

Advocating Responsible and Safe Wildlife Tourism by Strengthening Preventive Measures and Tackling Challenges

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Abstract

Wildlife tourism deals with travellers coming to observe and interact with animals in their natural habitats. The objectives of the current article are to identify different types of interaction in wildlife tourism, propose preventive measures for safe wildlife tourism, ascertain the potential challenges and the strategies that can be recommended to overcome these challenges. This type of tourism has received massive popularity in the recent past as there is a trend that people want to spend and experience their time close to nature and observe exotic and endangered species. Exposure to these human–animal interaction-related activities has been linked to the acquisition of zoonotic diseases, the transmission of parasites that can infect both humans and animals, and risk of injuries or attacks when animals feel threatened. Acknowledging the widespread risks and consequences that can precipitate during wildlife tourism, there is an indispensable need to implement preventive measures to protect public health, wildlife health, and ecosystems at large. In conclusion, close human–animal interactions in wildlife tourism can significantly increase the probability of zoonotic disease transmission and disturb the ecosystem. There is an immense need to implement public health measures to foster safe and responsible wildlife tourism where sustainable tourism practices are supported.

Keywords: Prevention, public health, wildlife tourism, zoonotic diseases

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife tourism deals with travelers coming to observe and interact with animals in their natural habitats.^[1] This type of tourism has received massive popularity in the recent past as there is a trend that people want to spend and experience their time close to nature and observe exotic and endangered species.^[1] Moreover, this tourism appeals to a wide section of society, like families, researchers, and adventure-loving people, and many pockets have been successful in attracting national and international tourists due to their rich biodiversity.^[2] Although the rise of such tourism has contributed to the growth of the local economy and livelihood of the people living in neighboring areas, there has been a simultaneous rise in the number of reported risks as well.^[3,4] This calls for the need to adopt ethical and sustainable practices to maintain a balance between conservation, public health, and tourism.^[5] The objectives of the current article are to identify different types of interaction in wildlife tourism, propose preventive measures for safe wildlife

tourism, and ascertain the potential challenges and the strategies that can be recommended to overcome these challenges.

WILDLIFE TOURISM: TYPE OF INTERACTIONS AND ASSOCIATED RISKS

Humans visiting wildlife for the sake of tourism tend to interact with animals in multiple ways, namely guided tours through natural habitats of animals, close contact with animals where

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they can touch or feed animals, interactions with rescued animals, bird watching, trekking in forests, animal riding experiences, nature walks, photography experiences, etc.^[2,4-6] Exposure to these human–animal interaction-related activities has been linked to the acquisition of zoonotic diseases, the transmission of parasites that can infect both humans and animals, and risk of injuries or attacks when animals feel threatened.^[3,4,6] There is a risk of the spread of antimicrobial resistance, especially in case animals are carrying resistant bacteria and might transfer to humans during close contact.^[7] The presence of humans can disrupt natural habitats, leading to stress on animals, making them aggressive or account for ecological imbalance.^[8] Further, the presence of tourism-related waste (viz., plastic or food waste), can pollute natural habitats and harm animals.^[4]

PREVENTIVE MEASURES IN WILDLIFE TOURISM

Acknowledging the widespread risks and consequences that can precipitate during wildlife tourism, there is an indispensable need to implement preventive measures to protect public health, wildlife health, and ecosystems at large.^[4,9-15] The measures include enforcing strict guidelines on maintaining distance between tourists and animals, as this will not only reduce the possibility of acquiring infections that are transmitted by close contact but will also minimize the extent of stress on wildlife.^[4,6] This will essentially mean prohibiting the feeding of wild animals, and it is also an indirect indication that we must discourage dependency on food items provided by tourists.^[9] Moreover, tourists should be made aware of their responsibility, how to interact with wildlife respectfully, and the need to not disturb their ecosystem.^[10] Further, tourists must receive mandatory vaccinations before visiting wildlife, as it will safeguard both humans and animals.^[11] Structurally, barriers must be made to create a safe buffer between humans and animals, create no-access zones to not disturb wildlife animals, and wildlife sanctuaries must be designed keeping in mind the best practices for animal welfare.^[8]

To limit the probability of acquiring infections, handwashing and sanitation stations must be created at entry and exit points, and the use of personal protective equipment must be encouraged whenever tourists are about to contact high-risk species.^[12] It is an essential strategy that the number of tourists visiting sensitive areas in the wildlife should be regulated so that they neither disrupt the ecosystem nor become a source of stress on wildlife.^[3] Employees of these tourist spots should be trained in regularly monitoring wild animals for any signs of disease, enabling early detection of infection, and initiation of an immediate response.^[13] In continuation, the staff of these tourist spots must maintain a strict waste disposal system to prevent pollution and also eliminate the possibility of animals from scavenging near tourist spots.^[14] Further, workers should be trained to detect any change in the behavior of the animals, which can avert the risk of injuries or trauma caused to tourists by these animals.^[8] Finally, there is an indispensable need to liaise with the public health authorities to monitor zoonotic

risks and develop an emergency response protocol for the same.^[15]

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

As the authorities decide to implement the above-mentioned measures to protect wildlife and tourism, a set of challenges have been identified that must be overcome to ensure sustainable tourism practices.^[3-5,10,16-19] The primary concern is that many wildlife regions rely heavily on the revenue and income generated from tourism, because of which neither they restrict activities nor limit tourist numbers, even when it is required for maintaining health or ecosystem-associated reasons.^[3-5] In fact, many local communities which genuinely rely on tourism, might oppose such restrictions, as it will impact their earnings.^[5] The immediate solution would be to initiate eco-friendly and responsible tourism packages, as this will generate income without being a cause of concern to the wildlife.^[16] For maintaining the ecosystem, a fixed portion of the generated revenue should be invested in wildlife conservation, including giving incentives for good practices.^[17] To benefit the local population, alternative sources of livelihood (like crafts, agriculture, etc.) should be encouraged to minimize the dependence on wildlife tourism.^[17] In addition, communities should be educated about the long-term advantages of sustainable tourism, as it will ensure that the number of tourists won't decrease with time.^[5]

The next concern is the difficulty in enforcing regulations (like maintaining safe distances, better waste disposal practices, etc.), especially in areas with large numbers of tourists.^[5] This will require leverage of technology (viz., use of tracking, drones, and cameras) to enforce regulations and empower working staff with required training and resources to improve their performance.^[18] In addition, the strategy of strict penalties for the offenders, coupled with incentives for responsible tourists, will motivate people to abide by the defined rules. The next problem is the tendency of the tourists to ignore guidelines due to lack of awareness or giving priority to close interaction with animals, rather than their safety.^[10] This problem must be dealt with by either conducting briefings of tourists and/or sharing resource materials, and both these interventions should focus on the existing guidelines for safety, potential health risks due to wildlife exposure, and the need for ethical wildlife interactions.^[19] Further, placing clear and multilingual signage boards in different wildlife areas will act as a reminder for tourists about the safety protocols and the importance of adhering to them.^[16]

Insufficient funding can prove to be one of the major barriers to protecting habitat, monitoring the health of animals, and training staff members.^[3] The possible remedial measure could be levying a nominal fee from tourists for the conservation of wildlife or by allocating a fixed portion of the generated revenue to preserve the ecosystem.^[16] The authorities could explore the option of public–private partnership to share the financial burden or seek funding from national or international

agencies to protect wildlife and prevent the extinction of rare species. Finally, owing to the absence of sufficient data on zoonotic disease transmission and wildlife behavior, we have failed to formulate evidence-based preventive strategies and also evaluate the effectiveness of interventions upon their implementation.^[15] The primary approach to overcome this barrier is to develop liaisons with research organizations that can conduct studies on wildlife health, the potential risk of zoonotic diseases, and the impact on tourism.^[13] In fact, the findings obtained from such studies will provide enough data for concerned authorities to make evidence-based decisions.^[15] In addition, a central database needs to be maintained, which will track all these indices, along with trends in tourism, and aid in the development of policies.^[13]

CONCLUSION

Close human–animal interactions in wildlife tourism can significantly increase the probability of zoonotic disease transmission and disturb the ecosystem. There is an immense need to implement public health measures to foster safe and responsible wildlife tourism, where the health of tourists and wildlife are protected, and sustainable tourism practices are supported.

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Ethics Code

Not Applicable.

Conflict of Interest

None to declare.

Authors' Contributions

Saurabh R. Shrivastava: Conception and design of the work, drafting of the work, approval of the final version of the manuscript; Prateek S. Bobhate: Literature review, Revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content, Approval of the final version of the manuscript;

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