



**The University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law  
Indigenous Peoples Law & Policy Program  
Initiative on Indigenous Rights and Protected Areas**

**The World Wildlife Fund Safari Tourism Partnership  
with Natural Habitat Adventures and Indigenous Peoples Rights  
(Report #2)**

**INDIA'S TIGER RESERVES, THE WORLD WILDLIFE FUND, AND  
VIOLATIONS OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

**Introduction**

This report on *India's Tiger Reserves, The World Wildlife Fund, and Violations of the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is the second in a series produced by The University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law Indigenous Peoples Law & Policy Program (IPLP) Initiative on [Indigenous Rights and Protected Areas](#). This IPLP report focuses on the World Wildlife Fund's business partnership with a major international tourism company, Natural Habitat Adventures ("NatHab") and the partnership's promotion of safari tourism in two of India's most famous "tiger reserves;" [Kaziranga National Park](#) and [Kanha Tiger Reserve](#), where Indigenous Peoples have been forcefully evicted, murdered, raped and persecuted for refusing to leave their traditional lands. The report calls upon WWF to stop accepting any profits or benefits from its partnership with NatHab derived from these tiger reserve safari tours until the government of India ceases in its efforts to forcibly evict the Indigenous Peoples from the lands that they have relied upon for centuries for their cultural survival, identity and integrity.

The [first report](#) in this series focused on WWF's promotion of tourism in Tanzania's [Ngorongoro Conservation Area \(NCA\)](#), where as many as 100,000 Maasai Indigenous Peoples are at risk of being [evicted](#) by the government and forced to leave their homes and the lands they've lived on for centuries. This second IPLP report explores the role of WWF in the promotion of safari tourism in India's tiger reserves where the government plans to involuntarily remove 400,000 Indigenous Peoples, India's Adivasis (the Sanskrit word for the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent), from their traditional homes and lands in the name of "conservation."

## **The World Wildlife Fund Partnership with Natural Habitat Adventures**

The [World Wildlife Fund](#) is the world's leading environmental conservation organization, with over one million supporters and involvement in thousands of conservation-related projects in more than 100 countries around the globe. Since 2003, WWF has [partnered](#) with a for-profit global tourism corporation, Natural Habitat Adventures, to offer its customers "[the opportunity](#) to explore the world's wild places." Living within many of those "wild places" are the world's Indigenous Peoples. In these "[protected areas](#)" Indigenous Peoples' human rights are too often routinely and systematically violated by governments that receive funding and technical support from States, international organizations like the World Bank, and, as described in this report, the largest conservation organization in the world, the World Wildlife Fund.

Natural Habitat Adventures advertises its mission as "[conservation through exploration: protecting our planet by inspiring travelers, supporting local communities and boldly influencing the entire travel industry.](#)" To further its mission, NatHab has entered into a partnership with WWF. NatHab advertises its partner in this tourism venture, WWF, as "the world's leading environmental organization." Together, they offer "nearly 100 conservation-focused and wildlife expeditions around the globe" on every continent of the planet, from [Polar Bear tours in the Arctic Circle](#) to "[Women in the Wild](#)" adventure tours and [Special Photo Expeditions](#).

[NatHab reports](#) its business partnership has provided more than \$6 million to support WWF's global conservation efforts (which happen to compliment and support NatHab's business model of environmentally friendly tourist outings in far-away, pristinely preserved places). NatHab has further [pledged](#) it "will continue to give 1% of gross sales plus \$174,000 annually through 2028 in support of WWF." As an added benefit supporting WWF's conservation efforts, NatHab states its business customers "have donated an additional \$40 million in support of WWF priorities in some of the most precious yet imperiled places on the planet."

## **India's Human Rights Abuses and the WWF/NatHab Tourism Partnership**

WWF's association with tiger conservation in India long predates its tourism partnership with NatHab. WWF's involvement in tiger conservation in India dates back to 1973 with the implementation of "[Project Tiger](#)." Currently, WWF continues to work with government forest departments and India's National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to [conduct research, monitoring, and spatial planning](#) in all the country's tiger landscapes.

India, advised and assisted by WWF, has consistently adopted an "exclusionary approach" in its tiger reserves and national parks, premised on the idea that biodiversity protection is best achieved by creating protected areas devoid of human disturbance. This practice, known as "[fortress conservation](#)," has driven India's most recent efforts to expand its tiger reserves. In July 2024, [a letter](#) was released by the director of India's National Tiger Conservation Authority that sparked

grave concerns among India's Indigenous communities who live in areas identified as tiger reserves.

The letter was written to Chief Wildlife Wardens in 19 states urging them to evict more Adivasi Indigenous Peoples from the country's tiger reserves. It is estimated that up to 400,000 Adivasis face evictions from the lands they have lived on for centuries. On September 20, 2024, Adivasis organized [mass protests](#) against forced evictions from their traditional forests to pave the way for tiger reserves. According to an article published by Survival International, "700 Adivasi people from 25 villages protested at the entrance gates of Nagarhole in Karnataka state, one of India's best-known tiger reserves." WWF is specifically called out in the [article](#) for not speaking out against the evictions, and for claiming that the evictions are voluntary, while, in fact, as the Adivasis have repeatedly attested, they are being forced to leave their ancestral lands.

While the Adivasis protest their planned evictions by the government of India, not only does WWF keep silent, it continues to profit from tiger safari tours offered by its business partner, NatHab, within the traditional lands of the Adivasis. The WWF/NatHab tourism partnership's "[Grand India Wildlife Adventure: An In-Depth Nature Odyssey in Search of Bengal Tigers and Other Rare Wildlife](#)" includes a 13-day comprehensive itinerary, limited to 11 travelers, starting at \$12,395 (\$U.S., including airfare). The NatHab/WWF partnership advertises its "Grand India Wildlife Adventure" as an "all-encompassing wildlife itinerary in less travelled parks." Its small group tours are promoted as providing "more authentic nature experiences, with India's finest naturalist guides—with top-level training including resources from WWF scientists."

One of the major tiger reserves featured as part of the WWF/NatHab "Grand India Wildlife Adventure" is the Kaziranga National Park. Created in 1974, the park was [designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site](#) in 1985. Kaziranga National Park is located in north-central Assam state and is the ancestral homeland of many [Indigenous communities](#) within the region collectively referred to as the Adivasi.

Over the years, "protection" of the park has become increasingly militarized. In [2017](#), WWF was reported by [BBC News](#) to have funded eco-guards that were responsible for the multiple shootings and killings of Indigenous Peoples whose traditional homelands had always been in Kaziranga. According to the BBC report, the government "granted the guards at Kaziranga extraordinary powers that give them considerable protection against prosecution if they shoot and kill people in the park."

[The Kanha National Park](#) is another famous tiger reserve included on the itinerary of the WWF/NatHab tourism partnership's "Grand India Wildlife Adventure." Kanha National Park was created in 1955 and later designated as a tiger reserve in 1973. The reserve area served as the setting for Rudyard Kipling's classic novel, "The Jungle Book." About [80 per cent](#) of the Adivasi communities living within and around the park are the semi-nomadic Adivasi tribes of the Baiga and Gond.

After the establishment of Kanha Tiger Reserve in the mid-seventies, the Baiga and Gond people were evicted from their ancestral homelands by the government for the purposes of conserving biodiversity in the area. The [relocation](#) was reported to be voluntary; however, it was later revealed that the Baiga and Gond were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands. In 2010, there was renewed pressure to evict more Indigenous Adivasi communities [after the National Tiger Conservation Authority received funding for relocation](#). According to a [“Right to Information Report](#) filed on 11/12/2017, a number of 34 villages have been relocated, corresponding to some 1870 families.”

In 2018, WWF was linked in a report by Survival International to the [eviction](#) of Baiga Indigenous communities from the wildlife “corridor.” As provided for under Indian law, any relocation must be voluntary, but the Baiga people reported [“threats, intimidation and violence until they have no choice to leave their homes.”](#) It was further reported that WWF provided [“infrastructural support, training and equipment for staff in Kanha Tiger Reserve.”](#)

### **WWF’s Stated Policies Respecting the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Protected Areas and the Reality on the Ground**

As a matter of publicly stated policy and principles, WWF [asserts](#) it recognizes that Indigenous Peoples “are among the Earth’s most important stewards of natural resources,” and that the organization respects their “human and development rights,” and “the importance of conserving their cultures.” Yet, in the two Tiger Reserves covered by this report—the Kaziranga National Park and the Kanha National Park—WWF has provided financial, material, technical, and legal support to park rangers that contributed to human rights violations perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples. Further, WWF as shown in this report benefits financially from the “fortress conservation” policies being pursued by India’s government in its tiger reserves and national parks, receiving a percentage of revenues from the tourism dollars spent by NatHab’s customers in these protected areas. The partnership’s customers pay tens of thousands of dollars to see and experience the biodiversity assertedly being protected by the government’s evictions of the Indigenous Adivasi peoples from their traditional homelands in the name of WWF’s vision of conservation as implemented on the ground throughout India’s tiger reserves.

The wildlife safari tours in Tanzania and India offered by the WWF/NatHab partnership are two examples, [but not the only ones](#), of WWF lending its name for a profit and price to NatHab to promote what it calls “conservation tourism” in protected areas. This Report, however, only focuses attention on the safari tours in India’s tiger reserves promoted by the WWF/NatHab partnership, and calls upon WWF to stop accepting any profits or benefits from these tiger reserve safari tours until the government of India ceases in its efforts to coerce and forcibly evict the Indigenous Peoples whose lives, livelihoods and very cultural survival are tied to these protected areas that they have been protecting as their ancestral homelands since time immemorial.

**A CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION BY THE WORLD WILDLIFE FUND  
CONCERNING THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF INDIA'S TIGER RESERVES**

**November 9, 2024**

1. WWF must suspend all planning, funding, work, and efforts in support of India's plan to forcibly evict any Indigenous Peoples in protected areas and national parks established and maintained as tiger reserves until an effective process of consultation has been developed and agreed to by affected Indigenous communities through their representative institutions.
2. WWF must obtain the free prior and informed consent of affected Indigenous communities for any plan or action the organization promotes or supports in protected areas and national parks established and maintained as tiger reserves that may affect the traditional lands, territories and other resources of these communities.
3. WWF must suspend its safari tourism partnership with Natural Habitat in protected areas and national parks established and maintained as tiger reserves until the government of India announces it will terminate all future efforts to evict the Indigenous Adivasi communities from their traditional lands.
4. To affirm and stand behind its own stated policies and principles on recognizing Indigenous Peoples' human rights and the important role they play as the Earth's most important stewards of natural resources and biodiversity, WWF must issue a statement denouncing human rights violations resulting from forced evictions of Indigenous Peoples by the government of India.