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An Increase in Tourism has created a Threat or a Boon to the Natural Resources and Wildlife of GIR National Park, Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

It is a matter of fact that mass tourism definitely generates money for governments but it also incurs recurring negative impacts and threats to the ecosystem of the forests. It has been seen that attracted by the beauty of the majestic Asiatic lion, a massive increase in tourism has been seen in Gir forest Located at Gujarat. Understandably, tourism in Gir forest has been able to bring in foreign money and generate immense revenue but this wildlife-based mass tourism is ruining the habitat and the ecosystem of the forest is getting affected. The loss of habitat due to mass tourism is a big issue that impacts the conservation of Asiatic lions. The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness regarding how increasing tourism is creating a threat to the wildlife with special reference to Gir forest situated in Gujarat.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most rapidly evolving industries in the global market which has substantially grown over the last two decades in India and has significantly contributed to the country's economic capability but it also comes with a cost (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2019). Particularly the state of Gujarat with its immense amount of tourist attractions has been able to promote its tourism business which has resulted in various advantages as well as disadvantages over the last few decades. Figure 1 shows the geomap of Gir forest area in Gujarat. This paper will hold an in-depth discussion about the increase of tourism and its effect on the natural resources and wildlife of Gir forest in Gujarat.

Tourism in Gujrat: Gujarat is one of the most diverse classified States which not only holds its

position as one of the most industrialized states in the whole country but has a rich culture as well as a wide

variety of fauna and flora. Gujarat offers great tourist attractions with a wide variety of ceiling beauties starting from the Rann of Kutch to the Gir forest (Suratissa 2021). Gujarat is worlds one of the biggest Habitats that includes fauna like the Majestic Asiatic lion, blackbuck, nilgai, various migratory birds, etc as well as diversely classified flora. One of the major attractions of Gujarat Tourism is the Gir National Park which in the recent decade has registered a more than 46% increase in popularity for tourism. Since the Asiatic lion conservation plan is improving and adding to the population of the Asiatic lions the inflow of foreign tourists has increased by a significant number which has further helped to increase the economic contribution towards the GDP of the country by Gujarat itself (Meena *et al.*, 2021). The tourism board of Gujarat has a strategic plan out various advertisements and media engagements which has also helped to increase the tourism inflow within the state. According to statistics in the year, 2021 is depicted in Figure 2, the state has received more than 19 million tourists

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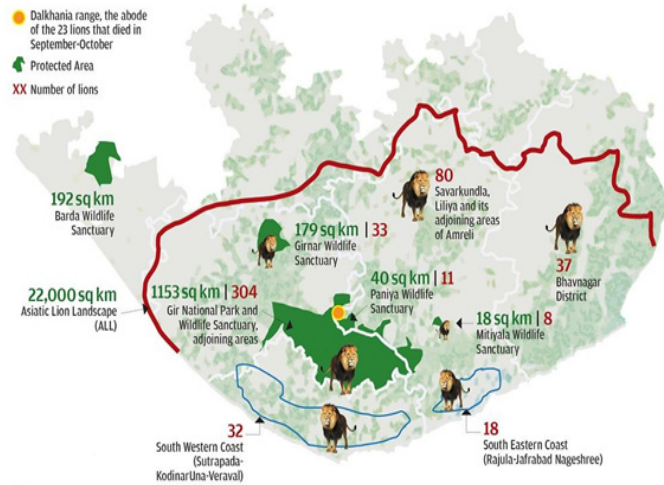


Figure 1 – Geomap of Gir forest area



Figure 2 – Tourist arrivals in 2019 and 2020

approximately despite the harsh situation of the ongoing pandemic.

Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on tourism in Gujarat: According to the tour operators and various travel agents it has been noted that due to the covid-19 pandemic the state has seen a decrease of approximately more than 50% in tourism. As compared to earlier statistical figures in the year 2017 to 2018 the state of Gujarat had seen an inflow of more than 50 million tourists. But it had its advantages, due to the lower intervention of Tourists and humans the flora and fauna of the Gir National Park was able to multiply at a rapid speed which has increased the number of plant and animal species from the usual. It is worthwhile to note that the population of the Asiatic lion has slowly recovered to more than 500 individuals. This has been possible due to the inflow of funds through tourism from the earlier years and proper allocation of the same with the help of the state and local community. It has resulted in an impactful conservation strategy which has led to an increase in the number of flora



Figure 3 – Tourist Gir forest safari

and fauna in the National Park and also helped to replenish the natural resources to some extent as well.

The Ill Effects of Increase in Tourism in Gir Forest: This section of this paper will discuss the coexistence of wildlife and people with farm habitation near the proximity of Gir forest and also will discuss the dynamics of these people in farm habitation and wildlife matrix. Mira Venkatraghavan is a research scholar who has been working for 15 years regarding this coexistence of people and wildlife of Gir forest. She has been collecting data regarding the concerns, fears and humour that depicts people's perception of the predators of that area (Tshewang, Tobias, and Morrison 2021). It is a matter of fact that Gir forest is the last resort of the endangered Asiatic lions, and human intervention is causing them to come outside the territory and causing fatalities in the nearby localities. The increase in the number of visitors each year does not only add up to an economic increase of income from tourism but also has a small part of the problem attached with. The increase in wildlife, as well as tourism in Gujarat, has resulted in changing the landscape including the national park itself (Gogoi et al., 2020). The increase of tourism has led to catalyzing urbanization as well as changing the influence of the stakeholders in order to alter the use of the land. With an increase in traffic both at night as well as day time which has further increased noise pollution and disturbance in the wildlife has resulted in an increase of intervention within the depth of the forest (Jasrotia, Kamila and Patel 2021) and is evidenced in Figure 3.

The growth of population in Gujarat around the Gir National Park as well as the expansion of the habitat of wildlife species outside the protected

areas results in more frequent incidents of attacks by the wildlife on the people and tourists (Dutt 2019).

Steps taken to conserve Gir: Recently the state government of Gujarat has taken various measures to modernize the rescue system in order to maintain a sound and gradual growth in the natural resources and wildlife species of the Gir National Park (Singh 2019). The rescue system consists of surveillance with the help of a drone & CCTV and a helpline number which will be available 24X7, along with a state of the art Hospital to be set up with a fund of Rs 85 crore. Recently the government officials, along with the Chief minister of the state of Gujarat, also shared and initiated about a Rs 351 crore comprehensive plan stretched over a long term which will not only help to recreate but also to create the infrastructure of the National Park and help to conserve the various wildlife species including the Asiatic lions (Chauhan and Kumar 2021). It is really crucial to understand that this has been possible to be declared so firmly by the government only due to the stability in the growth and functioning of the tourism industry of the state. Figure 4 shows the tourism contribution to Gujarat state GDP. This diagram shows a steady growth in the number of tourist from 2002 to anticipation about 2022 which may show a rise (these calculations were affected due to the pandemic)

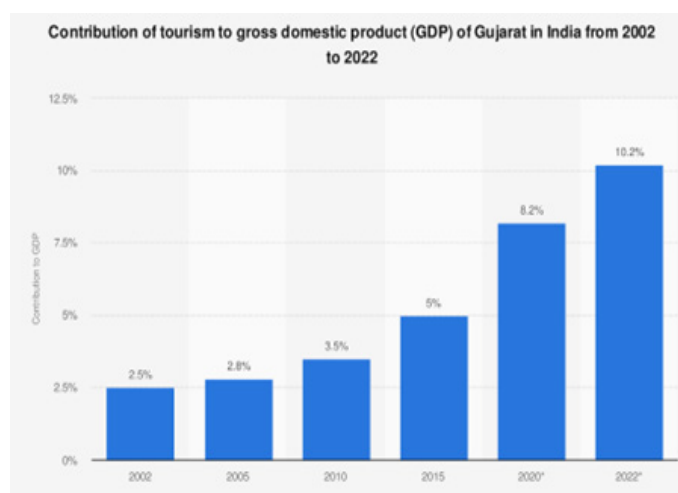


Figure 4 – Tourism contribution to Gujarat state GDP

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the clear view of the impact of tourism in the Gir National Park. It clearly signifies that there are various negative

impacts of tourism on a national park which can lead to several problems. The increase in the inflow of tourists, the state has been able to attain a significant amount towards the GDP of the country, which influences the economic situation of the state, but it comes with a cost of greater threat to the natural resources, flora and fauna of the National Park. Therefore it has been seen that the government has been able to initiate proper allocation of funds in order to sustain the wildlife as well as the natural resources of the National Park along with the declaration of a new long term comprehensive plan in order to add towards sustainable growth and development. Thus, it can be derived that tourism is a boon to the economic development and helps to sustain the natural resources and in contrast to this, increase in tourist is a direct threat to the flora and fauna of the Gir National Park. To maintain a balance the authorities should be more alert about the infrastructural development that hurdles the peace and beauty of the park.

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