Rural Tourism in Darjeeling

Darjeeling is known as the queen of the hills for its scenic beauty which attracts a large number of tourists from all over the world each year. Notwithstanding the volatile political situation that thwarts tourism Darjeeling continues to witness an exponential growth in tourism. Over the past few years rural tourism has received considerable impetus from the Tourism Department, Forest Department, the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), Tea Companies and Tour and Travel Agencies. As a result Rural Darjeeling is witnessing a mushrooming trend in the number of home stays, farm-stays and eco-tourist spots. Livelihood from tourism and allied services now figures prominently in villages like Upper Chatakpur, Upper Bhutia Busty, Rampaing, Upper Sepi, Gurlum, Gorkhay, and Samanden which lie within the Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary and Singalia National Park, the two protected areas of Darjeeling.

While tourism and its allied services ranging from homestays to portage have brought in considerable income for the rural communities some community members fear the rapid growth and surge in the floating population in the rural areas. The model that has been promoted is based on mass tourism and continues to be unregulated and unplanned. Rural villages known for their pristine beauty and solitude have now been transformed by the increase in concrete houses and infrastructure construction.

Shift in livelihood activities is seen among households practicing homestays who are shying away from agriculture opting for income from tourism instead. Most households in the revenue villages are known to have sold their agricultural land to outsiders for setting up home stays. This raises major concerns of self-reliance, food security and sustainability.

Water scarcity is already on the rise in villages like Upper Chatakpur and Upper Bhutia Busty which are major tourist hotspots. The increase in the volume of waste is a major concern as a systematic waste management is non-existent in the rural areas. Pollution, choking of water bodies that endanger the wildlife, flora and fauna within the protected area is an aspect that has not been looked into by the concerned authorities. In the recent Himalayan Cleanup conducted by ATREE to raise awareness on waste management, massive amounts of single use and multilayered plastic, tetra packs and other waste interns were collected from these villages proving that the volume of waste in these tourist destination villages are significantly higher than the rest.

Lifestyles of the rural population continues to change and the fear of cultural and social erosion resulting from massive influx of tourists continues to be a major concern among some of the villagers.

Planning and regulating tourism is the need of the hour as majority of the tour operators and tourists are uninformed and uneducated about these issues. Most of the homestays are cheap which attracts large number of tourists-perhaps high-end tourism, if promoted, could bring higher revenues as well responsible tourists into the villages. Tourism needs to be rethought and remodeled. Responsible tourism that takes into account environment, religion, social fabric and sustainability needs to be promoted in these rural areas that are social, cultural and biodiversity hotspots of Darjeeling Eastern Himalayas. Converting them into tourist hotspots is not a long term solution to solve livelihood challenges and tourist demand.

- Prakash Tamand (prakash.tamang@atree.org, translated from Nepali by Pasang Lepcha)
Mammalian diversity in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya
Review of archival information

Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya are part of the Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspot. Documentation of biodiversity which included the mammalian fauna of the region was initiated as early as 1841 by British naturalists. This information is not readily available as they are yet to be digitized and stored centrally. Access to these information is essential to set up a baseline so that change in mammalian diversity can be documented in the landscape which has undergone tremendous change. We conducted a literature review of mammalian diversity in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya using information from various sources. Some literature was available online and others are archived at the Natural History Museum located within the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, Darjeeling, Darjeeling Government College and Biodiversity Heritage Library (www.biodiversitylibrary.org). Our review listed a historical record of 177 species from Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya from 78 different sources, which mainly included books and journal articles spanning 177 years, since 1841. These species represented 11 orders and 33 families. 17 species were endemic to South Asia. Of these 160 and 147 mammalian species records were from Sikkim and Darjeeling, (including Kalimpong) respectively. This also included the newly discovered species Sikkim Pika Ochotona sikimara, endemic to Sikkim, described and separated from Moupin Pika Ochotona thibetana through phylogenetic analysis (Dahal et al 2017). We will be using this as a baseline for conducting field research for mammalian diversity in various agro-ecosystems in the region.

- Thangyuanlian Naulak (t.naulak@atee.org)

Community perceptions on changes and issues in Agro-ecosystems of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya

Assessments of community perceptions were conducted across agro-ecosystem sites in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya. Some of the changes perceived by the communities that have a direct bearing on biodiversity and ecosystem services included:

a) **Change in cropping patterns:** Higher inclination towards cash crop cultivation due to lower market prices and agricultural yield in traditional farming systems involving traditional crops. This will impact the diversity of the traditional agro-ecosystems when monocultures of cash crops are set up.

b) **Increasing Human-Wildlife Conflicts:** Communities living around forested areas increasingly describe crop de predation by wildlife. This has a direct bearing on the cultivation of food crops as thus impacting food security. This has led to increase in fallow land and off farm activities and migration.

c) **Lack of appropriate policy:** Lack of mountain-centric policies especially in the agriculture sector, as Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya is generally not considered to be an agriculture-dependent region, but rather a tourism area.

d) **Increasing water shortage:** Degradation of springs and springsheds leading to shortage of water in rural areas especially due to increase in built up areas, construction of infrastructure and climate change.

e) **Negative impacts of tourism:** Communities also perceived the negative impacts of rural tourism where there were littering of garbage due to movement of tourists and also increase in the use of fuelwood to cater to tourists. Both the state governments of Sikkim and Darjeeling have prioritized tourism sector as one of the leading strategies for the economic development of the state.

- Aditya Pradhan (aditya.pradhan@atee.org)
Tackling Crop Depredation through Convergence with Government flagship programmes

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is the largest employment generating scheme of the Government of India. Creation of community assets with employment generation is the primary objective of MNREGA. To reduce crop depredation by wild animals, ATREE facilitated a convergence programme between the Forest Department and the Block Development Office (Pulbazar Bijanbari) for the construction of a fence around the boundaries of two villages close to Singalila National Park, Darjeeling.

The major challenge in the implementation of this program was that 80% of the support under MNREGA constitutes labour. This necessitates implementation of projects under MNREGA to create convergence with other line departments to mobilize material costs for community asset-fence in this case. The other challenge communities prioritise infrastructure like roads, pavements, culvert bridges, protection wall etc. over agricultural/environmental assets like live fencing for reducing crop depredation.

The first step in facilitating this process started as early as 2015 by building consensus amongst the community members at the Gram Panchayat and Joint Forest Management Committee (earlier known as Forest Protection Committees) to develop and submit a community developed plan for construction of fence. The second step involved mobilizing labour and material costs by building consensus between the Divisional Forest Officer of the Forest Department and the Block Development Officer of Pulbazar Bijanbari Block Office. Once the plan was passed by the respective head of departments regular follow up was carried out to ensure that the funds and materials would be allocated for smooth implementation of the work.

By July 2018 the construction of fencing was successfully completed in both the villages that span 7 and 8 kilometers around the village boundary of the two forest villages. The Forest Department allocated the required barbed wire, nails, wooden posts and saplings for live fencing while labour was provided via job cards under MNREGA.

At a time when agriculture is suffering from labor deficit, it is really important that MNREGA activities be implemented to strengthen the existing agricultural system. A major achievement therefore has been to refocus the priority of the people into creation of agricultural and environmental assets like fencing for human wildlife conflict mitigation.

Bridging the gap in proper implementation of government programmes can be achieved by proper planning, creating dialogues between stakeholders and facilitating effective collaboration. Empowering communities through such processes enables them to take ownership (of problems and solutions) and sustainability of such community assets created under MNREGA.

- Pasang Lepcha (pasang.lepcha@atree.org)

Field based solutions to prevent wildlife crop depredation around Singalila National Park, Darjeeling

A midst the lush green forest bordering the Singalila landscape lies the village of Sepi, a perfectly sketched village with terraced fields visible from a distance. The major livelihood activity in the village is agriculture. As an outsider one fails to recognize the time invested and effort required for growing and harvesting crops. After such intense investment and input it is quite unlikely that one would expect a dwindling output. But such is the case for farmers in Sepi and the neighboring villages where their efforts to produce better and more crops are marred by constant crop raids by wild animals.

Farmers have tried and tested various mitigation strategies to deter wild animals from entering their agriculture fields. Bursting crackers, night guarding, bamboo fencing, etc seemed to work only for a certain period. Every attempt failed with time as wild animals adapted to these changes. In order to prevent further crop raids a community based endeavor was undertaken by the farmers of Sepi. In 2016 they incorporated live/bio fence within the existing barbed wire fence along the village boundary. In two years the bio-fence has grown making it stronger, dense and impassable. According to the farmers the frequency of attacks by wild pigs has definitely decreased however the effectiveness of the bio-fence can only be confirmed with time. This too is a short-term strategy as for a long-term solution there has to be some “out of the box” thinking!

- Poonam Rai (poonam.ra@atree.org)
Fredscorpset Norway (FK Norway) Exchange Programme
Mid-term review
Fredscorpset Norway (FK Norway) has been supporting an exchange of volunteers for the project “Partnership for Strengthening Private Sector Development in Rural Livelihoods” among Asian and African partners for three years from November 2016 to October 2019. ATREE along with Young Volunteers for the Environment (YVE) Kenya, Forum of Sustainable Energy and Sustainable Development (FEDESMO) Mozambique and Tanzania Traditional Energy Development Organization (TaTEDO) Tanzania coordinated by Namsaling Community Development Centre (NCDC) Nepal are participating partners.

Participants at the FK Norway Mid-term Review, Gangtok Sikkim

A mid-term review of this programme was held in Gangtok from 16th-18th September where representatives from all the partner organisations participated. The key objectives of the meeting included 1) To monitor progress and results of the project. Monitoring of partner’s compliance with crosscutting issues, financial management and that the partnership functions in line with FKs vision, mission and strategic objectives. 2) To facilitate reflection on what the partners have learnt from the project so far — and to see how this learning can be integrated into the project in the coming round(s) to enhance the results. The key outputs included 1) a road map for the concluding year of the first round (2016-2019), 2) identification of key challenges of implementing exchange programmes like this and strategies to overcome them and 3) a framework for the second round of the project (2019-2021).

- Dr. Sarala Khaling (sarala.khaling@atree.org)

Certificate Training Workshop at IIT Guwahati

Ecosystem Approaches to Water and Food Security for Rural Wellbeing - Certificate Training Workshop on Integrating Ecosystem Services and Rural Livelihoods was organized in collaboration with Centre for Rural Technology (CRT), Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati from 10th-14th September 2018. The course was attended by 30 participants from all the 8 Northeast states and Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The workshop discussed various natural and social science concepts in the field of ecosystem and wellbeing assessments. The workshop aimed to link ecosystem services, food and water security, environmental change and the dynamics of rural systems to understand and enhance the wellbeing of rural communities in the Eastern Himalayas. Training was imparted through a combination of lectures, discussions, field exercises and intensive group projects.

-Rubin Sagar, ATREE Bangalore (rubin.sagar@atree.org)

New Staff

Mr Arun Subba joined the Regional Office as Coordinator - Database, Outreach & Communication in the NMHS funded project from 1st October, 2018. Arun has an MCA from Sikkim University with a keen interest in web application development.

Mr Praniel Gurung joined the Regional Office as Coordinator - Database, Outreach & Communication in the NMHS funded project from 1st October, 2018. Arun has an BTech from Christ University, Bangalore with an interest in software development.

ATREE’s mission is to promote socially just environmental conservation and sustainable development by generating rigorous interdisciplinary knowledge that engages actively with academia, policy makers, practitioners, activists, students and wider public audiences. ATREE’s Northeast/Eastern Himalayas Office has a direct presence in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas and Assam, and works with a range of local partners in the other states of north east India.

For more information contact

Dr. Sarala Khaling
Regional Director
sarala.khaling@atree.org

Rohit George
rohit.george@atree.org