Rajasthan shall liaise with local, national and international stakeholders for planning, product development, advertising and marketing of the ecotourism product (read destination experience).

The Rajasthan State Eco-Tourism Society (REDS) shall foster ecotourism development that combines both nature-based and cultural attractions in a complementary way within the context of environmental and sociocultural sustainability. The Rajasthan State Eco-Tourism Development Society (REDS) will promote ecotourism development and management that emphasizes the 'sense of place' that is unique to each destination. REDS will further ensure the involvement of viable community-based models of ecotourism by making sure that the 'community' is well-defined and incrementally empowered (both in terms of skills and financial resources) to eventually become self-sustaining. Although, the Society would be practically autonomous, the activities of ecotourism would be implemented through the field units of Forest Department. Tourism Department Central / State Govt. undertakings, Village Forest Protection & Management Committee (VFPMCs), Eco-development Committees (EDCs), Private entrepreneurs, NGOs etc.

Presently, the Rajasthan Forest Development Corporation (RFDC) is being constituted. Once the RFDC becomes fully operational, the Rajasthan Ecotourism Development Society (REDS) shall become a part of the Rajasthan Forestry Development Corporation (RFDC) and all assets and liabilities of the society shall vest in the corporation. This will help in effective implementation of the Ecotourism Policy on a sustainable basis.

At the District level, a District Ecotourism Committee (DLEC) shall be constituted under the Chairmanship of the District Collector with Deputy Conservator of Forests (Territorial) as the member Secretary and shall have members from other stakeholder departments like revenue, tourism, tribal development, rural development etc. to promote, manage and regulate ecotourism sites. The DLEC can invite opinion from the experts in the field of tourism and hospitality sectors operating in their district. The DLEC shall work towards promoting community-based entrepreneurship to strengthen conservation of natural and cultural biodiversity and sustainable management of ecotourism sites. The DLEC shall formulate a district level perspective eco-tourism plan for the district and submit it to the REDS, which will then appraise and approve the plans and provide funds to the concerned Deputy Conservator of Forests in whose area the ecotourism initiative is being undertaken for its development and management. The Government of Rajasthan will provide grants to REDS for development of ecotourism sites, infrastructure, ecotourism amenities, information and interpretation centres, and facilities for organizing natural and cultural events.

4.2. Strategy for managing ecotourism sites: For sake of convenience, the ecotourism destinations and policy mechanisms for governing the ecotourism activities will be as under:

- Ecotourism destinations falling in areas within the control of the State Government
 - i. Destinations in the jurisdiction of Project Tiger (PT) areas.
 - ii. Destinations located in other Protected Areas (PA).

- iii. Destinations located in the Eco-sensitive zones of the Protected Areas.
 - iv. Destinations which are unique in nature and located inside Reserve Forest & Unclassed forest areas.
 - v. Destinations located on non-forest land but under the administrative control of forest department.
 - vi. Destinations which are in the administrative control of other government departments
- Ecotourism activities in PT areas shall be governed as per the NTCA guidelines issued in 2011 and revised accordingly. For destinations falling under Protected Areas, Chief Wildlife Warden will draft rules for regulating the recreation and wildlife experience.
 - For all other areas which are not a part of PA or PT areas, the forest department shall issue a set of rules under Section 26 (d) and Section 76 of the Rajasthan Forest Act to facilitate entry and regulating Ecotourism activities like experiencing nature, wildlife – wilderness experience, camping, trekking, angling etc. along with detailed dos and don'ts.
 - Ecotourism sites falling under the eco-sensitive zones of the protected areas will be governed as per the Eco-Tourism Master Plan which shall be prepared by the Department of Tourism in consultation with the Forest Department.
 - Other Ecotourism destinations which fall in the jurisdiction of local bodies like Gram Panchayats and Nagar Palikas - Tribal tourism, Village tourism, Agri-horti tourism, Herbal Tourism, Home stays, artisan & folk tourism etc will be regulated and governed by the Rajasthan Tourism Policy 2020.
 - Ecotourism destinations which are basically a part of government land but the tourists use the facilities of the private players to enjoy the ecotourism experience – Concept of **Nature Conservancies**; limiting disturbance to privately owned property while nature / wildlife viewing. The forest department in consultation with the Tourism department, will issue a set of guidelines for regulating this activity with an aim of minimizing the disturbance to wildlife.

4.2. Ecotourism Partners:

In order to realize the ecotourism potential of the destinations, it is imperative that the agencies partnering in the initiative have a clarity about their roles, responsibilities and obligations. The five main partners in ecotourism initiative are, **The Forest Department**, who is the owner of the facility, **The Eco tourist**, the person visiting the area for experience, **The Operator**; the private entrepreneur who is managing the ecotourism destination: **The Facilitator**; we may call him Guide or Interpreter, who is providing the interpretation, guiding and other intellectual inputs regarding the destination to make the experience memorable;

The local community who is the main beneficiary of the initiative and the Government (Forest and Tourism departments) who are leveraging the interdependencies of the partners to make the conservation initiatives successful. These shall be clearly defined along with the details of facilities and opportunities that the destinations offer in the Ecotourism Management Plan.

4.3. Ecotourism Management Plan

An Eco-Tourism Management Plan for each district (including the wildlife and non-wildlife areas) will be prepared at the district level by the District Ecotourism Committee (DLEC). It will be a document expressing the stakeholder's recommendations for how eco-tourism is to be carried out in the areas falling under the jurisdiction. An Eco-Tourism Management Plan will be prepared to determine the kind of eco-tourism activity that is desirable for a particular area. The detailed tourism plan approved as part the Management Plan of Protected areas, shall form a part of the Eco-Tourism Management Plan.

- The Eco-Tourism Management Plan will be perspective plan of five years and will give details of interventions such as requirement of infrastructure, development of activities such as eco-lodges, eco-sports, nature trails, trekking, safaris, home-stays etc. The activities at such ecotourism sites shall be identified based on the potential of it carrying capacity.
- The Eco-Tourism Management Plan shall have a year wise physical – financial phasing of the works proposed in the perspective plan.
- The Eco-tourism management plan shall be prepared in a participatory approach and it will clearly define the roles of communities living in and around the proposed area and also the role of NGOs, local government, government agencies and other representatives, besides the protected area staff who know the area well and who will be responsible for the implementation.
- The implementation of Eco-Tourism Management Plan shall be in accordance with timelines and implementation arrangement in the plan and will have credible indicators for monitoring and evaluation.
- The Eco-Tourism Management Plan shall contain the following component strategies:
 - (i) Zoning for visitor use. (ii) Visitor Site planning and design. (iii) Sustainable infrastructure design. (iv) Determination of the Carrying Capacity (v) Visitor management. (vi) Revenue generation and accounting (vii) Roles of forest department, private operator, facilitators and the local community (viii) Education & interpretation and (ix) Monitoring & Evaluation component.

- The zoning shall be carried out under the Eco-Tourism Management Plan, taking into consideration the potential of the eco-tourism site, visitor experience, sustainability and security.
- The Eco-Tourism Management Plan unit shall identify possible source of funds to be used for infrastructure and supporting activities for development of ecotourism. Funding may be by a government agency, a local community or even by one or more private partners.
- The Ecotourism Management Plan will be submitted by the DCF to Rajasthan Ecotourism Development Society (REDS) for approval, and once approved, the plan will be fit for implementation. The development of Eco-Tourism site and all such initiatives proposed to be undertaken shall be based on eco - friendly principles.
- The REDS would endeavour to enter into an understanding with the custodian of the potential ecotourism destination for developing an integrated and holistic project for development, execution and management of the ecotourism destination.
- REDS would endeavour to develop a multi-stakeholder framework involving community members, concerned government department, relevant civil society organisation, possible private partners and experts, based on the specific characteristics of each project, to build, operate and maintain the destination as desired and to ensure long term economic, social and environmental sustainability of the project.
- A comprehensive operational guidelines and a detailed manual on various aspects of ecotourism would be issued to facilitate easy and smooth development of ecotourism destinations in the State.

4.4. Ecotourism Product Development, Promotion, Publicity & Marketing: The ecotourism sites identified and developed will have its uniqueness and values in terms of aesthetic, natural, cultural and landscape characteristics which will be recognized and developed into an ecotourism product with which the site will be recognize. The product developed will cater to different target groups and will include hiking, trekking, wildlife sighting, bird watching trails, boating, photography, visit to medicinal plants conservation area, craft making, agricultural products, local handicraft, promoting festivals, interpretation centre visit and adventure sports. In the wetland /riverine sites, activities like walks and boat rides for viewing and appreciating the rich and special flora and fauna can be taken up. The marketing of ecotourism destination requires establishment of a cell and networking with the Tourism Department and other departments, promote branding of products and evolving marketing strategies and dissemination through media. Appropriate packaging and branding of ecotourism destination is important to the success of ecotourism. The marketing of

ecotourism destination requires dissemination strategies and the aid of digital technology and other conventional means.

4.5. Capacity building: Field functionaries will be imparted specialized training on management of Eco-tourism activities. Capacities of local communities will be built to act as nature interpreters/guides and to provide hospitality management services. This will be achieved by taking the assistance of Tourism department and the services of Hospitality Management Institutes like Institute of Hotel Management in the State. This shall include training to discharge specialized tasks such as tourist guides, natural science interpreters, patrol partners for protection work, entrepreneurs for small scale homestead-based hospitality industry, small business operators (like souvenir shops, equipment for hire, photography etc).

4.6. Funding and Budgetary support to REDS: Identification, development, marketing of ecotourism initiatives will require a consistent and assured flow of funds on a regular basis. This can only be ensured if funds are apportioned by way of budgetary provisioning. Funds to a tune of 2 % of the total forest department budget available for development work shall be apportioned for Eco-tourism activities and will be made available to the Rajasthan Ecotourism Development Society (REDS). The funds will then be provided to the district units on the basis of the approved Ecotourism Management Plans. Apart from budgetary support REDS will also free to raise funds, grants, donations etc from other sources to fund Ecotourism initiatives in the state.

4.7. Sharing of Revenue benefits: The main beneficiary from the ecotourism initiative shall be the community involved in the management of the destination and a small component of the revenue shall go to the government. The community shall be responsible for upkeep and maintenance of the facility in a guest worthy condition and carryout the routine maintenance of the site. Any major modification / upgradation at the site will be done from the funds of the government or Rajasthan Ecotourism Development Society (REDS).

The pricing of ecotourism destination is also important for its success. The eco-tourist visiting the destination shall pay an eco-development surcharge, which will be in addition to the normal fees for using the facility and this eco-development surcharge will be deposited in the REDS account and shall be used for eco-development activities in the area. The funds accrued from eco-tourism activities in the Society will be utilised for community development, conservation initiatives and running of eco-tourism facilities.

The model for sharing of revenue shall be as under:

- 80% for payment of remuneration to local community directly involved in running and maintenance of eco-tourism facilities;

- 20% as revenue to Government as fee for entry and utilizing the facility

Apart from this, the tourists shall be charged an additional 25% eco-development surcharge which will be used to address local livelihood development issues, human wildlife conflict management and conservation through eco-development and will be at the disposal of the Rajasthan Ecotourism Development Society (REDS).