Sacred Mountains

Located in the Eastern Himalayan region, Sikkim is the second smallest (7096 km²) and one of the least populous states of India. This region represents one of the global biodiversity hotspots of the world (Myers et al. 2000). Located in the lap of the third highest mountain in the world, the Kanchendzonga landscape is an important part of the Eastern Himalayan region. The stunning variation in altitude (1220 metres to 8586 metres) with its exceptionally high biodiversity, coupled with the existence of nine major ethnic communities living within the landscape make this landscape a prime destination for tourists given its rich natural and cultural heritage. Due to very limited industrial growth in this landscape, tourism is becoming a major source of employment for the local people (Rai and Sundriyal, 1990), and since 1990’s there has been a significant rise in tourist numbers (Maharana et al, 2000).

A revered sage from the 8th century- Guru Padmasambhava is said to have blessed the Kanchendzonga landscape making it sacred to many Buddhists and Hindus. A number of indigenous communities such as the Lepcha, Mangar, Gurung, Chettri, Bhotia, Lachenpa, Sherpa, Limbu and Tibetan Dokpa have been residing in this landscape from at least the past several centuries (Tambe and Rawat, 2009). Livestock rearing and cardamom farming in the subtropical belt have been the main livelihoods for these communities (ibid). Recently, tourism in certain select villages has brought about local prosperity.

Image 1: The sacred Kathok Lake in the village of Yuksom with the backdrop of the
Ecotourism in the Eastern Himalayas:

In many instances, ecotourism is assumed to be inherently sustainable and conservation oriented, although few attempts have been made to verify such assumptions (Maharana et al. 2000; Nyaupane and Thapa 2004; Bajracharya et al. 2005). In principle, ecotourism incorporates the objectives of environmental and cultural conservation and emphasizes economic benefits for local communities. However, opening up new and previously undiscovered destinations to the mass market has the potential to be more environmentally damaging, since it usually occurs in fragile environments (Wall 1997). For example, recent trends indicate a surge in the number of visitors to ecotourism destinations, mainly located in the mountains (Chettri et al, 2008). Hiking, camping, rafting, mountaineering, rock climbing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, and other forms of non-consumptive recreation are in growing demand (Sharma et al, 2002). The potentials for tourism development in the Himalayas are substantial. The number of visits in the Himalayan region has grown in recent years, but the data on tourist inflows into the region are not properly recorded and maintained; although the contribution to the mountain economy appears to be quite significant (Ibid).

The Kanchendzonga landscape, comprising the Himalayas of Sikkim and Darjeeling together with the adjacent neighboring areas of eastern Nepal and western Bhutan has been an attractive destination for adventure tourists, naturalists, and academics as well as for health conscious people over the last century (Dozey 1989). Realizing the potential for economic development through tourism, several new initiatives have been established to institutionalize tourism as an alternative livelihood option in the region (ADB 2004; ATREE 2006; Kruk and Banskota 2005).

Given the booming growth of tourism, the challenge therefore, is to balance resource and conservation factors to make mountain and tourism development sustainable, so that the positive impacts on mountain communities and environments are maximized and, at the same time, negative impacts are minimized as much as possible.

Ecotourism on Local Terms – Youth set up the Kanchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC)
Ecotourism in the Sikkim Himalayas centers around trekking in the Kanchendzonga National Park (KNP), most commonly accessed via the village of Yuksom in West Sikkim. Tourism started in Yuksom during the early 80’s and since then has grown at a steady rate. The primary tourist attraction is the Yuksom-Dzongri-Goechala trek, which leads one to traverse through the KNP following pastoral trails through lush forests and alpine pastures ultimately arriving at snow peaked mountain passes.

Since Yuksom lies at the base of this trekking route, the steady growth of tourism offered a potential livelihood opportunity for local residents.

Image 2: The village of Yuksom, West Sikkim

Increasing number of tourists and tourism operators raised concerns over the negative impacts tourism was having in the area and all along the trekking route, which is inside the national park. Local community members recognized that it was crucial to conserve the natural wealth in the area, since it was the main attraction for visitors. They also realized the importance of monitoring and regulating the use of natural resources like firewood as fuel by trek operators. Concerns were also raised about unregulated tourism that could in the long term become increasingly commercialized and lead to economic leakage outside Yuksom, bringing upon uncertainty on local incomes and livelihoods.

Image 3: Village kids playing cricket outside a monastery in Yuksom

To address these issues an active community organization was set up by the local youth called the Kanchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) that would focus on conservation of natural resources, income generation, conservation education and rural development. These activities started at the beginning of 1996 and KCC was
formally registered and recognized by the Government of Sikkim on the 19th February 1997.

*Image 4: The Kanchendzonga Conservation Committee office*

KCC is currently involved in numerous activities centered around livelihood generation and sustainable ecotourism, such as:

- Village homestays
- Zero Waste Trekking
- Ecotourism Service Providers Association of Yuksom (ESPAY)
- Environmental Education Activities

**Village Homestays**

Homestays are a form of tourism that is closely related to nature, culture and local custom, intended to deliver authentic experiences to a certain segment of the tourist market (Jamal et al., 2011). It aims to develop employment opportunities for local communities through micro-enterprises that enhance a visitor’s experience by allowing them to observe, experience and participate in the way of life of local residents. With a steady flow of tourists into the area, there is a high potential for the people to provide accommodation and facilities, which not only promotes the local economy but also is environmentally responsible. For example, a homestay would include resource efficient and environmental friendly services such as fuel-efficient cooking and heating, and hygienic indigenous composting toilets (Chettri et al., 2008).

The homestay practice encourages cultural and environmental conservation by providing an opportunity to strengthen the local culture and tradition in terms of hospitality, use of decor, cuisine, and buildings (Chettri et al., 2008). On the other hand, it offers unique opportunities for visitors to learn about local mountain cultures from the experience of staying with a local family. In addition, local communities start taking pride in their natural wealth by offering nature interpretation services to
visitors.

As of 2014, KCC has helped set up 10 homestays in Yuksom by selecting lower income families who can benefit from additional income and women for whom financial empowerment would be valuable. KCC handles all of the marketing and booking requirements and also provides a range of hospitality-based training for homestay owners. For example, homestay owners are given the opportunity to participate in cooking, housekeeping and financial management training.

An important contribution of KCC’s work has been the establishment of a minimum room tariff for homestays. This emerged from fears of potential exploitation of homestay owners who were arm-twisted into lowering their room tariffs to unsustainable levels. This occurred more so because of competition from large hotels and resorts. Through KCC’s facilitation, all homestay owners now request a nightly tariff of Rs 2500.

For more information, see http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/Webforms/General/VillageTourism/YuksomHome.aspx

ZERO WASTE TREKKING
With more tourism came more ‘waste’. This led to the formation of a participatory monitoring programme of the trekking trail inside KNP and in the surrounding areas. KCC identified and invited key local people and national park staff from the village for a general consultation meeting. The goals of the monitoring process were discussed and with consultation of the village member’s consensus was arrived at about participating in the proposed programme. Consultation and assistance from external agencies such as the Forest department and Sikkim tourism department were sought to make an effective work plan that would address the issues of monitoring tourism activities and conservation impacts. Having set their targets, several meetings were conducted in the village to make local people and those involved in tourism enterprises aware as to why such an initiative was important and how local people could participate and contribute.

Objectives of the monitoring programme:

1. Monitoring the status of waste, condition of trekking trails and campsite facilities over the trekking routes
2. Monitoring the prohibition of use of firewood and other forest products by trekkers, trek operators and their support staff
3. Involve tourists, trekkers and local tourism operators in the monitoring process
This initial monitoring programme has evolved considerably over the past 10 years. KCC is now operates a functional Waste Segregation Centre and has worked with the Forest Department to create a system by which trekking operators have to declare non bio-degradable waste products through that are being carried through a checklist and upon return account for these products. Defaulters are fined a hefty sum of Rs.5000 if they fail to account for waste that was not brought back.

Waste material like noodle packets, tetra packs, plastic etc. are recycled to make fashionable handbags, pillows, notebooks and so on that tourists can buy when the visit the KCC office. Yuksom was the first village in Sikkim to ban the use of plastic (both bags and bottles) in 1996 and the Government of Sikkim has since implemented this throughout the state. KCC also implemented and encouraged trekking companies to adopt a prohibition on the use of firewood during treks. Currently, all trekking groups are required to carry kerosene stoves (also monitored pre and post trek).

Connected to low-impact trekking trails is the introduction and widespread use of dzos instead of yaks, which is a move that KCC strongly encouraged in the 1990s.
This came out of numerous surveys that showed the adverse grazing impacts of yaks as compared to dzos (a hybrid between yaks and domestic cows).

Image 9: Bags, toys, notebooks made out of waste material

ESPAY
ESPAY (Ecotourism Service Providers Association of Yuksom) is an association that KCC initiated in 2004 to provide capacity building to trekking guides, dzo and yak owners, porters and other ecotourism-related professionals in Yuksom. ESPAY currently has 250 members has a range of different activities including: (a) lobbying at the state level for minimum living wages for porters and (b) community compensation scheme for loss of dzos due to trekking accidents and natural causes; and (c) provision of vaccinations and veterinary support for livestock.

Environmental Education Activities
The KCC office is also an environmental education centre that tourists are encouraged to visit to learn about KNP and low-impact tourism. From information about the wildlife that trekkers can encounter on trails to recycled trekking waste, the KCC centre remains accessible for all visitors to the area. However, given that visiting the Centre isn’t mandatory for trekkers, bringing in all visitors continues to be a challenge.

Challenges Remain…
Despite addressing very complex and contentious issues, such as sustainable tourism and with many flagships of success, some important challenges remain. For example, enforcing and monitoring stringent trekking regulations has been challenging because of varying support from the Forest Department. Primarily, trekking occurs inside KNP and therefore, strictly enforcing regulations on collection of wildlife species and forest products and fuelwood use is still largely within the jurisdiction of the Departments’ core activities. While KCC can push the Department to carry out patrolling and monitoring activities, these decisions are beyond the scope of KCC’s influence.
Another key challenge concerning urbanisation and sustainable development has been to come to village-level agreements. While KCC has been able to achieve a lot by engaging with individual homestay owners or dzo owners, bringing the village together to discuss issues continues to be a challenge. For example, trekking by itself is now zero-waste. However, commercial development in Yuksom town itself in the form of large hotels and allied facilities is not regularized. The gram sabha had at one point agreed to restrict infrastructure development to buildings of three floors only. However, it has been difficult to enforce this without a formal gram sabha resolution. Finally, with regards to the Waste Segregation Centre, while all trekking-related waste is being collected at a designated Centre, it has been challenging to find ways to recycle all of this waste material. KCC has managed to create some recycled products from this waste but a large amount of waste material remains at the Centre with no clear channels for what happens next.

**Yuksom and Its Surrounds**

Perhaps the best way to understand the impact or involvement of an organisation like the KCC is to compare Yuksom (where KCC is most active) with other tourism hotspots in Sikkim. Villages in North Sikkim such as Lachen have little community mobilization around homestays, ecotourism service providers and monitoring of waste. Here is it well and truly evident that despite many challenges that remain, KCC’s involvement has been absolutely critical in ensuring an organized, balanced approach towards ecotourism.

For more information on KCC see:

http://sikkimkcc.blogspot.in

https://www.facebook.com/kcc.sikkim/info

**References:**


