

## Nature-Based Tourism in Protected Areas: A Systematic Review of Outcomes for Local People

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### Abstract

Nature-based tourism (NBT) has emerged as an increasingly significant approach to biodiversity conservation and rural development, particularly within protected areas (PAs). By combining ecological conservation with livelihood opportunities, NBT has been promoted as a pathway toward Sustainable Development Goals focused on poverty reduction, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. This paper critically reviews the work of Thapa et al. (2022), who synthesized global evidence on NBT outcomes for local communities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Their review identified positive impacts—such as employment creation, income diversification, and cultural revitalization—alongside significant challenges, including inequitable benefit-sharing, social conflicts, and governance asymmetries between state authorities and communities. By organizing the evidence into economic, social, cultural, and governance domains, this paper develops a holistic understanding of both opportunities and obstacles in NBT implementation. Building on these insights, the paper contextualizes the discussion for India, with a focus on Madhya Pradesh's tiger reserves, where tourism has expanded rapidly. Strategic recommendations are advanced to promote equitable governance, livelihood integration, and participatory co-management so that NBT becomes truly sustainable for both biodiversity and local people.

### 1. Introduction

Nature-based tourism lies at the intersection of conservation imperatives and developmental aspirations. It involves travel motivated by interactions with natural environments, often in protected areas (PAs), which currently cover around 17% of global terrestrial areas under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Aichi Targets (Watson et al., 2014). According to

the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021), NBT is one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, reflecting greater consumer awareness of sustainability issues and demand for authentic, rural encounters.

In theory, NBT offers a “win-win” scenario: conservation authorities benefit from park-generated revenues, while local communities gain alternative livelihoods and reduced dependence on extractive resource use (Spenceley, 2020). However, emerging critiques question whether these benefits are distributed equitably. In some contexts, tourism exacerbates social inequalities, displaces communities, or encourages cultural commodification (Brockington et al., 2008; Hall & Page, 2019).

Thapa et al. (2022) provide a systematic review of two decades of NBT literature, examining outcomes for local communities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Their synthesis is significant as it consolidates dispersed case studies into comparative insights. This paper summarizes their findings, evaluates limitations, and applies implications to the Indian case, especially Madhya Pradesh’s tiger reserves—a region central to both tourism-linked conservation and rural development agendas.

## 2. Methodology of the Systematic Review

Thapa et al. (2022) employed a **systematic review** methodology in line with PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). This ensured a replicable, unbiased synthesis of global evidence.

- **Databases searched:** Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and regional repositories.
- **Inclusion criteria:** Peer-reviewed studies (2000–2021) focusing on NBT in PAs and reporting socio-economic, cultural, or governance outcomes.
- **Geographical scope:** Asia (India, Nepal, Thailand), Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa), and Latin America (Costa Rica, Peru, Brazil).
- **Sample size and coding:** 200+ articles analyzed using thematic coding across four domains: economic, social, cultural, and governance.

This process ensured broad representativeness, but the study acknowledged limitations such as English-language bias and potential overrepresentation of successful cases due to publication bias.

### 3. Themes Emerging from the Literature

#### 3.1 Economic Outcomes

NBT has created new livelihood opportunities. Employment in guiding, hospitality, handicrafts, and eco-lodging offered alternative revenue streams (Snyman, 2017). In Nepal's Annapurna region and Kenya's Maasai Mara, community enterprises reduced dependence on agriculture while increasing household stability (Lapeyre, 2011).

#### Challenges include:

- **Elitism:** Wealthier households or external investors capture disproportionate benefits (Mbaiwa, 2015).
- **Leakages:** Significant revenues flow to international operators rather than local economies (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010).
- **Seasonality:** Tourism dependency generates unstable incomes, especially during crises like COVID-19 (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

#### 3.2 Social Outcomes

Tourism often enables educational investments, training, and women's empowerment through direct employment (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Pride in cultural and natural heritage often increases as communities engage in conservation-linked economies.

#### Challenges:

Restricted access to resources, such as firewood and grazing lands, due to conservation measures (West et al., 2006). In some cases, PA creation has displaced entire communities without sufficient compensation (Brockington et al., 2008). Social stratification occurs when younger or better-educated groups benefit disproportionately.

#### 3.3 Cultural Outcomes

Positive impacts include the **revival of cultural heritage**, crafts, and folklore, strengthening identity. Tourism has supported intergenerational knowledge transfer in remote areas (Scheyvens, 1999).

**Risks include** cultural commodification, with traditions staged mainly for tourist consumption (Greenwood, 1989). Authenticity may erode, transforming living traditions into commercial performances.

### 3.4 Governance Outcomes

Positive governance outcomes arise when **communities co-manage PAs** through eco-development committees (EDCs) or joint forest management in India (Kothari et al., 1996). Participatory councils in Costa Rica and Namibia have shown inclusive decision-making (Jones, 2008).

Persistent challenges include state dominance, limited local voice, and institutional weaknesses undermining transparency (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2010). Power asymmetries often leave marginalized groups excluded from governance decisions.

### 4. Key Barriers Identified

- **Power imbalances:** States dominate conservation agendas (Adams & Hutton, 2007).
- **Capacity deficits:** Local communities often lack training in marketing, management, or negotiation.
- **Institutional weaknesses:** Benefit-sharing arrangements remain opaque or unequally implemented.
- **Market dependence:** Over-reliance on volatile tourist numbers leaves communities vulnerable (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

### 5. Strategic Recommendations

Thapa et al. (2022) and related scholarship suggest:

- **Strengthening Community-Based Tourism (CBT):** Community ownership of enterprises enhances equity (Scheyvens, 1999).
- **Capacity-building:** Skills in guiding, digital tools, foreign languages, and eco-certification improve competitiveness.
- **Inclusive governance:** Women, youth, and marginalized groups require guaranteed representation in decision-making.

- **Transparent revenue allocation:** Community development funds and audits build accountability.
- **Monitoring & evaluation:** Long-term studies are needed to ensure genuine community benefits (Spenceley, 2020).

## 6. Implications for Madhya Pradesh's Tiger Reserves

Madhya Pradesh, known as India's "Tiger State," hosts reserves such as Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Pench, and Panna, which attract high-value wildlife tourism. Lessons from the global review translate as follows:

- **Kanha:** Handicraft cooperatives and eco-lodges run by buffer-zone villages could reduce elite capture.
- **Bandhavgarh:** Women-led homestays and craft enterprises would distribute benefits broadly.
- **Pench:** Enhance community guiding by formalized training and interpretation programs.
- **Panna:** Diversify tourism by integrating tribal festivals, river-based tourism, and traditional cuisine to reduce tiger-centric dependence.

Across reserves, **co-management models** are essential, where the Forest Department and local communities share authority (Shrivastava & Heinen, 2007). This would address power imbalances and strengthen both conservation and community resilience.

## 7. Conclusion

Thapa et al. (2022) provide a valuable synthesis showing that the impacts of NBT on local communities are neither uniformly positive nor negative, but complex and context-specific. Economic gains and empowerment are apparent, but inequities, displacement, and governance asymmetries persist.

In Madhya Pradesh's tiger reserves, the challenge lies in operationalizing **inclusive, equitable governance** and diversifying beyond wildlife-centric tourism. Effective NBT requires moving beyond treating communities as beneficiaries toward recognizing them as stakeholders with rights, agency, and cultural heritage embedded within protected landscapes. If designed

inclusively, NBT can reconcile conservation objectives with community well-being, exemplifying sustainable development in practice.

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