

Guiding towards Nature. A conversation with Payal Mehta

**“Nature has always had more force than education.”
— Isaac Newton**

Nature guides or naturalists as they are popularly called, are the bridge between nature and people who visit a natural area. The recent past has seen a steady increase in ecotourism. Naturalists such as Payal Mehta not only ensure that their guest, i.e., tourists have a good experience, but also make people fall in love with nature.

It's hardly any child's dream to grow up and become a nature guide. Payal, being from the metropolitan city of Mumbai, never knew this kind of profession existed. Post her Masters' she took up a corporate job. But something must have not fit right because when she heard about Taj Safaris starting a training program exclusively for employees they were going

to hire for their upcoming resorts in central India, Payal grabbed the opportunity. That one decision changed her life. While talking to us RHATC Fellows during an interactive session, she reminisced about how she thoroughly enjoyed going to the same protected area every day. In a bid to check out something new, Payal had stumbled upon something she instinctively knew she would do for the rest of her life.

One may think that nature guides are lucky to be constantly in the wilderness. While it is definitely a perk of the occupation, Payal was quick to point out that sometimes it may not be



all smooth-sailing. There is always the fear of the unknown, the different dynamics of the group that one has to take care of, the disappointment of not sighting an animal, and lastly the struggle to find sufficient time with the family. A nature guide also has to prepare and study beforehand. It is all



worth the hustle of waking up early since you get to explore new places and meet people from all around the world.

Naturalists connect people to nature. And there are several ways to do it; one can work as a nature guide locally, i.e., based in one place as a freelance or as part of a lodge, a travelling guide who is with his/her guest throughout the trip or an entrepreneur who may start their own company. Irrespective of how one decides to pursue this profession, a nature guide's role is not just limited to showing animals or plants to the guests. A nature guide is the primary source of information for that particular region. They are a friend, a helper and in emergencies, a first-aid provider! To be able to play so many roles simultaneously, one needs to have good observation and communication skills apart from knowledge about wildlife.

Payal made us realize that nature tourism can aid conservation. Although, there is

no empirical data to measure the impacts, especially the positive ones, nature tourism can enable a shift in behavior and attitudes with the right guidance and information provided by the naturalist. A good example of that would be to gently nudge tourists to observe the fauna and flora apart from the usual charismatic species such as tigers, elephants, or rhinos. In doing so, not only are other species brought in focus but helps people understand how complex an ecosystem is. Nature tourism is not bound to dense forests and can encourage people to appreciate different landscapes. A country like India is blessed with several types of landscapes that include the rainforests of the north-east, cold deserts of trans-Himalaya, floodplains of Assam, Thar desert in the west, and many more. It might be impossible to show all these landscapes to people but there are smaller places that are representatives of vast landscapes. Kishen Bagh, an ecological park amidst the sprawling city of Jaipur is one such example. Kishen Bagh was initially





changes in land-use and compromised the privacy of local residents. Yet all is not lost. Experts in the field like Payal Mehta, Harsha J., and others are tying up with organisations to come up with courses that will equip future nature guides with tools and techniques necessary for ethical tourism.

created as a cactus garden and had failed miserably. Finally the park was restructured by Pradip Krishen and other like-minded people to represent the diverse micro-habitats of the desert.

A trail through the Park educates the tourists about the semi-arid landscapes called Roee in local culture. The park has planted only natives like Seenio and Bui scrubs, Munj grass and trees like Khejri, Rohida and Dhatura that cloth the undulating dunes. There are also ponds inside the park that welcome various species of birds.

Nature tourism or ecotourism as it is popularly called, not only helps educate the general

public about the importance of conserving natural habitats and its denizens but contribute to the repository of ecological information of a certain place. It creates watchers of the forest who know it well and can tell if the landscape and inhabitants are keeping healthy or not.

Like any other industry, nature tourism cannot keep expanding infinitely. In the bid to widen its avenues, the ecotourism industry is stressing natural resources and increasing our carbon footprint. Lack of formal training has caused disturbances to wildlife. Rapid burst of resorts and lodges to meet the demand of the growing industry has caused

Naturalists present a sneak-peak of the natural world to people. They do so by wearing many hats, including that of a care-taker, driver, educator and the list can go on. They shoulder the responsibility of spreading awareness about the natural world in an ethical and easy-to-digest form. If you are an aspiring naturalist reading this, I hope this article was able to nudge you in the direction Payal hopes to see in the future of ecotourism.

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