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India, 2016



JAWAI and the need for a conversation about conservation

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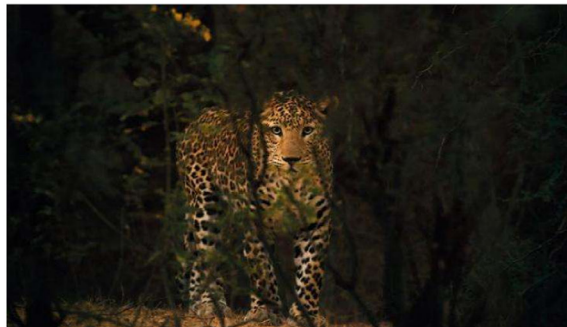


Photo courtesy SUJAN/Vedant Thite

The launch of most books are usually focussed around just the author and the book itself. The launch of Anjali and Jaisal Singh's book, *JAWAI - Land of the Leopard*, however, was focussed on an issue that does not receive enough attention in India - conservation.

The book itself documents the region of Jawai, in the Pali district of Rajasthan, home to an astonishing array of wildlife living in harmony with humans. Consisting largely of photographs taken by the Singhs and visitors to their camp in Jawai, it's meant to start a conversation on conservation tourism.

While one of the obvious highlights of the event was Rajasthan CM Vasundhara Raje attending and releasing the book, it was a clear reflection of the Singh's priorities that saw a panel discussion on conservation and conservation tourism take pride of place at the event.



Photo: SujanLuxury/Instagram

To the Singhs, after all, conservation tourism is both a passion as well as a profession.

The panel consisted of Jaisal Singh, Raje, South African conservationist, Dave Varty, and former Deutsche Bank co-CEO, Anshu Jain. While Raje may have been the most recognisable face on the stage, it was actually Varty, Jain and Jaisal Singh's experiences with conservation that were the real point of the night.

THE BARRIER TO CONSERVATION TOURISM

In fact, even before the panel discussion, both Varty and Jain addressed the audience individually. Varty spoke of the doability and the success of conservation tourism, while Jain spoke of the need and economic feasibility of it in the Indian context.

Both men, however, made one thing very clear - the need for governmental policy and frameworks to make conservation tourism in India a possibility. The villain of the piece, it soon became clear, was the government. Or, more specifically, government policy.



While Varty admitted to having little clue about the laws governing India's wildlife, the Indians on the stage, including Raje, roundly criticised India's outdated Wildlife Protection Act for being too jargonistic, antiquated and didn't take into account the value of participation in the private sector.

While sympathising with Jain and Singh's gripes with the Wildlife Protection Act, even accepting that some rules need to be changed, Raje maintained that changing these rules would be very hard as it required both Centre and State participation.

CONSERVATION, A POTENTIAL GOLDMINE

Despite the current barriers to conservation tourism thrown up by Indian law, all the panellists agreed on one thing - that the conservation tourism industry could change the face of India. Not just economically, but environmentally as well.

Examples were pulled from all over Africa to show just how conservation tourism can benefit a country's economy. For starters, how it can change the communities in these areas. Using Africa's example, panellists explained how involving the local communities rather than excluding them could greatly help the success of conservation efforts.

A percentage of the profits generated by this tourism could also be used for the upliftment of these areas, giving them access to amenities that they haven't been able to get traditionally.

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The potential for private parties to pour in huge sums of money that governments cannot match due to various other commitments was another factor that was mentioned. When asked if the private sector was willing to put money into a socially conscious cause like conservation, Jain answered with a resounding yes. However, he added as an afterthought, this was contingent on favourable and sensible government legislation.

Different approaches to conservation tourism were discussed ad nauseum, with pros and cons being thrown around. However, what was clear by the end is that India is too diverse a country for a one-approach-fits-all method to conservation. Site-specific solutions then are what's necessary. But for conservation tourism to begin, in whatever form, it needs one success story, perhaps that could be Jawai.



The Jawai book launch: Dave Varty

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