

# Nature's Storytellers: The role of tour guides in Conservation

"We firmly believe that nature guiding isn't just about showcasing landscapes; it's about repairing our connection to the Earth" says Payal Mehta, one of the team leaders of Nature Guides Academy in our very first session 'Career as a nature guide' of 'Follow the Leader' as part of the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation (RHATC) Program, 2024–25. I want to thank Zoo Outreach Organisation for organizing this session and Payal for being a wonderful speaker; her presentation was informative, entertaining and last but not the least my fellow batchmates who helped me write this article.

Nature guide or naturalist or experts as they use these words for individuals who interpret nature for people who visit forest areas. Since ecotourism was introduced in India, in the past decades there has been a sudden hike in tourism. Social media has contributed towards increasing the hype for eco-tourism. Being a nature guide is a newly known profession today. Being born and raised in Mumbai, Payal completed her master's in mountaineering course and then entered in MNC. But all this time somewhere inside, she knew that she was missing something and when she heard about the naturalist training program in her social circle happening in Taj Safaris, she jumped in to the opportunity with the support from her family. The course was to train individuals as nature interpreter in their upcoming resorts at central parts of India. After that, she never looked back. She always had curiosity about this field and once started, she knew that this was her calling.

Being a nature educator, I resonated with her primarily on the point where she mentioned people think that it's a very fun job to be in a forest and get

paid for it. While it is exciting to be in wilderness, but it was not like you will expect something and you will get it for sure. There is always the fear of facing the unknown and the different expectations of the group that one has to take care of. Sometimes the disappointment of not sighting an animal. And lastly, the struggle in managing family time. A nature guide needs to do some preparations beforehand. Of course it is worth the hustle to understand these challenges, we face during interacting with our





respective audiences. It is also very common in the field of conservation to look down upon the nature guides as if the profession has nothing to contribute towards the ultimate goal of conservation. This talk was a step towards breaking this myth and to dive deeper into 'Nature Guiding' as a profession and how it can have a direct impact on conservation.

Payal briefly shared about the role of naturalists, meaning of tourism, fun and challenges about it. She discussed the net impact of tourism on wildlife and the community associated with it. Naturalists play a connecting point between people and nature. They are trained observers of the wildlife who gives you information about the importance of biodiversity

and how it affects our day-to-day life. In the present scenario, apart from considering nature guiding as a profession, we need self-motivated enthusiastic individuals to take conservation to the next level.

At the end of the session, Payal discussed issues like how we can try to encourage controlled tourism and exploitation of the resources by drawing the line between greed and sensible tourism. Batting should be banned, instead of that work with communities who are sharing spaces with the wild. This would encourage them to do conservation. We can recommend some strong policies regarding the resources used by economically driven people so that resources don't get exploited. It is the local communities who suffer because of this unchecked tourism. Her take on night safari and bird watch from hide was not fully acceptable when we think from a wildlife point of view if that protected area has a water scarcity, then we could setup artificial waterbody to enrich the wild animals but, it cannot be tolerated in any case that the water scarcity economically exploited. Apart from these, she also brought the current issue of Dibang valley dam to our notice.

After this session according to my understanding, in India, eco-tourism started with the hope of connecting people with nature, providing livelihood to the local communities along with conservation but it has taken a turn from the initial goal of conservation to mere economic benefits. I want to become a conservationist so that I can do my bit to make people understand the value of nature and natural resources. I hope this discussion would encourage you to be driven more towards conservation through responsible tourism.

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