



# MARK CARWARDINE

## WILD THOUGHTS

India's National Tiger Conservation Authority recently announced plans to phase out tourism in the core regions of its 37 tiger reserves.

Conservationists have been calling for tiger tourism to be regulated for years – we've all seen those photographs of tigers surrounded by hordes of tourist-filled jeeps – yet more people are crowding into tiger reserves than ever before.

But to ban tiger tourism entirely would be complete madness. For a start, tourists make great deterrents. Tigers are less likely to be killed by poachers (poaching is the most immediate threat) in areas where lots of people are watching. It's no coincidence that the highest tiger densities are found in places with lots of tourists and their attendant guides – national parks such as Corbett, Bandhavgarh and Kaziranga.

Tourism is also the best way to give tigers (as well as their forest homes) a serious economic value. Travel Operators for Tigers estimates that a single Ranthambhore tigress generated some £90 million in direct tourism revenue in the 10 years of her adult life.

That alone provides an incentive to keep her (and all other tigers) alive and well. Otherwise, why else would local people care about tiger conservation? And why should politicians fight off attempts to use forest land for farming, logging, mining or anything else of commercial value?

There are no official figures, but as many as 500,000 tourists visit India's tiger reserves every year. That's a lot of eyes and ears – and an impossible amount of potential income to replace.

One thing's for sure, any changes that are made must have immediate and clear benefits. India's tiger population is plummeting faster than anyone can count. The last official figure was 1,411 in 2008, but many experts claim that there could be as few as 800 left in the wild today.

Any effort by the Indian government to ban tourism – rather than introduce urgently needed regulations – is nothing more than a smokescreen to hide its absolute failure to protect the tiger.



**Tiger tourists: lots of eyes, ears and of course cameras.**

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Mark Carwardine is currently filming a *Last Chance to See* rhino special with Stephen Fry, which will be shown on BBC2 later this year.