Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary is the second largest and the 2nd Tiger Reserve of Orissa. It has tremendous genetic and ecological importance as it is the wet portion of Decan Biogeographic zone. It has a significant elephant population in deciduous forests. The sanctuary is also important for being the natural habitat of two endangered species of fresh water crocodiles viz. Gharial and Mugger and a sizeable population of Tiger, Leopard, Gaur, Sambar, Chowsingha and barking deer. Large population of Giant squirrel is sighted on the canopy cover of the forest. Rare and endangered birds and butterflies are very common. 22.4 Km. long stretch of Satkosia Gorge of Mahanadi river harbours a large population of varied fishes and aquatic fauna.

Being located at the heart of Orissa, it is surrounded by hundreds of villages and numerous industries like NALCO, NTPC, TTPS, Bhusan Steels & Straps, Jindal steels, besides the coal mines of Talcher and other small industries. It acts as a carbon sink for them and hence is essential to protect the environment.

This sanctuary is vulnerable to heavy biotic pressure from surrounding villages such as tree felling, poaching, grazing of live stock, fishing and fire, which are against its sustenance. People living in and around the sanctuary in more than 200 villages depend on it for their livelihood and day to day requirements. They collect fuel wood, timber, bamboo for their bonafide use. But they also collect Mahu flower, Sal seed, Kenduleaves, Mushroom, Honey and other forest produce to sell in nearest towns. Commercial extraction of forest produce and peoples dependency on them will threat the conservation of biodiversity in the sanctuary.

Satkosia Gorge of river Mahanadi is the habitat of endangered Gharial and Mugger as the
gorge is also home of 183 species of fishes and prawn, which are the main food material for them. But nearly 800 traditional fishermen of 20 villagers on river bank depend on river for fishing for their means of livelihood. Tikarpada, Majhipada, Beherasahi, Kuturi, Marada are the few villages among them. Unregulated fishing activity not only disturbs the breeding biology of the crocodiles, but also limits the food availability for them. Crocodiles die of strangulation in forbidden gill nets used for fishing in the darkness of night. It is again a question of livelihood going against conservation of endangered fauna.

Now it has become a challenge for the sanctuary authority how to go for conservation without disturbing the livelihood of the dependent people. Conservation and livelihood should go side by side to gain the support of local people for existence of the sanctuary.

Non forestry based livelihood options like fishing in pond, poultry, apiculture, tailoring and mushroom cultivation are beneficial, hence these are promoted by the sanctuary authority through ecodevelopment activities. But livelihood based on ecotourism is a different type of forest based activity which can be carried out not at the cost of the forest. It sells the aesthetic value of the forest and wildlife only.

Eco tourism is defined as a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people (The International Ecotourism Society 1990). Responsible tourism is that tourism which maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts and helps local people conserve fragile cultures, habitats and species.

Tikarpada, a place on the bank of river Mahanadi in Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary is famous in Orissa for its Crocodile Research Center and has been attracting tourists form different corner of the country. During winter especially from October to February every year the flow of tourists as well as Picnickers reaches to maximum for visiting the sanctuary to experience wilderness and see wild animals. The climate during the season is very much congenial to spend time within it. Nearly 15000 tourists visit the sanctuary in a year. But the facilities and infrastructure at Tikarpada are not sufficient to provide adequate services to them.

During 2006, the then Principal Secretary to Govt. of Orissa in Forest & Environment Department Sri S.P.Nanda,IAS and the then Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Orissa Sri S.C.Mohanty,IFS thought to start community based ecotourism at Tikarpada to provide visitor facilities like accommodation, fooding, trekking, boating etc. Then a core team consisting of Sri A.K.Mohapatra,IFS, the then Conservator of Forests, Angul, Sri Susanta Nanda,IFS, the then Divisional Forest Officer, Satkosia Wildlife Division and myself selected a site 2 km down to Tikarpada in the sand dune
inside river Mahanadi to pitch 10 swiss cottage tents there.

During January, 2007 an ecotourism complex was developed there in the name of Gorge Retreat. Ten tents were pitched on the sand enclosed with chain link fence around the complex to prevent unwanted entry of visitors as well as wild animals. Solar street lights were installed inside the complex. All the tents were attached with tent toilets which were fitted with 24 hours running water supply. All the tents were well furnished with facilities of a star hotel and solar house lighting system. Large size umbrella of appliqué work were fixed in front of each tent with chairs underneath for the visitors to sit and enjoy the beauty of the gorge. A restaurant attached to a common dinning hall made up of tent was established within the complex to cater food to the visitors as per their demand out of menu chart.

Two fibre power boats were purchased and placed in the water of gorge to facilitate boating by the visitors. Initially the establishment cost of nearly fifteen lakh of rupees was borne by the State Forest Department and the created assets were handed over to the community to utilize them for their livelihood.

The young boys of Tikarpada village who were either sitting idle as unemployed or involved in traditional fishing in the river were organized to run the ecotourism complex. 64 such boys were grouped to form a registered society in the name Tikarpada Parivesh Paryatan Samiti (TIPPS). They were asked to manage the tent, restaurant and boats and provide necessary services to the ecotourists. Selected 22 members of the society were taken into confidence and various activities starting from reception to food supply and boating were distributed among them. The ecotourism complex was formally inaugurated on dated 20.01.2007 by Sri S.P.Nanda,IAS, Principal Secretary to Govt. of Orissa in Forest & Environment Department. During 2006-07 the occupancy in tents was not upto the mark. But the demand for the complex noticeably increased during Nov, 2007 to April, 2008. The visitors were rushing to office of the DFO, Satkosia Wildlife Division for booking of the tents.

The visitors have enjoyed pleasant nights in the tent, beauty of the Satkosia gorge surrounded by thick forest, trekking into forest tracks accompanied by guides, Tikarpada brand fish in their dish, chirping of birds and crowing of the peacock, call of giant squirrel and sighting of Muggers and Gharials on the sand near to water line of the river.

The members of TIPPS were given several trainings on Hotel Management by various institutions of Bhubaneswar to build their capacity. They have learnt to be well dressed, polite in dealings and cordial in rendering services. They were arranging camp fire to every group of
visitors in the night and taking them on boating to show them crocodiles. Since the facility was seasonal the complex has been temporarily closed since April, 08 last due to summer. It will again revive in November.

It has been observed that about 750 state tourists, 300 outside state tourists have stayed in tents. 1260 tourists have enjoyed boat riding. The society has earned income from rent of tents, boating fees and restaurant and Rs. 2, 97,125/- as their profit after deducting all working costs incurred during the period.

The 22 members of the community have shared 65% of net profit i.e. Rs. 1, 93,131 among themselves as their remuneration. They have kept balance 35% of the profit i.e. Rs.1,03,994 in their saving account, which will be utilized for their welfare activities, maintenance and further development of the infrastructures. The remuneration has been shared as per the degree of responsibilities they shouldered. For example, the Manager got 10% share, Security Guards got 6% share, Room Boy got 4.25% share, Clerk got 3% share and so on.

The community which was competing with the crocodile for their livelihood by way of fishing, could be diverted to such an option which is forest based but not at its cost. The pressure on river due to fishing could be reduced to some extent. The sanctuary as well as forest department have gained the support of local community so far as protection of wild life is concerned. The community is providing secret information about the smuggling and poaching and helping the staff in protection of forest and wildlife. They are ready to accept the proposal of the forest department for regulatory fishing in the gorge to protect the habitat of the Gharials.

Now the local community is interested to promote the ecotourism activity further out of their savings in the coming season. They are planning to construct tribal huts made up of bamboo mat and mud with its holistic cultural look for accommodation of tourists besides the existing tent facilities for even extended period. They will open one souvenir shop to sell traditional small crafts to the visitors. They have also planned to purchase one petrol driven vehicle to use it in carrying tourists to forest areas to show them wild animals and birds.

TIPPS is an example for successful ecotourism in true spirit. They have proved that ecotourism can be adopted as an alternate livelihood for them which in turn will protect the forest and wildlife. Their endeavour will definitely encourage people of adjoining villages like Purunakote, Labangi, Pampasar and Baliput of the sanctuary to go in for ecotourism as a means of livelihood.

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