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"Consuming the Tiger: Experiencing Neoliberal Nature"

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This is an ethnographic account of urban middle class Indian tourists' experience of seeing the tiger in the national parks (NP) in India, based on participant observation in Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, and Kanha and Bandhavgarh National Parks in Madhya Pradesh, India. This experience of seeing the tiger emerges as a specific form of commodity located within the process of commodification pervasive under neoliberal capitalism, circulated and sustained through a range of media, attainable through competitive exchange of economic and social capital. While the experience is prefigured, standardised and fetishised, actual embodied experience of the tiger safari in NP adds form and content to this commodity. Specific practices including the economy of tiger sighting, forms of access to NP and safari regulations reinforce wildlife experience as a scarce market commodity. The tourist gaze, mediated through global and new social media and materialised through ubiquitous photography, make the tiger simultaneously wild and familiar, cosmopolitan and parochial, universal commodity sign and specifically unique. Material experience through which the tourist "consumes" the tiger reinforces ideas of nature as enclosed, separated and rationed space accessible through the market to those with money to spend, and the tiger as accessible through social status and economic hierarchies. This research unravels a basic contradiction between a sustainable conservation ethic, and subjectivity created by this form of competitive consumption of commoditised nature. (Text from author's abstract)

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