

Community-Based Tourism in the Indian Himalaya: Homestays and Lodges

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Abstract

This paper describes four projects in the Indian Himalaya aimed at protecting the environment and alleviating poverty. Each focuses on tourism in rural communities, but there are significant differences in the design, implementation and impact of these projects.

Introduction

The Himalayan region has for long been a popular destination for climbers, trekkers and culture tourists, and tourism represents an important source of income for the impoverished region. However, little of this income reaches the remote communities in which poverty is most severe. Recently, a number of initiatives have been introduced to address this issue. Among these, community homestays and lodges are attracting attention.

Ladakh Homestays

Ladakh is a vast, sparsely-populated, mountainous region in the far north of India. It receives very little rain, and is extremely cold in winter, when the two main access routes are closed due to heavy snowfall. In summer, it is increasingly popular with tourists, who come to see its ancient monasteries and snow-capped peaks. Its natural assets include a significant population of snow leopards. These elusive creatures are an endangered species, and in the year 2000, the Snow Leopard Conservation Trust of India (SLC-IT) was established to protect them.

The SLC-IT proposed Ladakh Homestays in 2000 as a means of providing an

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photo 1 Padum Village in Zaskar (photo: D. Peaty)

alternative income for farmers whose livestock were threatened by snow leopards, with the hope that farmers would come to see these highly endangered cats as a source of income rather than a pest needing to be eradicated. The idea was first introduced to villagers in the community of Rumbak, a village with nine homes located at an altitude of 4050 meters along the popular Markha Valley trekking route in Hemis National Park, the home of India's largest population of snow leopards. A feasibility study was carried out in 2001 with funding from the Mountain Institute and the UNESCO Biosphere Project. Of 500 trekkers surveyed, around 60% said they preferred to stay in community homes rather than guest houses or camp sites. Eight of the nine families in Rumbak agreed to take part in the project and were given basic training in hospitality, cooking, hygiene and English language.

Although most Ladakhi homes have spare rooms with bench-style beds, some renovation was needed (Chanchani et al.). Start-up expenses amounted to around 1500 Rs per family, including the cost of new bedsheets, curtains, water buckets and whitewashing the walls. The SLC-IT provided interest-free loans, to be repaid the following year from tourism income. At first, participation was limited to low-income families, but two years later some wealthier families joined.

The first tourists arrived in Rumbak in the summer of 2001. In the following year, after an APPA survey (Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action, developed by the Mountain Institute), the program was expanded to five other villages in Hemis (Yurutse, Shingo, Sku, Kaya and Chilling) and then to seven in the nearby Sham region. In 2004 it

was extended to four villages in the remote Zaskar region and five in Spiti (discussed later). The program currently offers homestays with approximately 100 host families. The number of visitors has grown from 17 in the initial year to over 500 in 2007 (Wangchuk). Homestay opportunities are rotated among the families under the supervision of a coordinator.

From the outset, the SLC-IT was determined to involve the private sector, and this later proved a key factor behind the project's success. According to the Director of the SLC-IT "a strong partnership between community, tour operators and NGOs can help make a viable business that benefits both local people and conservation" (Wangchuk, personal communication). The SLC-IT chose four Leh-based tour operators it considered compatible with its goals to handle Himalayan Homestays. Three of them continue to work with the SLC-IT. One of them is Overland Escape. According to the owner, Tundup Dorje, the company charges their clients 450 Rs per person per night, or 800 Rs per person if two clients share a room. From this they deduct their commission of 50 Rs per client. The clients, or their guide, then receive a voucher to be presented to the families. If the clients need a guide, they will be charged 600-700 Rs per group per day (depending on experience and skill), and the company will pay this to the guide after deducting a 100 Rs commission. Dorje originally accepted the SLC-IT's request as a social obligation, but later found it to be commercially viable, as he handles various other aspects of the tour, including trekking, camping, hotel bookings, sightseeing and transport.

The average family in Hemis and Sham now earns over \$300 a year from tourism, and homestay income exceeds other sources of income in at least six villages (Wangchuk, 2009). Some host communities have seen incomes double (Snow Leopard Conservancy). According to Satterfield, at least three villagers reported earning at least 20,000 rupees per year from homestays.

Local communities derive income not only from providing accommodation but also guiding services, campsites, donkeys and donkey drivers, food, handicrafts (hats, socks and gloves) and even solar-heated showers. (These were provided by SLC-IT to three communities – Sku, Kaya and Ulley – but despite the low price of 50 Rs per shower, tourists apparently were not enthusiastic.) In addition, there are seven 'parachute cafes' employing over 70 village women using solar parabolic heaters to provide meals and boiled, filtered water to trekkers (Shan).

10% of homestay income and 50% of campsite fees is paid into the Village Conservation Fund, which finances waste management, tree planting and other environmental initiatives, cultural conservation works such as repairing mani walls (prayer walls), and creating grazing reserves for wildlife. Surveys suggest that most of the

remaining income was spent on education and on home improvement.

When tourism touches remote villages, impacts are almost inevitable. Financially, the communities providing homestays are better off than before. However, there may be some unwelcome changes to the culture. One problem that has been mentioned (e.g. Chanchani et al.) is linked to the general transition from a subsistence-based to a cash-based economy noted by Norbert-Hodge. The Ladakhis have a long tradition of hospitality, and people traditionally take small gifts with them when visiting people in other villages; but many now feel a need to pay for their accommodation with cash.

There is also concern about environmental impact. The Department of Wildlife Protection DWP began its own homestay program in Rumbuk in 2006. This has led in some cases to double bookings (Chanchani et al.). Moreover, some homes are now starting to look more like guest houses, with sign boards, hot baths and flush toilets (which are neither necessary nor suited to the arid Ladakhi environment). Inevitably there is a problem of garbage as well, despite the strict guidelines provided by the SLC-IT, by agencies such as Overland Escape, and by activist groups in Leh. Overland Escape spends up to 10,000 Rs a time for cleaning up campsites, but not all agencies behave as responsibly.

Maintaining consistency in standards across the region is difficult, and Himalayan Homestays face competition from low-cost operators. Chachani et al. point out the need for research into environmental carrying capacity before any expansion of trekking and homestay tourism in Hemis National Park is allowed to take place. Dorje, of Overland Escape, feels that further growth in the number of visitors and trekkers should be accompanied by dispersal policies, to new villages and along new trails.

Despite the problems mentioned above, the main goals of the Ladakh Homestays project appear to have been achieved: snow leopards are now protected as tourism assets rather than reviled as predators; and rural communities now have an additional source of income in the form of sustainable tourism.

Spiti Homestays

The Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh in India has depended for centuries on subsistence farming (mainly black peas - recently replaced by green peas - and barley) and barter trading, but recently its economy has become more cash-based, and its environment and culture are threatened by development and by the recent boom in tourism. Several NGOs have emerged to address this problem by promoting sustainable development. One of these is Muse, based in Kaza and founded in 2002. Muse has initiated or is involved in numerous projects, including conservation of threatened species

(e.g. the wolf and the snow leopard), harvesting and marketing of products made from seabuckthorn berry (juice, tea and jam), development and promotion of a handicraft industry based on wool from sheep, goats and yaks, introduction of garbage management systems and of greenhouses and passive solar heating systems, the restoration of an ancient monastery and the promotion of proper hygiene and sanitation.

In 2004, Muse was invited by the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust to introduce to Spiti a tourism project named Himalayan Homestays, modelled on the one that the SLC-IT had just introduced in Ladakh, a version of which was also introduced in Sikkim. Muse accepted the invitation and created an organization named Ecosphere dedicated to the following goals: to provide sustainable sources of income, conserve nature and cultural heritage, create employment for women and youths and to reduce outward migration. The project was initially supported only by SLC-IT and UNESCO, but was subsequently supported by various other organizations. Ecosphere carried out a preliminary investigation to identify villages suited and receptive to the homestay project. Eventually six villages agreed to participate: Langsa, Komic, Demul, Lhalang, Dhankar and Mikkim, with a total of over 80 families agreeing to offer homestays. The number of households per village ranged from 50 in Demul (which lies on a popular trekking route and receives the most visitors, and which operates a rotation of 8 families per year) to 3 in Langsa. Guidelines and criteria for participation were established: each family must be interested and willing, with one member always available to welcome and feed guests); each home must be designed in the traditional style and have at least one spare room (new construction was not required or encouraged) with clean beds, a dining room/kitchen, and a traditional toilet with latch (without flush – Spiti suffers from a severe lack of water). Group size may not exceed 10 persons, with maximum 2 per home and 8 per village.

Training of homestay hosts and guides followed. For example, language training was provided in Shimla, and by volunteers visiting Kaza. (Guide training is carried out each year.) Ecosphere developed a number of products involving village homestays, short treks, yak safaris, wildlife appreciation and monastery visits, and offered these on their new website, www.spitiecosphere.com.

The first tours began in 2005 with a small but growing number of tourists. By mid-2009, around 1400 visitor nights had been recorded – an impressive feat considering that Spiti has a tourism season of less than 4 months each year, being inaccessible the rest of the year due to heavy snowfall. In 2008, a resident of one village, Langsa, is said to have earned as much as 19,000 Rs from tourism. Guests are rotated among eligible and available hosts (during the short summer, many are fully occupied with farming). Income is earned not only by homestay hosts but also by guides, porters and the providers of



photo 2 View from Spiti Homestay (photo: Ecosphere)

donkeys, yaks and food. Other related income-generating opportunities include transportation, the sale of handicrafts and seabuckthorn products, and charges later introduced, at Ecosphere's suggestion, for camping and grazing donkeys on community land (thus discouraging agents who cut prices by accommodating their clients in tents set up on community land). Tourists are charged according to the services contracted, the number of persons per group, the duration of the tour, and other relevant factors. Ecosphere pays the homestay hosts a fixed sum (500 Rs per tourist per night) minus 10% for the village Tourism Program Coordinator (a rotated position) and 10% for the Conservation Fund, which is spent on digging garbage pits and other conservation-related activities. Guides (two regular and three occasional) are paid 500 Rs per day minus coordinator and conservation contributions; donkey men are also paid 500 Rs per day; and porters are paid 300 to 350 Rs a day. Any surplus income earned by Ecosphere after payment of salaries and other operational expenses is used for other activities related to sustainable development, such as subsidies for passive solar heating systems, greenhouses and solar baths. Initially Ecosphere provided homestay hosts with one sheet for each guest, but now hosts have to pay for these themselves.

The first negative impacts of tourism in Spiti were observed in the late 1980s in larger villages such as Kibber and Mud, where independent backpacker tourism resulted in problems such as the construction of cheap concrete guest houses. The state government has yet to do a study of carrying capacity for the tourism industry. Ecosphere



photo 3 Guest room in Spiti Homestay (photo: Ecosphere)

is trying to mitigate such impacts by imposing strict guidelines on the participants in its own programs, by monitoring and assessing their performance annually, by discouraging price-cutting (some families appear willing to accept lower payments and lower standards than those fixed by Ecosphere), by promoting environmental education and anti-litter campaigns, and by promoting innovations such as passive solar heating and pits for temporary storage of garbage. There is also a proposal to initiate an eco-rating system for hotels and guest houses. In addition, Ecosphere has introduced solar lanterns for trekking and homestays and plans to open a shop selling them, along with solar cookers and water heaters. Ecosphere has also raised the possibility of a quota on tourists entering from Manali and Shimla, a proposal which is likely to be highly controversial; and has urged the government to regulate the construction of new guest houses (e.g. by requiring them to be based on traditional designs).

Ecosphere faced a number of hurdles initially. They had very little funding; tourists hesitated to make the difficult journey to Spiti from Manali (itself a long trip from Delhi) or Shimla (requiring a special permit); infrastructure (roads, bridges, electricity, water, communications, etc) was inadequate; local awareness of hygiene and sanitation was low; few people spoke English; the tourist season is extremely short; and Ecosphere faced competition from Manali-based operators with no apparent interest in conservation of the environment or local culture. Another problem was some initial disappointment as excessive expectations of income from tourism were not met (a common feature of community-based tourism projects). Ecosphere also faces difficulties in marketing: many clients are provided by tour operators in Delhi and elsewhere, who charge higher prices

and pocket the difference. While this does not affect the amount of money directly received by Ecosphere's service providers, it reduces the potential number of clients overall. However, the number of tourists signing up for Ecosphere's tours continues to grow, with 2009 showing major growth despite the global recession thanks to Ecosphere's efforts and to other contributing factors such as improved access, increased information about Spiti and the growing popularity and familiarity of responsible or ethical tourism as a kind of brand.

Ecosphere has no current plans to expand their tourism program to new villages, as they are already busy with other activities and projects, including the renovation of Dhankhar monastery, management of campsites and garbage, reviving ancient food crops, selling filtered water to reduce the use of PET bottles, reviving traditional dance, dress and handicrafts, supporting conservation of endangered species and protecting seabuckthorn plants, which play a key ecological role in the cold desert environment of Spiti. While Spiti communities have no Village Management Committees such as those established in Sikkim and Binsar, local youth organizations fulfill a similar role. In Langza they maintain campsites, dig garbage pits and organize garbage clean-up operations twice a year. They proposed regulations on the sale of fossils and helped set up a solar bath. In Dhankhar, the monks have taken initiatives such as persuading tourists to take their garbage home. Villages have spent income from the Conservation Fund on digging garbage pits, building a solar bath (Langza), repairing the local temple (Demul) and other small projects. Ecosphere often subsidizes these projects with surplus income from tourism.

Sikkim Himalayan Homestays

Among the Indian Himalayan states, Sikkim has the greatest biodiversity, and thus the greatest appeal to ecotourists. It is also relatively accessible, with good road links to the Indian railway system at Siliguri and to Bagdogra Airport, and good roads within the state itself. Trekkers seeking a close-up view of Kanchendzonga (the world's third highest peak), for example, need walk only a few days from the village of Yuksom, in Sikkim, whereas the Nepalese approach to the same mountain is long, hard and expensive.

On the other hand, there are several major obstacles to the growth of tourism. Because of its contested border with China, Sikkim is a restricted area, and foreign tourists need a permit in order to enter, and further permits in order to travel to the north and east, where the most impressive mountain scenery is to be found. This is in fact less of a barrier than it seems: it takes less than half an hour to get an entry permit at Rangpo, the main border town. The permit is limited to 15 days, but may be extended both within

and outside of Sikkim. Another problem is the frequent strikes and demonstrations in Darjeeling, the main entry point, held by the campaign for an autonomous Gurkha state. Perhaps the biggest problem, however, is the climate: Sikkim suffers from heavy rainfall in the summer months, which might otherwise be the peak season, and the main road is often blocked by landslides.

Pastanga is a small village on the side of a hill 26 kilometers from Gangtok. It is inhabited by 95 farming families from Rai, Bhutia and Lepcha communities. They grow corn, tomatos, passion fruit, tree tomatos, bananas, bamboo shoots, potatoes, carrots and other products, and keep cows, goats and chickens. Their agriculture is organic, and the region is also well known for its cardamon, ginger and bamboo (13 species). Since the cardamon was attacked by a fungus, they have also begun growing orchids (for which Sikkim is famous) in polyhouses. The village contains some traditional Rai and Bhutia houses over 150 years old. Nearby there is a waterfall and a monastery, and the surrounding forest contains rare species such as red panda, barking deer and flying squirrels, together with many species of birds, insects and plants. Above Pastanga is a forested mountain called Khedi, with a high altitude meadow on which yaks can be seen



photo 4 Host family in Pastanga (photo: D. Peaty)

grazing. It was popular with low-budget Indian hikers, who brought tarpaulins instead of tents, cut trees for use as tent poles, made camp fires and left garbage.

In 1995, Dr B. B. Rai, Executive Director of the Voluntary Health Association of Sikkim, suggested ecotourism as a way to protect the local environment and provide a sustainable source of income. An NGO named KEEP (Khedi Ecotourism and Ecodevelopment Promotion Society) was then established. 44 of the 95 households in Pastanga signed up, each paying a membership fee of 500 rupees up-front and 100 rupees per year. KEEP's office was donated by a local landowner.

For 7 years, the members had no hospitality training, no promotion and no paying guests. The first tourists (a German, a Guatemalan and a Sri Lankan) arrived in 2002. The villagers asked them many questions and their enthusiasm for ecotourism was stimulated. More tourists began to trickle in, with 31 in 2002, 90 in 2004 and 130 in 2008. By April 2009, Pastanga had hosted a total of 613 visitors, including 187 non-Indians. Tourists are rotated among the ten members of KEEP who have homestay facilities, and pay between 1400 and 1600 rupees (depending on the size of the group and type of visitors) per night, of which from 2% to 10% is deposited with the organization for village development, tourist amenities development, conservation activities, operation and maintenance of office and programs, and the rest is paid to the homestay operators, guides, porters and cultural dancers. The guides are paid 100 rupees per day per group.

Tourists can also trek to Khedi on the Malinggo Trail, a three to five-night adventure for which they pay 2500 rupees per night, and there are plans to offer mountain biking. The peak seasons are March to April, when the rhododendrons are in full bloom, and October to November (from a leaflet published by KEEP).

KEEP received support from various organizations. IMK, a Belgian NGO, donated tents and sleeping bags. SNV, of the Netherlands, provided families with 7000 rupees for home improvements, more than half of which was spent on toilets. Training was provided by VHAS (Voluntary Health Association of Sikkim), by ECOSS (Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim) and by volunteers from the Institute of Hotel Management in Gangtok (Parya Paryatan Bikas Sandesh, Vol 2, 2006). The main benefits of ecotourism are considered to be the additional income and conservation of the local environment and culture.

In 2004 ECOSS set up a website (www.sikkimhomestay.com) promoting Pastanga and other villages with similar programs under an initiative called Sikkim Himalayan Homestay, with support from UNESCO. Seven such programs are now offered: Pastanga, Kewzing, Yuksam, Rey Mindu, Dzongu, Naitam, and Lingee Payong. All except Dzongu are in the easily accessible southern region of Sikkim. They operate under different pricing systems. Kewzing, for example, is priced at 1330 rupees per day, despite offering

better accommodation, meals and scenery than Pastanga. (The price includes payment to the host, guides, Kewzing Tourism Development Committee and the local monastery.) Kewzing also has a more attractive list of possible activities, including: village walks, culture, songs and dances, ploughing the fields, milking cows and making butter, fodder collection and feeding cattle, cardamon weeding and harvesting, traditional games and sports, collection and cooking of wild edibles, folk tales and stories, day hikes to pilgrimage sites, bird and butterfly watching, visiting village healers, crossing bridges made of cane and bamboo, hot stone herbal baths, and preparing local food and drinks. However, many of these activities are seasonal, and few were actually on offer when this researcher visited. Some, such as the performances and the hot stone baths, require additional payment. Kewzing also has a bird watching trail, a handicraft centre, a small tea estate and several trails to nearby monasteries and indigenous communities.

Kewzing has 15 households offering homestays, and each is allowed to take a maximum of four guests. Others unable to afford the necessary home improvements have a chance to prepare packed lunches or act as guides. My host had hosted 131 paying visitors between 2003 and April 2009, with Swiss, Germans, Americans and Australians being the most prominent. According to the president of the KTDC, Mr Ugen Bhutia, the organization was founded in 2003 as a local initiative without outside support, and has since hosted around 1500 non-Indian visitors, plus a larger number of Indians. The state government later built a community center, now leased by the community and used for various purposes, and a handicraft center. ECOSS has provided some training, and now helps Kewzing to market its product. According to the KTDC president, there have been no significant cultural impacts from tourism, and host families continue to depend mainly on their income from farming. However, at present the host households are all from the Bhutia community. The KTDC president says that the Rai and Lepcha communities will eventually benefit from tourism, but only when they are ready. As for the environment, the KTDC organizes a community clean-up operation twice a month.

Village Ways

Village Ways (hereafter VW) is an Indian company specializing in community-based walking holidays in the Binsar region of Kumaon, Uttarakhand, India. Tourists – mostly from the UK at present – travel to Almora and then to the Mountain Resort at Khali Estate, where the VW office organizes their holidays. From there, they walk from village to village and stay in lodges built by Village Tourism Committees (Gram Paryatam Samiti), funded by grants and loans from VW and managed by the local community. The company also offers a similar product in Supi, a large village close to the Nanda Devi Biosphere

Reserve.

The Binsar Sanctuary was established in 1990. The residents of the villages within the Sanctuary used to earn a living hunting, logging, extracting pine resin, raising livestock and subsistence farming, but their use of the forest was banned in 1990. After discussions between a group of four Britons and three Indians, including Himanshu Pande, owner of Khale Estate in Binsar, a proposal was made for tourist lodges to be built in Binsar villages. Village Tourism Committees were established to build and manage guest lodges, and to provide meals, guides, and porters. Negotiations were conducted with the residents, and agreement was reached with 5 villages – Satri, Kathdhara, Gonap, Risal and Dalar – to build and manage the lodges. They were built mostly by local artisans using local materials and traditional designs, on land leased by the Village Tourism Committees from local landowners. The rent paid to the landowners was based on the number of guests staying each night. VW helped cover construction costs through a mix of grants (40%) and interest-free loans (60%). They also provided training in lodge management and guiding. The lodges opened in 2006 and the first paying guests arrived on 5th October 2006. As of 3rd May 2009, the most successful lodge, Kathdhara, had received a total of 263 paying guests.

VW recommended building separate lodges rather than accommodating guests in existing homes in order to reduce the risk of jealousy, to protect villagers' privacy and to spread income among the community. Under the contract between each community and the landowner, the latter may buy the lodge from the Village Tourism Committee after 30 years. The VTCs represent all families agreeing to take part, and have a president, treasurer, secretary and vice-secretary, all unpaid and elected. One VTC (Kathdhara) even has its own constitution (see Appendix below). Not all families joined the VTCs: some were too busy, others too old and others already received a substantial pension from the state or the army. In Kathdhara, for example, 16 of 28 families joined the VTC. The VTCs meet once a month. There is also a higher-level committee (Paryatan Vika Samiti) representing all 5 villages which meets every month.

Training for VTCs focused on health and hygiene, hospitality and lodge management, with exposure visits to Community Based Tourism projects in Corbett National Park (lodge, hotel, homestay and campsite) and the government-run Institute of Hotel Management. Training for guides was provided by professionals based in Corbett NP and Delhi, and four British volunteers provided additional training in route finding, English language and guiding manners.

VW has created major benefits for the 5 communities. The most significant is financial. The VTCs charge VW for each guest night spent in their village. The rate is negotiated through the Paryatan Vika Samiti. The charge is currently 600 Rs per guest per



photo 5 View from homestay in Binsar (photo: D. Peaty)

day (more if there is only one guest), covering lodge management, cooking and cleaning. Additional charges are made to cover accommodation for each guide, porters, fuel wood, laundry, and so on. There are 13 guides at Binsar and 12 at Supi. Guides are freelance, and are paid according to ability and skill, with payment ranging from 100 to 600 Rs per day. Local porters are paid 100 Rs per load (maximum 15 Kg). Some tourists choose to give tips. These are collected at the VW office in Khali and distributed to the VTCs at the monthly meetings of Paryatan Vika Samiti. They are then put into the local Village Development Fund and used to pay for house maintenance and for the benefit of the whole community. The Kathdara Village Development Fund now contains over 40,000 Rs. Opportunities to work for the lodge in each community (cooking and cleaning) are rotated among the members. Villagers can also use the solar energy systems in the lodges to charge up their own batteries when not needed for guests.

Other benefits include the training provided by VW, greater self-esteem and an eagerness to learn both English and foreign cultures. In addition, VW has made efforts to create more opportunities for women and for people belonging to lower castes. Efforts have also been made to develop handicraft production (for example, soap, and birds made of cloth), although these have so far been unsuccessful.

The lodges and guests have had minimal impact on the environment. The solar panels bought and installed by VW provide hot water and electricity for each lodge. Stoves used for cooking burn wood obtained locally. Water is obtained from Binsar's

many springs. Garbage is burned. Sewage flows into septic tanks. When Binsar became a sanctuary, poaching and illegal logging apparently increased, but since the VW project began, the population of rare barking deer and other species appears to have increased, and one former hunter living in Gonap is reported to have quit hunting and built a hide for viewing animals instead.

Cultural impacts are also reported to be minimal. VW decided at the outset to limit guests to six per village in order to prevent interference with agricultural work and dependence on tourism, and this has helped prevent unwelcome cultural impacts. Awkward situations involving male guides and female guests have so far been avoided, and with female guides also available, the issue is unlikely to arise. On the other hand, Supi guides reported a desire for intercultural exchange with guests – currently very limited owing to language constraints – so future changes can be anticipated if and when their English improves. Moreover, one of the attractions of ‘village walks’ is the chance for social interaction, so it is inevitable that visitors will have some impact on local culture. Furthermore, VW have consciously attempted to empower women by requiring VTCs to have at least 2 women members, by training female guides and by encouraging VTCs to hire female porters.

The lodge at Supi represents a somewhat different approach to that followed in Binsar. It belongs to three villagers, who have negotiated leases with the VTC. The manager, selected by the VTC, works full-time and is paid 2000 Rs per month by VW. The 28 VTC members have formed seven teams, who look after guests by rotation. The VTC pays them between 100 Rs and 200 Rs per day, according to their ability.

Eight Supi guides were interviewed (in English, with interpretation) for about an hour. They said they hoped to work as guides for around 10–15 days each month. They would also like to have the chance to work in the lodge and to produce handicrafts (one suggested bamboo baskets). They would also like to see more lodges in Supi, and have high expectations of a new trekking project recently implemented by VW. They recognize that tourism has brought changes, mostly positive, to Supi, and hope for more chances to communicate with foreign guests. This would require significantly higher levels of English proficiency, and they hope for further training.

VW benefited initially from media exposure – particularly in the UK – which led to several travel awards. The directors now see the need to maintain interest by adding new products. With the new Supi Lodge now running smoothly, two new developments are now under way: a second lodge at Jhuni and a tented camp in the nearby hills that will enable VW to offer longer walks and closer views of Himalayan peaks. This would not only attract more robust hikers but also provide income to additional guides and porters and to villages providing mules and food supplies. There are also plans to establish similar

projects elsewhere in India; and one is about to start in Ethiopia (Village Ways News, October 2009).

Many positive comments can be seen in the visitors' books kept at each lodge. The few negative comments we saw concerned the pervasive forest fires. However, one guest we met raised an important issue relating to the conflicting interests of private business and community-based tourism. While VW is a private enterprise operating in a very competitive market, they also claim to be socially responsible. However, there is a conspicuous gap between the relatively high prices they charge tourists (between 600 and 700 pounds for a 9-day Binsar tour leaving from Delhi, for example) and the money that actually reaches the community. According to one of the directors (personal communication), most of VW's income from tourism is used to pay expenses such as staff salaries, office rental, travel, house maintenance, insurance and administration, the directors have never drawn fees or dividends, and profits made in the year 2007–2008 were used to initiate the new project in Supi. Making this kind of information more accessible to potential clients and supporters (in the Village Ways newsletter, for example) would help to dispel any doubts about the company's commitment to poverty alleviation. In fact, as our comparison (below) shows, VW's partners in the communities have little reason to be dissatisfied. In addition, there is a need for more detailed explanations about the communities (agricultural activities, alternative sources of income, etc.) and also about the business relationship between VW and its community partners. Guides' poor English ability, already mentioned, is another problem. This is currently being addressed, according to VW, with the help of volunteers from the UK.

Evaluation

The projects we have discussed above share three goals: conservation, poverty alleviation and cultural preservation. To what extent are these goals being achieved? Tourism could be regarded as ecologically sustainable if it has no negative impacts on the environment. If we ignore the link between long-distance flights and global warming, and just consider local impacts, what impact has tourism had on the four regions covered in this study?

Researchers studying the Annapurna Conservation Area Project in Nepal were able to show that forest cover increased after the ACAP project started. In Spiti and Ladakh, however, the harsh environment does not support forests; Binsar is plagued by forest fires apparently unrelated to tourism; and the increase in Sikkim's forest cover from 2756 square km in 1987 to 3262 square km in 2005 (Forest Survey of India) is due to enlightened policies at the state level rather than community-based tourism. The degree

of forest cover is therefore probably not an appropriate measure for the four projects under review.

Biodiversity is another measure of ecological sustainability. Unfortunately, hard data on the wildlife populations of the Indian Himalayan region is lacking. According to Chadwick, the snow leopard population of Hemis is "stable or even on an upward trend". Since humans are the main threat to endangered species, we could surmise that fewer snow leopards are being killed. This may be attributed to several factors. One is the introduction of more secure livestock pens, which has led to a significant reduction in predator attacks and subsequent retaliation by villagers. However, there is also evidence that local people now view the snow leopard as "an invaluable tourism asset worth more alive than dead" (Wangchuck, 2009). As for other regions, we were told that the population of barking deer in Binsar has increased since the beginning of the Village Ways Project, but we did not see any scientific data to support this.

Garbage offers another indicator. In Kewzing, the local community now participates in the twice-monthly garbage clean-up initiated by the KTDC. However, the fact that a clean-up continues to be necessary suggests that the level of awareness is still low. In Spiti, 10% of the village conservation funds are spent on garbage management, which involves storing garbage in pits and then transporting it to Kaza, the main town. However, it is not clear what happens to it after that. In the villages of Binsar, garbage is burned. While this is better than leaving it on the ground or dumping it in streams – a common practice in India – it is probably not the ideal approach. In Ladakh, the parachute cafes sell water that has been boiled using solar cookers and then filtered, reducing the demand for fuel wood and plastic bottles.

Other measures of ecological sustainability in tourism include the materials used for construction of tourism accommodation and the energy and fuel used in lodges and homestays. These indicators present a clearer picture. Himalayan Homestays use existing houses. These may be renovated, but there is no new construction, and hence, no environmental impact. Village Ways, however, opted for building a lodge in each of the Binsar villages – an inherent feature of their approach to the sharing of tourism income. As for energy, the homestays in Ladakh and Spiti and the lodges in Binsar use solar energy; but in Pastanga and Kewzing, they use electricity from the grid. (It should be noted, however, that the latter are close to power lines, and most of Sikkim's electricity comes from clean, sustainable hydro-electric sources.) In Ladakh and Spiti, the primary source of fuel is cow dung (a renewable source of energy); in Binsar, it is wood (which must be harvested sustainably according to Forestry Department regulations); but in Pastanga it is propane gas delivered by truck.

Another important measure is the extent to which the organization promoting

homestays attempts to raise tourists' awareness of environmental issues. Each of the organizations in this study does this to some extent on their website, but none appears to do it overtly during the tour. On the other hand, the tourist is exposed to the sustainable lifestyles of local communities, with features such as biological toilets in Spiti and Ladakh. In Pastanga, members of KEEP conduct a 3-day cleaning campaign in Khedi, during which they urge independent tourists to dispose of their garbage in a responsible manner. In Ladakh, Spiti and Sikkim, there is also an effort to raise the level of environmental awareness in the communities themselves.

Indicators of poverty alleviation are somewhat less ambiguous. Each of the organizations visited in this study was able and willing to provide data on payments to the community. If two tourists without a guide spend one night in a Ladakh homestay, the host will earn 700 rupees. If the same two tourists stay one night with a family in Spiti, the host will receive 800 rupees. If the group stays one night in a Binsar lodge, the community will receive at least 1200 rupees. If the tourists spend a night in Pastanga, the family will receive around 2500 rupees. Ladakh Himalayan Homestays received over 700 tourists in the year 2006, and incomes have doubled in some communities. In the case of Pastanga, the ten families with homestays had hosted a total of 613 visitors as of April 2009. As for Spiti Himalayan Homestays, the communities received around 1400 overnight visits as of mid-2009. Kathdhara, the most popular of the Binsar villages, had 263 overnight guests as of May 2009.

In addition to income deriving from accommodation, the communities also gain income from providing guides, porters (Binsar) and donkeys (Ladakh and Spiti), from selling handicrafts, and from providing other services, such as solar showers (Ladakh and Spiti) and hot stone baths (Pastanga and Kewzing). The communities have also benefited from capacity building and guide training. It should be noted, however, that the benefits of homestay tourism are not distributed equally. In Ladakh, Spiti and Sikkim, the main benefits go to those families that are able and willing to host tourists. In Kewzing, for example, the families hosting tourists are all from the Bhutia community, and the Rai and Lepcha communities have so far been excluded. In Binsar and Supi, all families are eligible to join the Village Tourism Committee, although many choose not to.

The third of the goals that the four projects share is cultural preservation. One way to minimize the impact of tourism on the culture is to restrict the number of foreign visitors to any single home and any one community. The policy of Overland Escape in Ladakh is to send no more than two tourists to any home and no more than four to any village. Ecosphere limits their tourists in Spiti to ten per group, eight per village and two per family. ECOSS is more flexible: while Pastanga accepts no more than two tourists per family, the limit in Kewzing is four; and with 15 households, it is quite possible for

Kewzing to host 60 tourists at a time. The policy of Village Ways is to allow no more than six guests per village (all staying in one lodge).

Another way to preserve the local culture is to present it as a tourist attraction. In Kewzing, guests can watch local people perform traditional dances wearing local costumes and enjoy hot stone baths. In Pastanga, tourists can visit two 150-year-old houses, one Rai and one Bhutia. Ecosphere, in Spiti, emphasizes the importance of traditional architecture, and objects strongly to the construction of concrete guest houses in mountain villages. Ecosphere also supports the restoration of cultural assets such as the remarkable Dankhar Monastery. Culture is also retained in the kitchen: all four organizations offer traditional meals, although in Sikkim homestays and the Village Ways lodges, guests seldom eat with their hosts. In Pastanga and Kewzing, guests are welcomed with a white scarf and a pot of chang (an alcoholic drink made from barley). However, despite their best efforts, the four organizations and the communities they work with will never be able to prevent cultural impacts completely, and indeed some changes are considered necessary. The potential impact of Village Ways' policy on increasing the status of women and lower castes has already been mentioned. Each project also includes efforts to improve standards of hygiene, such as advising villagers to wash hands with soap and water before handling food. And tourism is in any case just one of many potential threats to traditional culture. In Pastanga, for example, our hosts' children spent a lot of time in front of the television, with a wide choice of channels, many presenting a very warped view of the outside world. Tourists could actually help by moderating that view.

Comments and suggestions

The link between the three Himalayan Homestays projects (Ladakh, Spiti and Sikkim) is at present somewhat tenuous, despite their common goals. Greater cooperation and coordination might yield considerable benefits. For example, they could share their marketing, using overseas agents with a responsible travel reputation to market their products; they could adopt a similar pricing system (adjusted to allow for differences in access and local costs) and system of payments to service providers, and show these clearly on the Himalayan Homestays home page (www.himalayan-homestays.com); and they could list the numerous attractions each project offers, such as herbal stone baths in Sikkim, yak treks in Spiti, and tracking snow leopards in Hemis. Language problems appear to be a major obstacle. The tourist is often dependent on the guide for interpretation, but the guide is not always available. It might therefore be useful to produce bilingual information and explanation sheets dealing with meals, customs, the use of the toilet, how to get boiled and filtered water for drinking, where to wash hands before

meals, and so on. These, along with the common objectives and the criteria for eligible homes and hosts, could be provided to all hosts in the Himalayan Homestays program and linked to the web pages. So far, the SLC-IT, Ecosphere and ECOSS have focused on accommodation in family homes. However, in certain circumstances and communities, lodges of the type favored by Village Ways might be more appropriate.

At present there seems to be little or no communication between Himalayan Homestays and Village Ways, despite the similarity of their goals. Perhaps they could benefit from an exchange of ideas.

Conclusion

This study looks at four different models of community-based ecotourism with similar goals. The variables include the type of accommodation (homestays or community lodges), the system of payment (directly to individuals or through Village Tourism Committees), the method of marketing (using a single operator or not) and the initiator of the project (NPO, commercial or the community itself). Despite the differences, the results are somewhat similar: all provide significant monetary and non-monetary benefits to the community, all have a relatively low environmental impact, and all manage to preserve local culture to some degree.

Appendix

The Kathdhara Village Tourism Committee Constitution

- 1 The Committee will have four working committees, each with four members, each from a different family.
- 2 This Consitution will be signed by all members.
- 3 The Committee will include at least two females.
- 4 One of the female committee members will be Joint Secretary.
- 5 A Committee meeting is to be held on the fifth day of every month.
- 6 No more than one job may be assigned to any one member.
- 7 Committees undertake to work for the best benefit of the community.
- 8 Every member has the right to express his or her opinions.
- 9 Problems are to be resolved at the next meeting, except in urgent cases, when the four executive members are to meet to resolve the problem.
- 10 All members are to be informed of when the next meeting is to be held.
- 11 Registers are to be kept for accounts, rotation, purchasing and other purposes.
- 12 Each member receiving guests will be paid 200 Rs per day.
- 13 In the case of daytime-only guests, the rate of payment will be 100 Rs per day.
[Articles 14 – 17 were subsequently cancelled by majority agreement.]
- 19 Purchasing and delivery is to be carried out according to a roster.

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- 20 The person handling purchasing and delivery will be paid 2.5 Rs per kg.
- 21 If Village Ways receives unexpected visitors, they will phone the VTC Secretary, who will then contact members according to the roster.
- 22 Porters will be hired according to the roster, and will be paid by Kg.
- 23 A sum of 50 Rs will be paid to the landowner for each visitor per day.
- 24 If there is surplus energy in the lodge solar batteries, villagers may use it to charge their own batteries.
- 25 Dairy products and vegetables will be bought locally according to roster and availability.
- 26 The rate of payment will be 12 Rs per Kg for milk and 15 Rs per Kg for yoghurt.
- 27 If the person next on the roster for tourism hospitality duty is called out for other work elsewhere, he or she must designate a replacement.
- 28 All working committee members must have received training in cooking, washing and cleaning.
- 29 All committee activities must be open and transparent.
- 30 Accounts are to be shown at meetings.
- 31 No students or children may work as committee members.

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