

## **REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN DAY CELEBRATIONS HELD AT GANGTOK, SIKKIM, INDIA**

On the occasion of International Mountain Day, a round table discussion on the topic “Ecotourism–Sikkim’s emerging Scenario” was hosted by the WWF-India Khangchendzonga Landscape Programme and the Ecotourism & Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS) at Hotel Chumbi Residency, Gangtok Sikkim, on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Around forty representatives of major NGO’s, including The Mountain Institute, Sikkim Development Foundation, PRIA, Voluntary Health Association of Sikkim, KEEP, KTDC, and various Community Based Organisations, the Travel Agents Association of Sikkim, and various Government Departments such as Tourism, Forests Environment & Wildlife Management, Rural Management and Development, etc took part in the deliberations.

Mr. R. P. Gurung CEO ECOSS in his welcome address highlighted this year’s theme of “Food Security in Mountains” and the role of ecotourism in mitigating food insecurity by providing alternate and supportive livelihoods for mountain communities.

Mr P..D. Rai Chairman ECOSS and Dy Chairman of the State Planning Commission, provided the keynote address. This was followed by the CBO’s and NGO’s sharing about their activities and highlighting some of their urgent problems and issues. The Government Departments also joined in with their observations and suggested possible solutions. There were lively discussions on some of the problems and issues and although not all of them could be tackled at the meet there was consensus that such meetings should be had more often and that ECOSS should take the initiative to evolve an appropriate forum to continue the discussion and evolve solutions to the issues raised. Everyone agreed to meet again next year on International Mountain Day to share and deliberate on similar matters of importance to mountain communities.

### **OUTCOMES**

#### **Issues highlighted in keynote address**

1. The need to recognize ecotourism as an important component of the livelihoods scenario in Sikkim with many stakeholders involved.
2. One of the underpinnings of the tourism process in Sikkim was the peace and tranquility that prevailed in Sikkim and therefore there was a need to recognize and nurture this aspect especially in today’s turbulent times.
3. The State of Sikkim was today importing around 75% of its food from outside the State. This also left a huge carbon footprint by the transport sector. There was therefore a strong reason to question this practice and to ask why this trend could not be reversed and why we should not produce more of our own food.
4. There was a need to look into our traditional farming systems and see how it could be retained and made more productive.
5. The problem of young people opting out of agriculture as a livelihood required to be addressed. Ecotourism was about livelihoods and if we could use it to push tourism into rural areas we could link up rural livelihoods with food security.

6. The State Government had broadly adopted ecotourism as a buzzword in its promotional campaigns. This was the most appropriate form of tourism for a naturally endowed state like Sikkim. However there was a need to have a proper understanding of ecotourism and its principles and to properly plan and design for it. Above all there was a need to harmonize the interests of all the various sectors or else conservation and the interests of the community would suffer and we would all be responsible for killing the goose that laid the golden egg.

**Some of the problems and challenges highlighted in the roundtable discussions and some suggested solutions.**

**a) Policy**

Difficulty in getting permits from the Government for accessing forest and restricted areas.

Lack of regulatory and effective framework at homestays, camping sites and national parks/sanctuaries.

Lack of broad based participation on issues that impact the industry such as that of tariff rates and lack of co-ordination /collaboration between stakeholders.

Unlicensed trekking guides and untrained Liaison Officers deputed by the Govt.

Absence of safety/evacuation guidelines.

**Solutions:**

Trekking Guides to be licensed, properly trained and licenses to be renewed regularly

Fix the dates for various tourism festivals and space them for yearlong tourist inflow.

Fix accountability in all sectors. Have designated campsites. Introduce certification for all players.

**b) Infrastructure and Finance**

Poor quality or lack of trekking trails and access roads

Poor maintenance of trekkers and porters huts and trails

Sustainability of CBO's – funding

Financing for homestays and their upgradation

**Solutions:**

Trekking trail to be nature based using local materials . No concrete footpaths

Adopt User pay systems. Create eco-development fund by charging small amounts per visitor- to be utilized by the local CBOs

Approach Gram Panchayat (Local Self Government) for taking up funding of trails

Microfinance agencies for homestay infrastructure funding.

**c) Conservation**

Natural Habitat destruction. Lack of awareness of fragile ecosystem amongst youth.

Loss in local tradition and culture – not enough promotion

Absence of comprehensive solid waste management. Incinerator not an option.

Use of firewood in lodges having heavy impact on forest.

Threat of bio-piracy

**Solutions**

Teach Solid waste management in schools. Introduce 'Zero' waste program in schools

No trekkers huts only camps. Would necessitate more use of services of local people.  
Minimize what is taken up in the trekking routes. Arrange effective and sustainable infrastructure mechanisms for reducing garbage in restricted areas  
Segregation of waste at source. Need an end to end solution. Use private players  
Install solar water heating systems to reduce firewood use. Levy fees on firewood.  
Reduce waste coming in such as mineral water bottles.

#### **d) Capability**

Limited capacity of homestays. Lack of exposure to best practices.  
Lack of knowledge of local biodiversity and one's own culture and tradition amongst youth leading to poor interpretation  
Deficit in human capital- Migration of youth from villages  
Lack of proper equipment – binoculars and other paraphernalia  
Lack of understanding of ecotourism  
Security issues in homestay sites- thefts – bio-piracy

#### **Solutions**

Proper, sensitization, awareness building, training & capacity building through reputed organisations like ECOSS, WWF. Will take time to learn and adapt.  
Relearning ones own culture through ecotourism interpretation process.

#### **e) Marketing & Promotion**

Absence of effective marketing and promotion  
Pricing: Houses having different standard facilities for same rate. Uniform pricing vs different rates for different places.  
Lack of reliable information on home-stay infrastructure, capacity, pricing  
Overall capacity of homestays to take in tourists still low

#### **Solutions**

Promotion through Brochures, websites, travel agents association  
Need for standards and benchmarks and perhaps differential pricing  
Product development through careful attraction study and market analysis.

#### **Summary of Outcomes**

Dr. Dipankar Ghose from WWF-India summed up the discussions by saying that the deliberations from different Government departments, NGOs, CBOs and NGIs brought out four major issues that the 'ecotourism initiatives' in Sikkim are facing in the recent times. These are (i) lack of efficient marketing and promotion of home-stays and village based ecotourism initiatives, (ii) inadequate infrastructural support, (iii) lack of proper understanding of conservation issues including water and waste management issues and (iv) inadequate policy and regulations support. He suggested that these complex issues could not be solved in one roundtable and with just 40 participants and instead suggested that a platform be created, which has to be lead by ECOSS and will have representatives from all the stakeholders. The platform could meet at least once every quarter and should pick up one issue each time to find out a solution acceptable to the most.