

Eco Rating and Certification of Places of Stay around the Tiger Reserves – An Overview

Tourism is not only one of the largest and fastest growing sectors in the world but it is also environment dependent. Concern for environment led to Ecotourism, a niche sector in tourism, and wildlife tourism is further niche area.

In India the tiger is an iconic flagship species and there is public interest in tigers. Tiger reserves receive more than one million visitors annually. This has resulted in a complex interplay between Tiger Reserve managers, local communities, places of stay and the tourists. Positive impacts from tourism around Tiger Reserves include economic benefits (employment and entrepreneurship opportunities), infrastructure benefits (better access, transportation facilities, and health care and education facilities) and social welfare benefits (political, psychological, economic and social empowerment).

India is witnessing high numbers of domestic tourists in the Tiger Reserves and a substantial number of them is of responsible tourists who look for places of stay that are environment-friendly with minimum carbon foot-prints, i.e. places of stay which have proper strategies and processes in place for waste management, energy savings, water conservation etc. These places of stay present an exciting opportunity for the tourists to become stakeholders in conservation efforts around the Tiger Reserves.

India presently has 53 Tiger Reserves spread across the country. Some of the Tiger Reserves (TR), like Kanha TR, Ranthambore TR, Periyar TR, Bandipore TR, Kaziranga TR etc. are very popular tourist destinations with very high footfall and one of the reasons for their popularity is availability of quality places of stay in large numbers. On the other hand there are a few Tiger Reserves which do not receive high footfall. Accordingly, the number and concentration of places of stay around each of the Tiger Reserve vary.

Moreover, the places of stay vary in their property sizes, number of rooms available, provision of amenities and facilities, employment opportunities generated etc. Similarly, support extended by the management of places of stay to the Tiger Reserves vary – some actively support the TRs during emergencies such as fire outbreaks, human-wildlife conflict situations etc., in organizing various events, tours etc. for the visitors and the local communities etc. while others extend little support.

Government of India is involved in setting standards for different sectors in India. For example, the star rating of hotels is carried out by the Ministry of Tourism; the standards-compliance mark for industrial products in India is ISI (Indian Standards

Institution) falling under the purview of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs; the certification mark for agricultural products in India, AGMARK, is under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare; the certification mark for all processed fruit products is FPO (Food Products Order) under the Ministry of Food Processing Industries; Silk Mark is a quality assurance label for silk products in India given by Silk Mark Organization of India under the Ministry of Textiles etc.

Accordingly, it would be prudent that standards, based primarily on environmental, ecological parameters, including support extended by them to the local communities and the Tiger Reserves, are developed, for places of stay around Tiger Reserves. These places of stay are then rated and certified which would be in line with the guidelines issued by NTCA on eco-tourism and infrastructure development in Tiger Landscapes. As this rating and certification would give primacy to ecological and environmental parameters, therefore, this would contribute meaningfully towards saving our planet, health and well-being of the local communities in addition to confidence and satisfaction to the tourists of their contribution towards environmental conservation, their care about the ecology of the area.

Objectives of the Eco Rating and Certification

- i. To have uniform environmental and ecological standards for places of stays etc. around the Tiger Reserves across the country.
- ii. To help visitors to choose responsible accommodation providers / sustainable places of stay.
- iii. To help providers of places of stay to expand their business
- iv. To sensitize stakeholders, including the public representatives, towards Tiger landscape and their conservation.
- v. To encourage environmental education, adoption of sustainable practices to minimize environmental impacts around Tiger Reserves.
- vi. To conserve natural resources, minimize pollution, provide better living conditions to the local communities with better and diversified livelihood opportunities.

Why Eco Rating and Certification¹?

Responsible travel is now a fast growing segment in the tourism sector. With growing awareness about the environment, climate change, conservation of forests and wildlife etc. places of stay that demonstrate their commitment towards the environment, are more attractive to responsible travelers.

¹Certification is a voluntary, third-party assessment, of a place of stay for conformity to a standard.

Eco Rating and Certification by National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) will mean availability of reliable information about the sustainable and eco-friendly, green accommodation or eco-lodging² around the Tiger Reserves to the responsible travelers to exercise their choice of green living³ as Certification also means these places of stay comply with the highest social and environmental standards. This will translate into more business for the rated and certified places of stay and encourage them to try to get the highest certification to get more business. Display of Rated and Certified places of stay on NTCA, Tiger Reserve websites etc. would make them more visible.

Adoption of Eco Rating and Certification also means it would lead to cost reduction due to resource conservation and waste reduction. Increased use of local products will further reduce the costs. Enhancement in livelihood opportunities of the local communities and strengthening of local micro-economic conditions would also prove useful in garnering their support towards the Tiger Reserves.

The process of obtaining Eco Rating and Certification would make these places of stay more aware about the environmental and ecological standards but would also make them more sensitive towards nuances of wildlife conservation in general and tigers in particular, such as importance of impediment-free corridors etc.

The Eco-Rating and Certification will also bring uniformity in standards on ecological / environmental parameters around these Tiger Reserves across the country. It is well known that the Tiger Reserves are repository of Biodiversity, contribute significantly towards environmental security of the country, and are source of many tangible and intangible benefits and hence their conservation needs to be pursued vigorously.

Needless to add, conservation of Tiger Reserves (TRs) is a shared responsibility of all, including the places of stay. More so because these places of stay owe their business to these Tiger Reserves and these also have an impact on the local environment, economy and sociology around the Tiger Reserves.

In a nutshell, the expected benefits from Eco Rating and Certification can be (i) Economic Benefits (more footfalls more business), (ii) Environmental Benefits (due to efficient use of natural resources and energy, reduction in waste generation and its recycling, etc.), (iii) Social Benefits (increased employment, diversified livelihood opportunities – reduced pressure on Tiger Reserves, cross-cultural awareness and

²Eco-lodging refers to accommodation that has least impact on its surrounding environment due to its design and construction.

³Green living aims at reduction in the impact of pollution and wastage by opting for a less wasteful and environmental friendly lifestyle.

exchanges), (iv) Benefits to Tiger Reserves (increased sensitivity, enhanced participation in reforestation efforts and activities, help during human-wildlife conflict situations, fire outbreaks etc.)

The Eco Rating and Certification can start with the places of stay around the Tiger Reserves and then, in course of time, it can be extended to other Protected Areas as well in future.

Classification of places of stay

In India, hotels are rated and classified by The Hotel & Restaurant Approval & Classification Committee (HRACC), which falls under the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, on quality parameters to award them 1-5 star ratings. Similarly, the Resorts / Time Sharing Resorts (TSR), Incredible India Bed & Breakfast establishments and Home-stays, and Guest Houses have also been classified.

But classification of places of stay around the Tiger Reserves on environmental, ecological parameters, community involvement, sharing of benefits with the local communities and the Tiger Reserves etc. is not easy as capture of some parameters, including intangible benefits is difficult. Moreover, there are appreciable differences among different places of stay like, Hotels / Resorts / Lodges / Home-stays etc., as they have different property sizes, have varying number of rooms, different tariffs, number of persons employed, and their distance from the periphery of the Tiger Reserve, etc.

Availability of similar Rating and Certifications around the world

Rating and Certification systems for places of stay, that give primacy to environmental and ecological factors including benefits to the local communities, are available both within and outside the country. Their fee structures are different and take varying number of days to rate and certify the places of stay.

Criteria for Eco Rating and Certification in Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala, India

The Eco Rating and Certification of Kerala, known as Pugmark Rating and Certification, is based on five major principles –



In a nutshell, to become an Eco Rated and Certified place of stay, it has to show – (i) improvement in sustainability, like water usage, energy efficiency, waste management, (ii) maximization of the social and economic benefits for the local community, (iii) reduction in the levels of negative environmental impacts, (iv) sustainable supply chain, and (v) cooperation with Tiger Reserves. Details are at **Enclosure-I**.

The Eco Rating and Certification involves assessment of various aspects that deal with living things and are part of Life Sciences and hence they may change and evolve over a period of time. Various criteria, as discussed above, have been chosen in such a way that capture positive impacts on the planet in general and Tiger Reserves in particular.

Name and Logo for Eco Rating and Certification

Name and logo for Eco Rating and Certification of places of stay around Tiger Reserves is required as both of them need to capture the essence of Eco Rating and Certification aptly and should be self-expressive, stirring and capturing the attention of masses, easy to pronounce and draw.

Below the logo there should be space to put an auto-generated unique alpha-numeric Certificate Number for each place of stay, clicking upon which, on an electronic platform, would display the Certificate issued by NTCA.