

## TOURISM, WILDLIFE AND COMMUNITIES

### Crumbling under the onslaught

Though successful, community-run eco-tourism ventures are facing threats due to the lack of a clear policy on tourism, writes Ashish Kothari.



ASHISH KOTHARI

*The Swiss Tent camp near Kumbalgarh, Rajasthan: a mix of comfort and wilderness*

**E**CO-TOURISM is the new buzzword. As the Indian Government goes all out to woo foreign visitors, everyone seems to be latching on to the term, as if the mere addition of the prefix 'eco' will suddenly transform a highly destructive industry into one that will save the planet.

#### In the name of eco-tourism

Much of what goes on in the name of eco-tourism is business as usual, albeit with a few peripheral changes like notices in your room requesting you to re-use the towel. Some visitation is even called eco-tourism simply because it is to ecologically interesting areas, such as national parks! Most principles of genuinely sensitive tourism, developed internationally over the last few years, are ignored. This includes carrying out assessments of the ecological impact of tourism and whether it actually benefits the local people or not.

There are, however, exceptions. Three community-run initiatives I recently visited are among them: one in Rajasthan and two in Uttarakhand. The youngest of these initiatives is Dera Kumbalgarh ([www.derakumbhalgarh.com](http://www.derakumbhalgarh.com)), a Swiss cottage tent camp set up by the village of Aaret in Udaipur district of Rajasthan.

Established in 2006, the camp is on a plateau overlooking a picturesque valley with a mosaic of deciduous forests and agricultural fields. Just two km up the road is the historic Kumbalgarh fort, boasting the world's second longest wall (some 36 km). A fork on the road also leads to the entrance of the Kumbalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, with about 500 sq km of relatively intact Aravalli vegetation and wildlife including sloth bear, leopard, caracal, jungle fowl and spur fowl, and hundreds of other species.

Assisted by the NGO Seva Mandir, the village

## Other community eco-tourism initiatives

### Sikkim

Two community ecotourism initiatives have been started with the help of the Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS). At Dzongu, close to the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, the Lepcha community run Dzongu Ecotourism Committee manages trekking and other tourism. The second is Pastanga village, close to Gangtok, where tourism based on traditional Sikkimese village life is run by the local community NGO Khedi Eco-tourism and Eco-development Promotion (KEEP).

### West Bengal

In Bali village, in the Sundarbans, local people have started the Bali Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society, with support of Help Tourism, Association for Conservation and Tourism, and World Wide Fund for Nature India. (WWF-India). This Society runs a 'Community Tourism Demonstration Model Camp' that employs 22 local people and benefits over 50 families and seven other villages.

### Nagaland

Khonoma village, close to Kohima, is the site of the Green Village Project by the

Khonoma Village Council and Department of Tourism, Government of Nagaland. Khonoma was chosen because of its historical significance, natural beauty, and conservation efforts initiated by the Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary Trust.

### Kerala

In the Periyar Tiger Reserve, forest officials used the GEF-funded Ecodevelopment Project to establish a unique ecotourism programme run by local adivasis, employing amongst others several hardcore poachers. Tourists benefit from the tremendous traditional knowledge of the forest and wildlife that these adivasis have.

### J&K

In Ladakh, several villages have initiated home-stay programmes for trekkers and other tourists, with funds going back into conservation and village development, in the Sham area, the Hemis National Park, Zaskar region, and Tso Moriri lake. The first three are with the help of the Snow Leopard Conservancy, the last with help from WWF-India.

**Ashish Kothari with inputs from  
Secma Bhatt, EQUATIONS, ECOSS,  
Asit Biswas, and Sujatha Padmanabhan**

set up a Maharana Kumbha Common Interest Group (CIG), with nine villagers from families below the poverty line. The youth were trained in visitor management; one of them speaks English, and one has learnt to cook various cuisines. Looking quite simple from outside, the tents are almost luxurious inside, tastily done up with local designs. The cost is steep at about Rs. 2,500 a night, but the villagers said they would consider discounts for groups that could not afford such rates. In the four months since they started, the camp has already earned over Rs. 1,00,000!

The camp offers camel and horse riding, hiking, folk dances, and other activities, but its biggest attraction seems to be the serenity of its environs. The CIG members and Seva Mandir staff are also open to diversifying into other activities, such as bird watching, and promoting local crafts.

Till recently Chhoti Haldwani village, just outside the Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand, was known only as the backdrop to the Jim Corbett Museum at Kaladhungi. Visitors to the Museum would simply pass it by, and the village gained nothing from its proximity to either the Museum or the tiger reserve.

### In Corbett's memory

Till 2001, when the Centre for Eco-tourism (set up by the Uttarakhand Forest Department) began experimenting with three kinds of community-based eco-tourism products: trails, camps, and home stays. Chhoti Haldwani was identified for the first.

A researcher, Anjali Bhartari, helped provide information and plan interpretative facilities. The Centre organised discussions with the villagers,

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*Tie-and-dye products of the women's group in Chhoi Haldwani*

seeking their opinion on tourism ventures linked to Corbett's memory. Training sessions were organised, in which the village youth were taught the basics of visitor management, and insights into Corbett's life. Six of those who took part in this went on to become tourist guides.

In 2003, a lined path was laid out through the village, providing snippets of Corbett's story on signboards in English and Hindi. In 2006, the United Kingdom's Minister of Environment and Climate Change inaugurated a renewed trail. Meanwhile, a Corbett Gram Vikas Samiti (village development committee) was set up to manage the initiative.

As visitors now walk down the trail, they learn that this was the village that Jim Corbett helped set

up. He had bought some 221 acres for a princely sum of Rs. 1,500 in 1915. Here, he allotted plots to these villagers as tenants and assisted in clearing the land for fields. He provided irrigation (incredibly, the mud-and-stone-lined canals still carry water), helped build a wall to keep animals out of the fields, and introduced many other ways to secure livelihoods. When he left for Kenya in 1947, Corbett handed over ownership of the plots to the tenant families.

**Tourist attractions**

The Corbett trail is only one of the tourism attractions the village now boasts of. The Forest Department has rented a shop on the Ramnagar-Nainital road, next to the entrance to the Mu-

**The Forest Department has rented a shop to the Samiti on the Ramnagar-Nainital road, next to the entrance to the Museum. Here, they sell tie-and-dye scarves and bed sheets, turmeric, maize, chilli powder, and other products of the village.**

**Unless the Government takes firm steps against this, the great potential of sensitive community-led tourism will remain unfulfilled.**

seum, to the Samiti. Here, they sell tie-and-dye scarves and bed sheets, turmeric, maize, chilli powder, and other products of the village. The proceeds go to the villagers, with the Samiti keeping 10 per cent.

Products of other village-level groups of Uttarakhand are also sold, with some percentage being kept by the Samiti. Several of the village women have formed the Gajraj group to coordinate the textile work. Villagers Sabir Hussain Ansari and Puran Bisht have set up home stays for visitors, emphasising local foods and hospitality. The Samiti is also constructing a camping site, with conference facilities, and a museum to showcase traditional utensils, handicrafts, and other items of daily use that people here have abandoned but are still in use in villages higher up in Kumaon. These two projects are unfortunately going slow for lack of funds.

Samiti members now also guide tourists through the Corbett Museum, explaining various aspects of his life, and pointing to the fact that some of his compatriots are still alive in the village. I briefly met one of them, Dhanman Goswami, now over 70. He animatedly told me about how as a kid he regularly delivered milk and curd to 'Corbetsaab', and how he was once instructed to sit quietly on the elephant from which Corbett shot one of his many man-eating victims.

Samiti office-bearers Raj Kumar Pande and Mohan Pande showed me the records of earnings of all the members. In the last year, they had each earned between Rs. 8,000 and 20,000 as guides and from the shop. They also proudly pointed to the visitor's book, which had entries by the Chief Ministers of Punjab and Haryana, the U.K. Forest Minister, and others praising the initiative taken by the village.



*A village youth guiding visitors through the Corbett Trail in Chhoti Haldwani*

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*Kumbhalgarh Fort and Sanctuary are enticingly close to Dera Kumbhalgarh*

A number of such community eco-tourism initiatives, are facing threats from the lack of a clear direction on tourism from State Governments. Though Uttarakhand is projecting itself as an eco-tourism state, developments around Corbett indicate that powerful actors in the tourism industry are the ones to gain.

**Established in 2006, the camp is on a plateau overlooking a picturesque valley with a mosaic of deciduous forests and agricultural fields.**

The tiger reserve itself has been surrounded by dozens of resorts, most of them with scant respect for either wildlife or local villagers.

In several villages including Chhoti Haldwani, plots are being sold off to outsiders, raising the fear of being swamped by such resorts or other unwelcome developments. Unless the Government takes firm steps against this, the great potential of

sensitive community-led tourism will remain unfulfilled.

The Kumbhalgarh area in Rajasthan is also facing similar threats. All along the road to the fort and sanctuary, plots have been sold, and construction on a number of tourist resorts has begun. Community-run visitation can hardly survive in the face of more powerful competition, and the area's fragile ecosystems themselves are likely to crumble under the onslaught.

Like Uttarakhand, Rajasthan too needs to decide where its priorities lie — with Nature, wildlife, and local communities, or with the rapacious mainstream tourism industry?



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