

Uttarakhand's draft ecotourism policy could threaten biodiversity

21 August 2020

About 65 percent of India's hill state of Uttarakhand is forested. Now, a latest proposed ecotourism policy suggests using vast stretches of these forests for ecotourism activities. While the policy proposes ecotourism to ensure the livelihood of people living in rural areas and for conservation too, the move has invited resistance from local environmentalists who point out that such activities could disturb wildlife, including many endangered species.

The draft 'Uttarakhand Ecotourism Policy 2020' of the state's tourism department notes that it aims to act as a guiding principle for a balanced amalgamation of tourism and conservation. It emphasises that it is designed keeping in mind the urgent need to put adequate safeguards that prioritise conservation of the environment, reduce threats to biodiversity, promote socio-economic development, particularly in rural parts of hill districts, and facilitate low-impact, responsible travel to natural areas which are culturally and ecologically sensitive.

The draft (dated July 15, 2020), accessed by Mongabay-India, further stated that the involvement of local communities would ensure greater prosperity for people living in natural ecosystems through the generation of nature-compatible livelihoods, thus "helping to arrest the out-migration of people from the rural areas of the hill districts of the state, while generating economic returns, including direct income for the conservation of protected areas." It is going to be the first ecotourism policy of the state.

Uttarakhand is a biodiversity-rich state and every year millions of tourists visit the state for pilgrimage as well as recreational purposes. Forests constitute about 65 percent of Uttarakhand's total forest area and of that, about 12 percent is under the protected area network (six national parks and six wildlife sanctuaries). The state is home to 161 species of flora that are recognised as rare or threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Of the 223 species of orchids reported from the north-western Himalayas, over 150 have been reported from Uttarakhand alone.

It is home to a wide variety of fauna too. The draft policy notes that Uttarakhand has about 102 species of mammals, 623 species of birds, 124 species of fish, 69 species of reptiles and 19 species of amphibians including threatened species like the snow leopard, musk deer, tiger, Asian elephant, bharal, Himalayan monal, king cobra among others.

However, not everyone is convinced including the senior forest department officials. A senior forest department official of the Uttarakhand, while wishing anonymity, told Mongabay-India that while the heart of the policy is in a good place there are some inherent problems that would threaten the forests and biodiversity. "For instance, the policy is heavily loaded in favour of opening up many of the forest areas for ecotourism and that could disturb the movement of wildlife using forests as corridors. Secondly, the policy is driven by the tourism department with very little room for views of the forest department in deciding which areas to open up or not."

Shankar Gopalakrishnan, who is the secretary of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a national platform of forest dwellers groups, was also not convinced with the policy.

"The idea of an ecotourism policy is welcome but this draft policy is framed in a way that it leaves almost all the power with bureaucrats – even as it includes token participation from panchayats. Moreover, this is being framed in Uttarakhand where, despite more than half of the state's land area

being forest, the Forest Rights Act has not been implemented,” Gopalakrishnan told Mongabay-India.

“A bureaucrat-driven process with no local rights is not likely to produce benefits for communities or the people of the state, whatever the language of the policy. Instead, it may accelerate the environmental destruction and consequent natural disasters already taking place,” he said.



Nearly 2/3rd of Uttarakhand's total area is covered with forests. Photo by Travelling Slacker/Flickr.

Meanwhile, the draft policy stressed that it is of utmost importance that Uttarakhand conserves its bio-cultural natural heritage while opening its doors to domestic and international tourists. It said that the state government of Uttarakhand envisages developing tourist destinations in a planned manner through innovative and sustainable tourism products that are built on the state's inherent strengths while protecting the most-frequented tourist destinations which have witnessed high traffic, haphazard development, and over-exploitation of resources.

The policy is significant as tourism is the mainstay of Uttarakhand's economy and the tourism sector alone contributes to over 50 percent of the state's gross domestic product. In 2016, an estimated [31.78 million](#) people visited the state, around three times the state's total population. By 2028, the number of tourists visiting the state is expected to reach about [70 million](#).

The draft policy emphasised on setting standards for “carrying capacity in the ecotourism zones and forested areas to prevent damage to the biodiversity and ecosystems.”

Replying to concerns raised against the draft ecotourism policy, Uttarakhand's Tourism Minister Satpal Maharaj said across the world there is a proven and successful model of ecotourism which includes accommodation, toilet, and phone facilities. “There is no reason why we can't have a similar thing. All concerns regarding forest and wildlife will be addressed. We have so many haunted villages

(empty due to migration of people). Our ecotourism policy will ensure livelihood to local people and help in stopping migration from rural areas of Uttarakhand,” Satpal Maharaj told Mongabay-India.

Important ecotourism sites will be identified

The draft policy said that a district ecotourism committee which will be headed by the district magistrate will be responsible for identification and proposal of new projects and activities within and outside of forested areas.

“This committee will include members of eco-development committees that are affiliated with the Department of Forest. All proposals will be forwarded to the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (ecotourism wing) for further guidance and approval. The UTDB (Ecotourism Wing) will be responsible for identifying and proposing ecotourism circuits which could potentially allow the development of new, or use of existing, forest rest houses and/or camping sites within forest areas,” said the draft policy.

It held that all ecotourism proposals involving the use of forest areas will be forwarded to the forest department by the UTDB (ecotourism wing) for review and comments. However, as per the policy, the final authority for selection and establishment of ecotourism projects will lie with the district ecotourism committees and the UTDB. The UTDB (ecotourism wing) will also be responsible for identifying and selecting partners for the development of ecotourism products/sites in Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode.

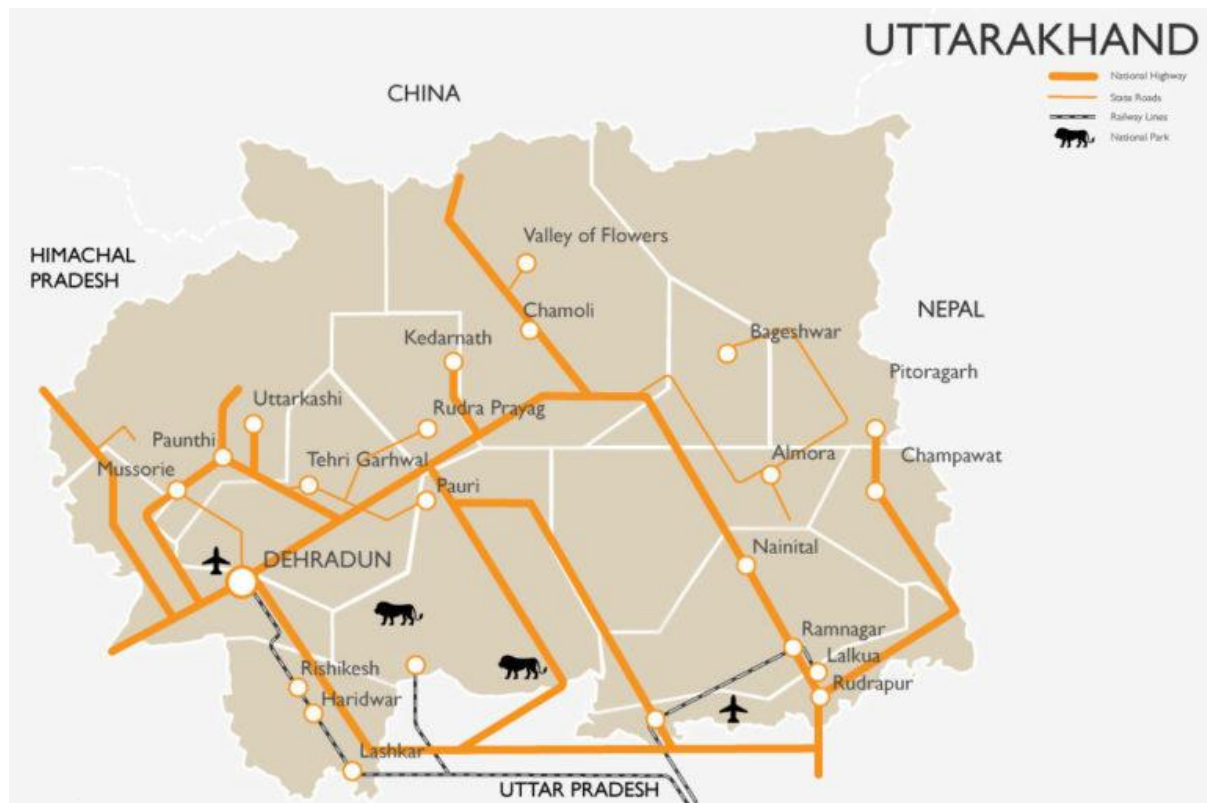
On this, the Uttarakhand’s forest department official remarked that this draft is against the principles of the [2018 ecotourism policy](#) (in forest and wildlife areas) of the central government’s environment ministry and a supreme court order. “The objective of ecotourism should be creating awareness among people., involving community and nature education. But this draft is against the central government’s ecotourism policy. In fact, it is also against a judgement of the Supreme Court of India that ruled against the commercial use of forest rest houses – something that the draft policy proposes,” the forest official said.

What is, in fact, going to be interesting is to see how ecotourism projects come up because it has been defined as a non-forestry activity under central government [guidelines](#) and will need permission under the Forest Conservation Act 1980. The [guidelines](#) also mention that ecotourism projects in protected areas will be allowed if the said activities are part of the management plan/tiger conservation plan and are duly approved by the central government.

Zoning to be done to identify ecotourism sites

The draft ecotourism policy said that zoning will be carried out in key districts of Uttarakhand for identifying and demarcating core intervention areas for ecotourism development. Such zones will

then be identified as ecotourism zones and could be developed around specific activities like trekking, bird watching, photography etc.



Tourist spots are spread across Uttarakhand and they are visited by millions every year. Photo by Noopur Varma/Wikimedia Commons.

“Zoning for ecotourism development will be based on the idea of concentrating environmental impacts in small areas and sparing protected and vulnerable sites from environmental disturbance. It is advisable to use sites that have already received some human intervention in order to avoid impacting intact sites,” it said.

It clarified that the criteria for determining the suitability of zones will be based on physical and environmental characteristics like land use cover, scenic beauty, natural hazards, species diversity (abundance and density of unique, endangered, endemic or charismatic species), protection of species and socio-economic factors like accessibility (distance from roads and possibility for human mobility), community’s settlement size and willingness to participate.

The draft said that the forest and tourism department will work together to identify ecotourism zones as well as general tourism zones, keeping in mind the need to provide a diverse range of visitor experiences. “Prior to establishment of the ecotourism zones, consultations will be planned with local non-governmental organisation, community-based organisations, local people’s representative groups, and private tour operators for identification of important and/or previously unexploited attractions which can be developed under the ecotourism zones,” the draft said.

Once sites are identified, the visitor site planning process would be carried out by a team comprising a landscape architect, a biologist or ecologist, and an environmental engineer, “who should all have

some training in environmental impact evaluation and tourism infrastructure, along with a team of local residents who are familiar with the site and/or environmental conditions in the area.”

It noted that the projects shall be monitored periodically and environmental impacts of ecotourism on biodiversity and local communities will be monitored to plan and take necessary remedial measures. The policy suggested that an “environmental cess/tax for ecotourism will be fixed by the ecotourism wing of the UTDB” to plough back the revenue earned into environment conservation and local cultural traditions.

Kishore Upadhyaya, a senior leader of the Indian National Congress party from Uttarakhand and former head of the Uttarakhand Congress, said that this policy won’t help the locals. “This draft is against the principles of the forest regulations and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. It is highly driven by bureaucracy and will be against the interests of the forest dwellers. It is not going to support conservation but instead, it is centred around businesses. It will also not benefit locals,” Upadhyaya, who is also the convenor of the *Vanadhikar Andolan* (forest rights movement), told Mongabay-India.

Source: <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/08/uttarakhands-draft-ecotourism-policy-could-threaten-biodiversity/>