

The Devalsari Story Unfolds

Author - Sanjay Sondhi, Published on - 22.6.2015

A week ago, Titli Trust, the nature conservation NGO that I am associated with, conducted a starters nature guide training for the local youth at Devalsari near Thatyur. Devalsari is nestled in the Aglar Valley, approximately 75 kilometers from Dehradun and its marvelous forests and biodiversity have been a magnet for us in the last five years. We have made repeated visits to the area to revel in its biodiversity, and witnessed first-hand the issues that typically plague life in the hills in Uttarakhand. Issues of lack of adequate medical and school facilities, unmet aspirations of educated youth, crop damage by wildlife and lack of alternate livelihoods is creating a trend of people selling their land cheap and moving to the cities. Into this grim scenario entered a young, then 17 year-old, who wanted to attempt to change this. Over the last few years, working hand in hand with this young lad, Arun Prasad, we decided not just to crib about what we were witnessing in a Himalayan paradise, but attempt to do something about it. Our efforts finally culminated in the start of a program in Devalsari that hopes to address the issues the local villages are facing. We have just initiated the Devalsari Ecotourism Development Project that hopes to train local youth to become nature guides, start home stays and get involved in community-based rural eco-tourism. The first step to making this happen was a 3-day nature guide-training course in which 32 people from Devalsari and the surrounding areas attended. The camp created a great deal of enthusiasm and vigour and many people came away wanting to be a part of this movement, this new story. Many small events unfolded in the background. The training program was held at the newly constructed Deodar Ecotourism and Research Center, built and financed mostly by the local community themselves. The center is located on the backdrop of marvelous deodar forests. When we visited the center in the third week of May, I had no hopes of it getting ready in time, and I told Arun so. "Sir, we will get it ready," Arun promised. Over the next 3 weeks, the local team worked round the clock, and they finally got the lovely Center ready on the morning of the event!



The new Deodar Ecotourism and Research

Center, Devalsari (Pic. Anchal Sondhi) Hosting 30-odd people for the first time in a forest camp half a kilometer from the village is no joke. Vehicles cannot reach the campsite, so mules have to be hired to move material. Most goods, including food, are not available at Bangseel, the nearest village, so one has to go the Thatyur, 13 kilometers away, to get even nuts and bolts! More hurdles awaited Arun and his team. On the first night of the camp, water ran out. Arun and his team used an electric conduit to draw water from a stream 3 kilometers from the camp-site, up the mountain slope. And all of this was done between midnight and two am! We have no idea where this journey will take us, but using ecotourism to provide an alternate livelihood, in order to incentivize conservation of flora and fauna, is at the heart of our strategy. Hold your breath as the Devalsari story unfolds ... [The author is a Dehradun-based nature lover](#)
Contact the author First published in Hindustan Times (**Dehradun edition**)