

The Socio-Economic Dimensions of Ecotourism for Rural Communities around Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Corbett Tiger Reserve, centred on Corbett National Park, has developed into an important wildlife tourism landscape in Uttarakhand. This paper examines how the growth of ecotourism has affected the livelihoods and participation of rural communities living around the reserve. Drawing on published studies and secondary evidence, it finds that tourism has opened new livelihood opportunities through wage employment, homestays, guiding, transport and small enterprises. However, these gains are not shared equally across local communities. Tourism expansion has also been associated with changing land use, pressure on traditional livelihoods and limited community influence over tourism-related decisions. Using Ashley and Roe's (1998) framework of community involvement, the paper argues that local residents continue to participate mainly as hosts, workers and small service providers rather than as equal partners in the tourism economy. Strengthening community institutions and improving local participation in tourism benefits and decision-making are therefore important for making ecotourism around Corbett more inclusive.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Corbett Tiger Reserve; rural livelihoods; community participation; Uttarakhand

1. Introduction

Corbett Tiger Reserve is among Uttarakhand's most significant wildlife tourism destinations and has contributed to the development of a considerable tourism-based economy in the surrounding area. Agriculture and rearing of livestock are still traditional sources of livelihood in the villages surrounding the reserve. Tourism, however, has slowly become an extra activity to make income, offering work in resorts, guiding, transport, homestays and other small-scale tourism services. Thus, the increasing influence of tourism has gradually changed the patterns for livelihood of the communities living around Corbett. However, the growth of wildlife tourism presents key concerns. Tourism can produce employment and additional revenue, but it does not guarantee that local communities will share equally in benefits and be meaningfully involved in tourism development decisions.

The majority of the tourist economy may remain in the hands of people and businesses from outside the region, while local residents are frequently reduced to jobs or small-scale service provision. Therefore, it is important to think beyond the expansion of tourist activities and to assess to what extent ecotourism supports livelihood security, creates economic possibilities, and encourages community participation in

the villages surrounding Corbett Tiger Reserve. The paper talks about the socio-economic implications of ecotourism to the rural communities around Corbett Tiger Reserve. It synthesises existing published research on livelihood opportunities, local engagement and the changing nature of the tourism-rural community nexus, and interprets these findings within the wider context of community participation in wildlife tourism.

2. Literature Review

Ashley and Roe (1998) provide a useful framework for understanding how local communities are positioned within wildlife tourism. They describe a continuum ranging from communities that mainly bear the costs of tourism with little influence or benefit, to those that participate as employees or suppliers, and finally to those that act as genuine partners or owners with a meaningful share in decision-making and revenue. This framework is particularly relevant for examining the experience of communities living around Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Evidence from Corbett, shows that tourism has brought both opportunities and tensions. Rastogi et al. (2015), in their village-level study along the south-eastern boundary of the reserve, found that wildlife tourism improved links between local villages and wider markets. At the same time, the growth of resorts created new social and institutional pressures, especially where tourism businesses operated outside traditional village governance systems. Pandya et al. (2023) similarly observed that tourism-related wage employment has become increasingly important for residents around Corbett, while land is being bought, sold and converted for tourism use, sometimes at the expense of established agricultural livelihoods.

The distribution of tourism benefits is also uneven within local communities. Mittal et al. (2025) found that residents with lower levels of formal education and greater dependence on agriculture tended to hold more negative views of wildlife tourism than those who were better educated or more closely connected with tourism employment. This suggests that perceptions of tourism are influenced by how far individuals and households actually benefit from it. Alam and Nayak (2025) also found that simply feeling involved in tourism-related decision-making did not necessarily lead to stronger support for conservation. Instead, perceived economic benefits and greater conservation awareness were more closely associated with positive attitudes. Their findings support the distinction made by Ashley and Roe (1998) between formal participation and meaningful partnership.

At the state level, Uttarakhand's homestay scheme has been promoted as a way of taking tourism income more directly to rural households, including those in areas close to Corbett. However, Lakhera et al. (2025) note that the implementation of such support has not been uniform across districts. Evidences from other parts of Uttarakhand points in a similar direction. Kala (2013), in a study of Dhanolti Ecopark, found that ecotourism can contribute to local livelihoods, but that its benefits depend heavily on continued institutional support.

The broader literature on community-based tourism also reinforces this point. Stronza and Gordillo (2008) show that local people's views of ecotourism are strongly shaped by their role in decision-making, while Sebele (2010) demonstrates that even tourism ventures that generate revenue may still be experienced as disempowering when control and benefit-sharing remain uneven. Taken together, these studies suggest that the value of ecotourism for rural communities cannot be judged only by the growth of tourism activity or income. The nature of participation, control and distribution of benefits is equally important.

3. Methodology

This paper is a secondary-data synthesis based on peer-reviewed literature on Corbett Tiger Reserve, official Uttarakhand government tourism statistics, and one documented expert interview, all cited in the reference list. No primary household survey was conducted for this paper; rather, findings already reported in the cited village-level and survey-based studies are synthesised and interpreted through the community-involvement framework described above.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Dynamics of Ecotourism Footprint and Expansion

Official data reveal a massive expansion of the ecotourism footprint at Corbett National Park (CNP). Total annual tourist arrivals surged by 360.6% from 61,501 in 2000 to a peak of 283,281 in 2019, before a pandemic-driven drop to 168,078 in 2020 (Table 1). The long-term upward trend, plotted alongside notable annual fluctuations, underscores the rapid growth and inherent market vulnerabilities of the local ecotourism sector (Fig. 1).

Table 1. Longitudinal Tourist Arrivals at Corbett National Park (2000–2020)

Year	Indian Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists
2000	57,877	3,624	61,501
2001	57,113	3,775	60,888
2002	61,712	3,678	65,390
2003	86,886	4,170	91,056
2004	93,707	5,968	99,675
2005	114,623	8,199	122,822
2006	131,496	7,643	139,139
2007	120,486	6,682	127,168
2008	164,225	653	164,878
2009	183,484	926	184,410
2010	189,474	774	190,248
2011	131,728	4,882	136,610
2012	205,602	7,279	212,881
2013	172,598	4,204	176,802
2014	246,652	5,733	252,385
2015	194,590	5,258	199,848
2016	182,676	4,043	186,719
2017	248,526	5,972	254,498
2018	255,218	6,062	261,280
2019	275,521	7,760	283,281

Year	Indian Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists
2020	165,461	2,617	168,078

Source: Government of Uttarakhand, Department of Tourism, Tourist Statistics 2000–2020.

The tourism figures provide an important background for understanding the growing economic significance of Corbett for the surrounding rural communities. Rather than focusing on individual annual fluctuations, the data are used here to show the broader scale of tourism activity and to place the socio-economic effects of ecotourism in context. This helps in examining how the expansion of tourism has influenced local employment, livelihood opportunities and community participation around Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Table 2. Comparative Assessment of Ecotourism Volume (2024)

Destination	Indian Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists
Corbett National Park	351,771	10,120	361,891
All major destinations, Uttarakhand	59,373,869	176,408	59,550,277

Source: Government of Uttarakhand, Department of Tourism, Tourist Statistics of Major Tourist Destinations, Year 2024. Figures for 2021–2023 are not reported in the source series used here.

4.2 Livelihood Diversification and Ecological Decoupling

This heavy influx of tourism capital has altered rural household survival strategies around the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) buffer zones. Local residents have transitioned from subsistence agriculture to service roles as resort staff, nature guides, and safari drivers. State-supported homestay initiatives further enable households to capture tourism revenues directly rather than depending entirely on precarious wage labor (Pandya et al., 2023; Lakhera et al., 2025).

From a human ecology perspective, this economic shift facilitates a critical ecological decoupling effect. When households secure reliable ecotourism livelihoods, their direct extraction of reserve resources—such as fuelwood collection, livestock grazing, and illegal logging frequently decreases.

However, these benefits are highly stratified. Households with baseline capital, formal education, or proximity to main reserve gates (e.g., Ramnagar, Dhela) dominate the tourism economy. Meanwhile, marginalised, asset-poor social groups remain dependent on traditional, climate-vulnerable agriculture, creating a stark imbalance in local prosperity.

4.3 Institutional Asymmetry and Community Conservation Attitudes

The rapid growth of the capital-intensive resort economy has introduced friction into traditional village governance networks. Well-funded external tourism enterprises often bypass or weaken local village institutions (Gram Sabhas), creating external centers of economic influence (Rastogi et al., 2015). As a result, communities absorb the localized socio-ecological costs of high-density tourism but lack structural influence over its development.

This institutional asymmetry directly impacts wildlife conservation support. Households excluded from the ecotourism value chain—particularly marginalized, low-education farmers remain highly skeptical of wildlife tourism benefits (Mittal et al., 2025). Local tolerance for wildlife hazards, such as crop-

raiding by elephants, is closely tied to direct economic returns. When benefits are concentrated in a few hands, community support for ecosystem preservation erodes.

4.4 Governance Constraints and Landscape Sustainability

The evolution of tourism around CTR highlights the vulnerability of local business models. Early community-owned and operated ventures have largely been replaced by private resorts backed by external capital ([Bhartari](#), as cited in Dasgupta, 2023). Under the community involvement framework of Ashley and Roe (1998), residents function primarily as "hosts" or "employees" rather than genuine partners. They provide labour but lack equity in revenue sharing and landscape governance.

Furthermore, symbolic inclusion in institutional meetings does not automatically translate into community support for ecosystem protection; tangible economic security and targeted environmental awareness are far more critical drivers (Alam and Nayak, 2025). For long-term landscape sustainability, management policies must actively shift local communities from simple wage earners to institutional co-managers, ensuring equitable economic distribution to safeguard the CTR buffer zone.

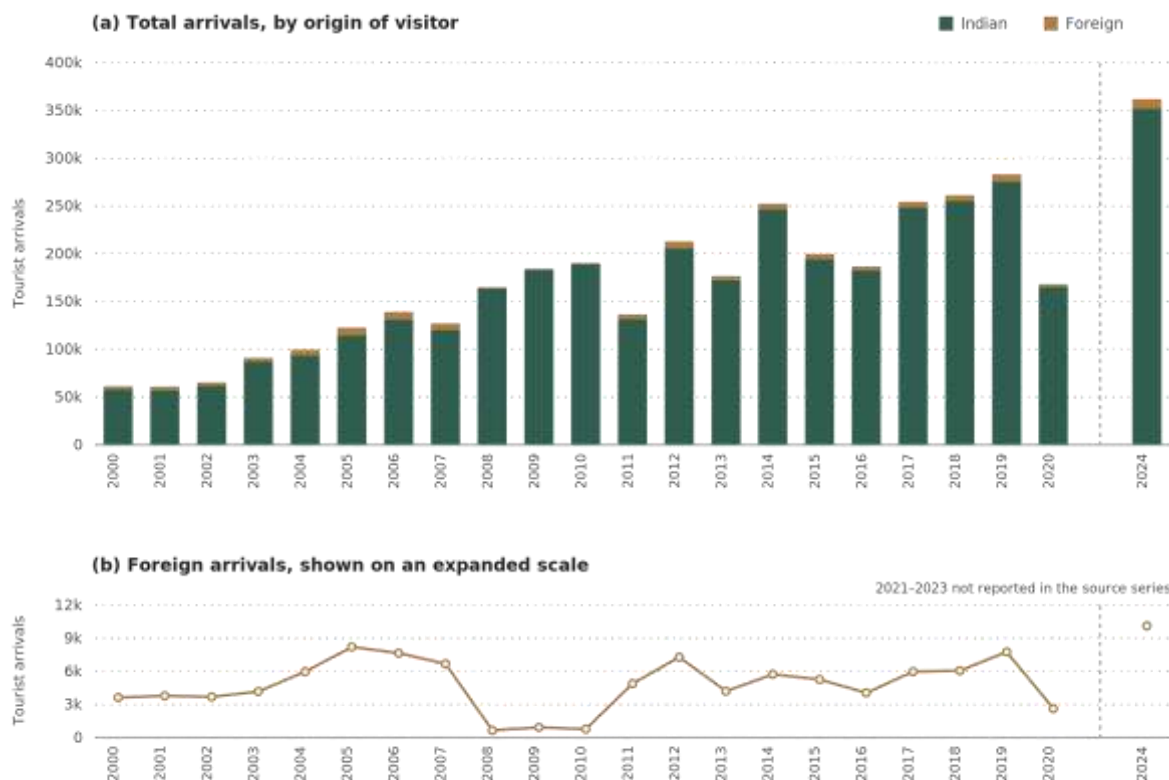


Figure 1. Tourist arrivals at Corbett National Park, 2000–2020 and 2024.

Panel (a) shows total arrivals with the Indian and foreign components stacked; panel (b) shows foreign arrivals alone on an expanded scale. The dashed break marks 2021–2023, for which figures are not reported in the source series. Plotted from the figures in Tables 1 and 2. Source: Government of Uttarakhand, Department of Tourism, Tourist Statistics 2000–2020 and Year 2024.

5 Conclusion and Policy Implications

Around the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR), ecotourism has clearly helped diversify how rural families ma

ke a living. Many households have shifted away from traditional farming into service-focused roles, working as resort staff, nature guides, drivers, and homestay operators. However, these financial benefits are not felt equally across different socio-economic groups. Instead of becoming fair partners in the local wildlife economy, most local residents simply serve as an external labor force. This imbalance leaves communities with very little say in how tourism develops, which in turn dampens local enthusiasm for protecting the broader ecosystem. If ecotourism is to work as a true conservation tool over the long run, we must move local communities away from being passive service providers and toward being active, equity-sharing partners who help manage the protected landscape.

Making ecotourism resilient and reducing harmful human pressure on the CTR buffer zone will require focused policy changes. First, forest and tourism departments need to bring village-level governance bodies (Gram Sabhas) directly into the licensing and decision-making processes of commercial resorts. This is a vital step to keep outside capital from completely taking over local resources. Second, the Government of Uttarakhand's homestay scheme needs to be better targeted, offering specific financial incentives and practical training to marginalized, less-educated farming families. Helping these vulnerable households move away from relying on forest wood and grazing is crucial for keeping the habitat intact. Finally, a set portion of resort revenues should go directly into community-managed funds. Using this money for quick compensation when wildlife damages crops or property creates a direct, visible link between the presence of tigers and the well-being of the community.

Looking ahead, future research should focus on long-term, household-level surveys across a much wider mix of villages surrounding the reserve. We need to systematically track how household income, dependence on the forest, and general attitudes change over time. Gathering this type of field data is the only reliable way to see if newer tourism models are genuinely creating a sustainable environment and supporting the people who live alongside India's premier tiger habitat.

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