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Vast alpine *bugiyal* at Khedi Tar for tent Pitching, picnic and grazing of cattles, and is one of the Common Pool Resources (CPR) in Taksom Valley, East Sikkim.

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Pastanga-Khedi, a Potential Ecotourism Destination in Taksom Valley, East Sikkim, India: Scope for promoting nature adventure

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Introduction

The term ecotourism was initially coined in 1987 by Ceballos-Lascurian (cf. C. Lascurian, 1996) who defined ecotourism as an experience of 'travelling to relatively undisturbed areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild life'. However, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. The concept of ecotourism has been developed with a view to uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel together and has gained full support from many government, non-governmental organizations as well as academic institutions. Presently, developing ecotourism destination is in high demand compared to conventional mass tourism owing to its low impact/pressure on the natural environment. Owing to its increasing significance, Government of Sikkim in the last one decade had taken pro-poor, pro-community and pro-environmental initiatives to develop

adventure, cultural and pilgrimage tourism as well as village and home-stay tourism within the broader view of ecotourism.

In this context, the Himalayan state of Sikkim is not left behind as the Government of Sikkim through Tourism and Civil Aviation Department (T&CAD) and Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department (FEW&MD) had already framed the *Ecotourism Policy* for Sikkim. The vision of *Ecotourism Policy* is "to create Sikkim as an ultimate and unique ecotourism destination offering memorable and high quality learning experiences to visitors, and to contribute to poverty alleviation as well as to promote nature conservation" (FEW&MD, 2011). Besides, several eco-treks have been identified and recognized by the T&CAD in the recent years such as *Yoksom-Dzongri-Goechela* eco-treks, West Sikkim, *Tholung-Kishong* in Dzongu Valley, North Sikkim as well as *Pastanga-Khedi* and *Tinjurey* eco-trails in Taksom and Rongni valleys, East Sikkim. The eco-trail passes through areas viz., *Pastanga* (take-off point) in the downstream, *Chauri Kharka* and *Dho-Bato* in the mid-

stream and *Khedi Tar* in the upstream.

Pastanga-Khedi eco-trail (ca. 1400m-2800m) in Taksom valley, East Sikkim is one of the ecotourism destinations contributing and sustaining the community based rural tourism. Khedi Eco-Tourism & Eco-development Promotion (KEEP), Pastanga based non-governmental organization has been maintaining and organizing the eco-treks along the trail in the last one decade. Though, the attraction of *Pastanga-Khedi* eco-trail to the domestic and foreign tourists, researchers and the locals has already been highlighted by Sharma (2010) and Verma (2012).

Pastanga-Khedi Eco- Trail and its Uniqueness

Pastanga-Khedi Eco-Trail (PKET) falls within the Taksom *Chhu* (= Khola) watershed occupying an area of 35.42 km². It is characterized by diverse man-manure interaction, holy lakes, view points, Rhododendron forests and a vast stretch of alpine *bugiyals* (= alpine meadows) providing abundant space for grazing of horses, cow and the yaks. For Pastanga-Khedi Eco-Trail, Pastanga, Assam Lingzey is the take off

point which is around 30 km drive from Gangtok via Ranipool and Assam Lingzey.

Pastanga-Khedi Eco-Trail extends from ca.1400m- 2800m and takes 8 hours up-hill adventurous trek to reach Khedi Tar (= flat land) from Pastanga village located at 27°17' 22" N Latitude to 88°39' 02"E Longitude in the down-stream. The major attractions along the trek are **Chauri-Kharka, Raja Kharka, Dhobato, Goru Juray, Khedi Tar, Deorali Pokhari, Pothi Khedi Pokhari and Bhalay Khedi Pokhari** considered as holy lakes by the communities of Assam Lingzey. March and April has been considered as the best part of the year for trekking PKET by the trek organizers and the locals. The attractions of holy lakes and Khedi Tar can be ascribed to the differences in quality and quantity of the aesthetic resources of Taksom valley. The table below presents the idea of the key tourism attractions in terms of the Unique Selling Proposition (USP), the existing resources the valley had and was created or developed by the community and T&CAD, GoS to strengthen and build the competitive advantage.

The historical significance of the trail that still remains curtailed, except for few locals, is that, it was the shortcut route for petty businessmen of Tibet and Sikkim before 1962. Also, an



Photo1. Shrinking Khedi Pokhari at 2,652m, Taksom valley.

important trade route between Sikkim and Tibet before 1942. The place is serenely covered with dense virgin forest, green pastures at some place, meadows, various species of bamboos and trees, rhododendrons, wild orchids and flowering plants. It is also the home for various species of alpine birds and wild animals (<<http://www.keeppastangasikkim.org/trekking.htm>>; accessed on 24/04/15).

The mostly visited and documented landscape features in Toksom valley are the depression filled-up lakes

(Bhalay and Pothi Khedi Pokhari) nourished by streams and the fracture springs and a flat stretch of land recognized as Khedi Tar (ca.2800m). A concrete temple symbolizing goddess Durga and a range of prayer flags fluttering at the shore of the lakes during Ram Nami festival signify its sanctity as well as reflect a diverse and strong man-nature interaction at the high altitudes. The water of the two holy lakes has been feeding the turbulent Taksom *Chhu*, in fact a 13 km long tributary of Rani Khola.

For the growth and development of the PKET, T&CAD, GoS has constructed a wide foot path from Pastanga village in the down-stream up to Khedi Tar in the up-stream. The Department also organizes mela at Khedi Tar to promote and develop the eco-trail. Owing to ease of access, the eco-trail has been attracting domestic and foreign tourists in the last 8 years. In spite of this, the volume of tourists trekking through **PKET** has declined tremendously as compared to the volume of tourists visiting **Yoksom-Dzongri-Goechela (YDG)** eco-trail, West Sikkim. Indeed, a total of 1,092 domestic and foreign tourists had trekked through **PKET** to enjoy the aesthetic beauty of holy lakes, Rhododendron and Magnolia forests, Khedi Tar, Goru Juray between 2002-2009 which is very low in comparison

Table 1. Places of attraction along Pastinga-Khedi Eco-trails

Places of attractions	Attractiveness	Created and developed by the community and T&CAD, GoS
Chauri-Kharka, Raja kharka, Dhobato, Goru Juray, Khedi Tar, Deorali Pokhari, Pothi Khedi Pokhari and Bhalay Khedi Pokhari, Sela pass, Khedi Tar etc.	Dynamic man-nature interaction, Khedi Tar, Sela pass, Bhalay and Pothi Khedi Pokhari, migratory rare species of bird Ruddy Shelduck (Brahminy Duck), Red Panda, numerous species of Rhododendron forests viz., (<i>Rhododendron grande</i> , <i>R. arboretum</i> , <i>R. barbatum</i> , <i>R. vaccinioides</i> . <i>R. grande</i> and <i>Magnolia forest</i> , view of <i>Mt. Kanchenjunga</i> .	Wide foot path from Pastinga- Khedi Tar, planned eco-treks by KEEP, homestays at Pastinga, and Bird watching etc.

Source: conceptualized by the author



Photo2. Form of Man vs. nature interaction at Khedi Tar (2800m). The fluttering of Khada (scarf) and prayer flags signify the sanctity of a place.

with the volume of tourists trekking through YDG (Fig.1). In 2005, a total of 4,547 tourists had trekked through YDG eco-trail, West Sikkim. On an average 15,000 people visiting Samiti Pokhari, West Sikkim per year has been reported by WWF, FEW&MD and Dahal (2014).

Looking at the declining trend of tourists trekking through the eco-trail and dissatisfaction among them, following recommendations have been made to boost the PKET in the days to come:

PKET needs immediate intervention of the T&CAD, FEW&MD, GoS, tour operators and the communities living in the down-stream region of the

Taksom valley. Timely intervention by the line departments shall bring ownership, livelihood security, minimal leakages and backward linkages, efficient conflict resolution and up-scale the social carrying capacity of the tour operators and the locals. Furthermore, it will help to reduce the volume of tourists visiting older eco-destinations which had experienced congestion and instead help in marketing the new ones like *Pastanga-Khedi* and *Tinjurey* eco-trails.

Devising a waste management collection and disposal system at selected locations.

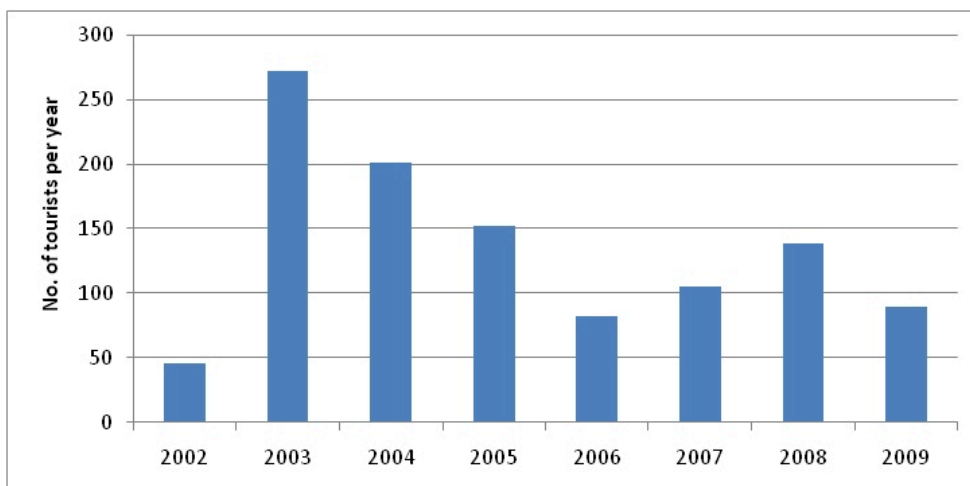


Fig.1. Trend of domestic and foreign tourists trekking through *Pastanga-Khedi Eco-Trail* between 2002-2009. The above figure is based on the database maintained by KEEP, Pastanga, Assam Lingzey, East Sikkim.

Exposure visit to the local unemployed youths and KEEP members for preparing them as eco-guides.

Field training to the local unemployed youths on trekking related activities such as tent pitching, selection of camp sites, bird watching and promoting home stays etc.

Formation of *Pastanga Khedi Eco-tourism Development Committee (PKETDC)* for its marketing and management.

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Photo courtesy: ENVIS Centre

Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) is a unique type of tourism which was introduced as a way of alleviating the impact of tourism activities on the environment as well as striking a balance between local people and the natural environment. It is a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people implying that there is a necessary social dimension to ecotourism. 'However, most CBET ventures are failing due to a number of problems such as unequal distribution of economic benefits, poor or lack of marketing knowledge and poor infrastructure. [Rosemary Matikiti, African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Vol. 4(1) - (2015)]

In order to understand the relationship between Social Capital and Community Based Ecotourism, we first need to have a clear understanding of the term 'Social Capital'. Social Capital was divided into social, economic and social forms. Generally, social capital is defined as the networks of relationships that foster the development of resources and benefits that can be used for the good of the individual as well as the collective. Social capital is relatively abstract as compared to other forms of capital like human and finance; it requires social relationships rather than tangible possessions.

Infact, social capital forms the central principal of CBET venture as it involves community participation and involvement. All the social activities that take place in a community and how well people in these communities contribute to one another is essential to measure the amount of social capital and the successfulness of that CEBT venture. Local community participation is one of the pillars for sustainable development especially in community based ecotourism. But in order to be successful, any efforts to sustain ecotourism options must have strong community support.

Therefore answer to these basic questions may shed some light to

better understand the relationship:

- What are the major challenges being faced by community based ecotourism ventures?
- What are some of the factors which affect the success of community based ecotourism?
- Does social capital plays a role in the development of community based ecotourism?

Social capital and community participation influences the behavior of local people towards the environment. If the community participation is positive and members of the community take active participation then there will be a positive CBET outcome. This positive gratification gradually leads to people taking better care of their surroundings and thus an improved environment. One of the main challenges of community based ecotourism are difficulties in controlling the carrying capacities of target areas, limited access of the poor to the tourism market and insufficient knowledge about tourism service skills, management and implementation at local level. The capacity to generate income relies on 'commercial links' with tour operators and entrepreneurs and failure to create these links will lead to lack of proper functioning and



Photo courtesy: ENVIS Centre

derailment of development in communities. However, according to Borman (Borman, R. (2008). Ecotourism and conservation: the Cofan experience) the perception about the relationship between the indigenous communities and tour operators are exploitive. For example, when a tour operator purchases a land of cultural significance to the local community and uses it as a tourist attraction sometimes the local people are denied access to their land. This creates a feeling of negativity among the indigenous community towards the visitors.

Through social capital, a more welcoming environment for tourist can be created thereby improving the image of the destination. Community involvement especially in the

beginning of development can positively affect the destination's quality which could possibly help to minimize conflicts regarding ecotourism development between community members and the initiators. The main role played by social capital in promoting community based ecotourism is:

- Influences the behavior of local people towards the environment thus, it can improve a community's ability to sustainably manage natural resources through generating appropriate norms, rules and enhancing trust and reciprocity,
- It can act as a mechanism that push and pull people to participate in their local tourism development,

- Creating a welcoming environment which can improve the image of the destination which in the long run promotes the success of the venture.

CONCLUSION:

Community based ecotourism venture if properly managed have the ability to transform the lives of poor local people by creating employment thereby increasing their disposable income. CBET is a branch of tourism which can alleviate the impact of tourism on the environment at large and benefiting the local people simultaneously. Therefore, social capital was found to be one of the major aspects which can positively affect the perpetual success of CEBT ventures.

Table 1: Benefits of community based ecotourism.

The benefits of community based ecotourism	
Environmental Benefits	Restoration of community degraded land through initiatives such as creation of protected areas, nature reserves and implantation ecotourism projects Change the attitude of or behavior of tourist towards ecological resources through seeing the initiatives by local people
Economic Benefits	Improvement of community livelihoods through creation of employment, which increase the community's disposable income. Improvement in community infrastructure.
Political benefits	promotes affirmative action policies by empowering disadvantaged groups
Social Benefits	Creation of bridges to cross and establish values among community thereby strengthening social bonds within the community by promoting cooperation among the community members, community cohesion is improved as individuals and families work together to build a successful ecotourism venture.
Cultural Benefits	Preservation and appreciation of community cultures which motivates the local people to participate in the CEBT ventures.

SOURCE: African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Vol. 4(1) - (2015)



Religious spinning wheel



Village in Yuksam

VISIT TO KHANGCHENDZONGA CONSERVATION COMMITTEE (KCC) BY ENVIS CENTRE

Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) is a community based Non Governmental and Non-profit organization based in Yuksam, West Sikkim (India). Formed in 1996 out of shared concerns, KCC works for the conservation of Biodiversity in Sikkim Himalaya with special focus on Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP), promote community based tourism for sustainable income generation for mountain community, works with school teachers and students on conservation education, undertakes micro planning for overall development approach of development, promote Zero Waste Trekking Trail in Yuksam-Dzongri-Goechala Trekking corridor, provides training to guides, Porters, Home stay operators, Pack animal operators and lodge operators. KCC is registered under the societies Act with Sikkim Government and was officially registered in 1997.

My visit to KCC, Yuksam which is one hour journey from Pelling, West Sikkim was for three days that is on 5th May 2015 and 7th May 2015.

At 1st day visit i.e 5th May 2015: It was mainly an interaction one with Miss Tshering Uden Bhutia, CEO of KCC. List of collection of data based on eco tourism in and around KCC and KNP.

1. List of Waste Management Entrepreneurs, recycled products in West Sikkim or Sikkim
2. Statistics for the number of Trekkers with Nationality visiting KNP and neighbouring areas
3. Bird List of KNP, and potential areas (list of birds around KNP, West Sikkim and list of birdwatchers in and around)
4. Per day charges and Rates of Porters and pack animals, their contact and availability.
5. Authentic Home stay, eco friendly lodges promoting local and organic food with proper service in Yuksom, KNP, and West Sikkim (if possible), with facilities provided.
6. Data on Environment impacts caused by tourism and allied activities in KNP
7. List of skilled, trained guides working independently or with tour operators, their names, contacts and reliability.
8. List of Tour Operators in the area (Authentic and Standardised), especially for trekking, birding, lodging etc.
9. List of upcoming Workshops, Events, training by KCC, or related to ecotourism activities with dates, venue, no. of days.

10. Specific Guidelines, Permits international and national tourists/visitors visiting KNP.

11. Other activities of KCC, or related to ecotourism

2nd day visit i.e 6th May 2015 was field visit starting from office which comprised of an entrance hall with Class room for home stay trainees, Entrepreneurs trainees, Porters, Cook etc. One small Library for students and the trainees, apart from that the office has two eco friendly guest rooms for guest. There were four interns from different department engaged in collecting data in and around KCC.

3rd day visit 7th May 2015 was also a field visit few distance from the office is Garbage Segregation Centre run by KCC, were after collecting garbage then it is segregated to different segment for further use. KNP check post is located on the way to Dzongri trail few steps from Segregation Centre where trekkers are asked to fill up the form. The trekkers are checked for the numbers of items they carry and are fined while returning if the number of items is less. Overall the tour to KCC Yuksam was a fruitful one as the above mentioned data was all provided by KCC.

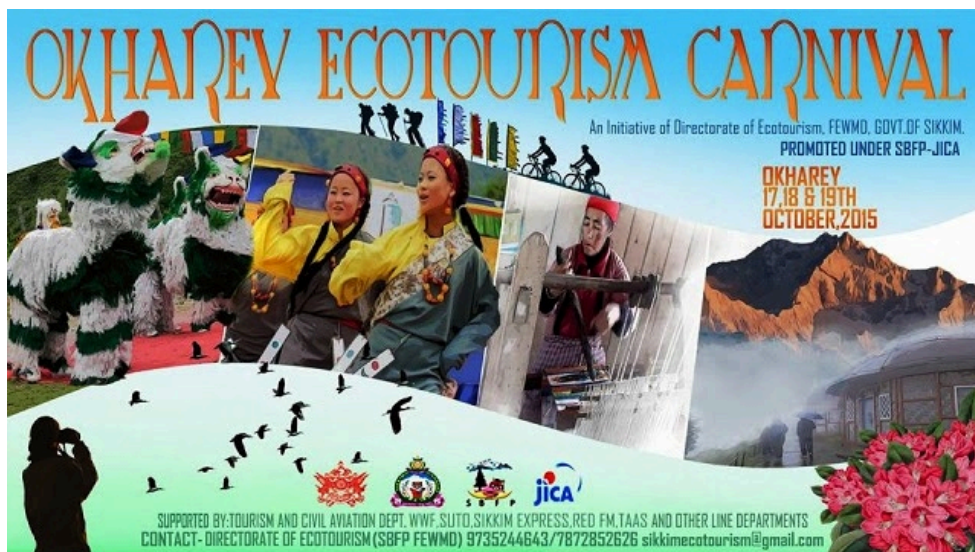
(All the data collected from KCC is available at our website www.scstsenvis.mnic.in)



OKHAREY ECOTOURISM CARNIVAL

For the very first time in Sikkim everyone experienced the real essence of Eco-tourism. Okharey Eco Development Committee hosted its first Okharey Eco-tourism Carnival in the month of October 2015. The festival occupied entire Okharey Village, and was structured into EDC working zones. Its main focus was the promotion of Eco-tourism products divided by variety, Sikkim's first Night Safari, Jungle Safari was launched; also there were a number of cultural performances, where events such as Ethnic Sherpa Dance, Cultural Interpretation, and Snow Lion Dance performances were shown. Bird watching activities, a Handloom-Handicraft products and souvenir stalls, and Adventure activities like archery, Mountain Biking, Horse Riding were all part of the three day festival.

The three day carnival was an initiative of the directorate of ecotourism FEWMD, Government of Sikkim, promoted under SBFP-JICA. The main objective of the carnival was to promote the ecotourism potential of the Okharey Village and its surrounding areas. With Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary on its fringes, Okharey is blessed with countless flora and fauna. The presence of the unique tribe 'Sherpas' and the warm and pleasant hospitality of the people was overwhelming. The carnival which was inaugurated by the hon'ble minister of Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department &



Department of Science and Technology and Climate Change, Mr. Tshering Wangdi Lepcha on the 17th of October 2015. The Minister in his opening speech applauded the initiative of the department on organizing a well thought out event and encouraged ecotourism enthusiasts to take full advantage of such events.

The three day event which ended on 19th of October was filled with foray of activities but the highlight of the carnival was the Night Safari (Sikkim's First ever) walk through dense forest trails teeming with birds and some rare butterflies. There was also a short trek to Lamasing, trek to Hilley and Varsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. A 4km trek route from Hilley will lead you to the mountain of rhododendron through the rhododendron sanctuary of Varsey/Barsey. Rhododendron (aka Guras in colloquial language) is the special attraction as almost 38 species of guras is available in the jungle of this mountain. In the month of April or so, the main attraction occurs when the locals celebrate guras festival exhibiting almost all varieties of 'guras' available on those mountains. Most of the tourists visited the ecotourism carnival for the trekking experience. Besides trekking there were also other activities that the participants could indulge in such as mountain biking and horse riding which provided

amusement to the tourists and locals alike. Another highlight of the carnival was the Snow Lion dance which is to scare away evil spirits and bring good luck for the New Year. This was a rare opportunity for the tourists to have a unique experience. There was also a camping site set up for the tourists to view the sunrise in the morning and the scenic mount Kanchenjunga. Several other stalls where also put up like traditional food stalls and various local handicraft stalls by the local community which would benefit them as a business opportunity. These stalls were selling locally made bamboo products and wood handicrafts at a reasonable price as well as custom made t-shirts of Okharey Carnival which would serve as a souvenir.

For accommodation there were two home stays available namely the Guras Kunj and the Barsey Retreat which were one of the most affordable hotels in Okharey and is the only place to experience the local exotic cuisine and homely environment. These homestays provided accommodation to most of the tourists who spent the night at the venue. One of the local proprietors Mr. Hissay Gyasto Sherpa who was responsible for booking of trekkers hut (Guras Kunj) was very helpful in arranging accommodation for the visiting parties. Accommodation was also provided by the organizing body



for which advance booking of rooms had to be made with the concerned authority. These were fairly priced rooms.

The okharey eco tourism community showcased a fine yet educational carnival with the help of the directorate of ecotourism FEWMD,

Government of Sikkim, (SBFP-JICA) and was a grand success. With Eco Tourism Carnivals/Festivals like these the eco tourism potential of Sikkim can be explored by the eco enthusiasts all over the world. Such events need to be highlighted on a regular basis so that the tourism in our beautiful state of Sikkim can flourish.



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Terms and conditions for publication:

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- Closely related with ecotourism related subjects or climate change.
- Full paper with abstract notes.
- 650 to 700 words in English language.
- High resolution pictures (3,4 nos.) of the topic.

Note: Publication of the research paper/ article will be decided by the editorial board of the Newsletter.

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