



## The Sikkim Ecotourism Policy - A Review

*In the 21st century humankind will increasingly depend on mountain resources such as water, bio-diversity, and recreation”- Arnold Koller, Sikkim has the perceptible potential for different activities that could provide the ideal recreation for those who seek it in terms of having the right attitude for conservation and preservation of nature and culture in the mountain region of the world's highest himalayan range. The ecotourism policy has been made keeping in mind the importance of the environment and rural development with the aim to benefit local communities from ecotourism ventures while ensuring their participation and wellbeing.*

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### **I**ntroduction and Background of the Policy :

The term 'ecotourism' was coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, a Mexican architect and environmentalist, nearly two decades ago and the preliminary definition by him was 'Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.'

“Ecological Tourism”, or “Eco-tourism”, according to the World Tourism Organization (WTO) involves 'travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both the past or the present) found in these areas.'

The concept of ecotourism has been widely accepted by several countries and Sikkim is no exception as this is a key element of the tourism sector which emphasizes on preservation and conservation of the natural environment. While calling for involvement and benefiting the local communities in which the ecotourism activities are most prominent and pragmatic.

Sikkim, with a geographical area of 7076 sq. km. is the 22nd State in India and lies in the mega bio-diversity hotspot of the Eastern Himalayas in the Indian subcontinent and embraces a variety of flora and fauna basking in the foothills of the snow capped mountains and virgin forests which are ecotourism assets to be proud of. It is important to note that most of the natural treasures in Sikkim are located in the protected areas zone.

The Government of Sikkim has addressed ecotourism

as a priority sector thus necessitating the formulation of an Ecotourism Policy to act as a guiding principle to bring about a unique amalgamation of tourism and conservation. At the same time the Policy aims to reach the benefits accrued from ecotourism to help improve the livelihood of local people while keeping the negative impact of this activity to the minimum in order to avert unsocial and unfruitful consequences to promote sustainable development.

The Sikkim Ecotourism Policy which was formed in April 19, 2011 by the Department of Forest, Environment and Wild Life Management Department of the Government of Sikkim, was the culmination of previous discussions between the State Government, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) and other stakeholders. A final workshop was held with stakeholders and expertise was provided by the Japan International Corporation Agency (JICA). The agency has also provided the financial assistance for the formulation of the Policy as well as appointing Kazuishi Watabe, an expert on ecotourism to make the Policy. The Policy has been developed by the State Government to ensure sustainable livelihood of the local people as well as to protect and manage the forest in the State of Sikkim.

The Policy vision has been laid down to establish Sikkim as an ultimate and unique ecotourism destination which offers quality tourism and simultaneously to contribute towards alleviating poverty and promoting conservation of the natural resources which are in abundance in the State of Sikkim. Due to Sikkim's mountainous territory and lack of feasibility for other big industries apart from hydro, tea and pharmaceuticals it has been felt in the policy initiatives that tourism will serve as the mainstay of economic development

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in view of the availing natural beauty and biodiversity in the State. Sikkim offers the visitors unmatched enchanting beauty of the snowy Himalayas and the colourful cultures that have emerged from this tranquil environment which is still in close association with the nature and its blissfulness. All efforts are being made to woo visitors by providing maximum amenities and further inputs are in the making to have ecotourism amenities developed to international standards.

Sikkim has been globally mapped in the tourist pilgrimage circuit because of its rich cultures and religious heritage which are of historical significance. The State is prominently mapped as a Buddhist pilgrimage circuit and would be enroute to important destinations like the Mansarovar lake in China (TAR). The government of Sikkim has recognized tourism as an eco-friendly industry and environmentally sustainable with the support from the government in framing of policies and facilities provided throughout the State to be taken advantage of by every household especially in the villages in view of the emphasis on rural/village tourism and homestay which help ecotourism to thrive. The need to educate the people on environmentally friendly sustainable motives has been consistently emphasized so as to spread awareness and abort the disaster on a fragile eco-friendly State.

The history of Sikkim under the Namgyal dynasty has seen a close affinity with the religion that was established in the long tradition of Buddhism in Tibet. Although the percentage of Buddhists (about 25%) in the State is less than that of the followers of Hinduism, however its impact on the daily life of all Sikkimese people is noteworthy. The worship of Guru Padmasambhava, the patron saint from Odiyan and other significant Buddhist deities in all about 200 monasteries in Sikkim, has deeply influenced the cultural heritage and lifestyle of the people of Sikkim.

The future mapped out by the leaders is that of achieving the transformation of the State into an Ecotourism destination by 2015, with the hope that Sikkim will emerge as a modern State in the country with the highest indices in every socio economic sphere. Ecotourism in Sikkim needs to be firmly established as the economic gear to bring about noticeable qualitative change in the lives of the citizens of the State. This can be fulfilled given the natural resources, hospitality of its people, political peace which together puts tourism in Sikkim on a platform that can boost the burgeoning economy. Sikkim has witnessed 35% increase in domestic tourists arrival which has added to the State revenue and the target is to generate 1500 crores annually by 2015 in addition to other resources and grants received by the State.

It is heartening and appreciable of the leadership, government and people that Sikkim continues to maintain its position as the best performing State in tourism in the country and has received accolades in this sector time and again.

Along with seven other States, Sikkim is in the North East region of India and together comprises four percent of

the total population and approximately eight percent of the total area of the country. There are over 200 ethnic groups in these eight States speaking about 125 languages truly making this part of India unique and an experience to be felt by the rest of the countrymen and others.

#### **Interpretive Method for Ecotourism :**

One of the most important terms related to ecotourism is its interpretation by which visitors would be made to understand and appreciate the community resources. For this a Training Manual on Interpretive Methods is available for guides and community members who are being explained of the need to know the art of interpretation by way of holding workshops from time to time. This is important as with the development of ecotourism, new issues and concerns would crop up if appropriate training is lacking. Therefore, the importance of interpreters, who are the people who would be communicating with the visitors in such a way that they learn about the Sikkimese society and culture and also appreciate them meaningfully. The interpretive approach to community based ecotourism which has been emphasized by the government, as also included in the Tourism Mission 2015, can make an important difference to help preserve the core values of the local community in which ecotourism has been started. Infact to quote the honorable Chief Minister 'Tourism mission is to make Sikkim the principal tourism destination in South Asia, Southeast Asia and worldwide'. A special thrust has been imparted to village tourism, home stay as much of the culture and natural wealth has been found to be intact in the rural areas. The need for simple and clean places has been emphasized and the Tourism Department has the authority to check the home stay provisions in the villages which are having a huge potential given the unmatched natural surroundings and local culture.

The possibility for ecotourism is even greater in that the State of Sikkim is the most eco friendly State in the country with over 82 percent of its geographical area under forest land use and more than 42.55 percent under wildlife and biosphere reserve. The potential of Sikkim as a tourist destination is on the rise as the state has been receiving all the best tourism awards in the country. The Government is committed towards developing sustainable, green and clean tourism, quality tourism, safe tourism which are also important factors for the Ecotourism Policy that is being implemented in the State.

#### **Strategies laid down in the Ecotourism Policy :**

The Sikkim Ecotourism Policy has further laid down strategies for ecotourism development in the field of planning, capacity building, and benefits to economically disadvantaged people, stakeholder partnership and departmental conversions, product and infrastructure development, marketing, finance, safety and certification. It also lays strategies for awareness programmes and education of ecotourism for environmental conservation and waste management which are important issues for ecotourism.

As of today, Sikkim has been recognized as the best

small State for overall achievement in human development and the best State for citizen security, environment, water resources and sanitation categories. It would seem that from the present position gained by the State, the strategies laid down in the ecotourism Policy are in the right direction and further improvements in implementing strategies would enable sustainable development at the much required degree for safety and security of the local people as well as the environment. This is important given that out of total of 7910 households in the State, 5271 households are in the rural areas and therefore, the thrust in planning and development strategies for uplifting the rural sector by way of ecotourism prospects.

Major programmes to this effect in the tourism sector are in the offing and lately the first ever global tourism event was organized in the North East of India under "International Tourism Mart 2013" at Sarusajai Stadium from Gohati from January 18-20 with the aim to tap unexplored tourism sites in the North Eastern States and West Bengal. The event had 83 delegates from countries like countries in Euro Zone, USA, Australia and Asian countries, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Japan and Korea. Sikkim was singled out as the most performing State in Tourism among the rest of the North Eastern State. The Union Tourism Minister said that the actual expenditure to promote tourism in the North East has exceeded the year marked budget year after year and rupees five sixty cores provided to develop tourism infrastructure during the 11th five year plan. He also mentioned the need for increase in the arrival of foreign tourist from current 0.6 percent to 1 percent in the next five years with the focus being on adventure tourism.

Ecotourism lies at the heart of tourism and Sikkim is gearing to provide visitors with opportunities to enjoy its nature and the diversified cultures. To make it even easier the visitor was given a unique chance to view the floral variations of Sikkim in the International flower show held in February 2013 (23-27).

The Government lays emphasis on green building practices in architecture and also for the infrastructure being built for the home stay and village tourism. So far 720 houses have been identified in the four districts of state to promote village tourism and home stay with building of two additional rooms with government funding. The work has been awarded to cooperative societies of respective villages where homestay and village tourism flourish. The emphasis is on village tourism to bridge the gap between villages and the urban people through economic bonding and that the youth should get the opportunity for economic gain and overall development of the local community.

#### **Sustainability and prospects of eco-tourism (with special ref. to spiritual-cultural tourism in Sikkim) :**

The Government has realized the need and importance of professionalism in this sector and if monitored well, the state has all the chances of becoming the ultimate eco-tourism destination that it wishes to be. Sikkim adheres to the 'Small

is beautiful' phrase of eminent political theorist Ernest F. Schumacher and the continual political stability in the State for nearly over three decades is an immense booster to the tourism industry in comparison to the rest of the northeast and other parts of the country. Getting to Sikkim is rather easy, getting the traveler to come back and stay and enjoy the peace and tranquility amidst the pristine nature, requires a lot of hard work and responsibility on the part of the stakeholders. Since 1998 to 2013 Sikkim has been flooded with accolades in the tourism sector as the 'best performing state' by the Ministry of tourism, Government of India be it in adventure tourism, ecotourism, picturesque destination, programmes and emerging Tourism State.

The Indian Himalayan Centre for Adventure and Ecotourism (IHCAE) at Chemchey in south Sikkim has been created to develop ecotourism in the north eastern region and provide leverage for the country to be ahead in the field of ecotourism. Another feather in the cap of the State is the establishment of a nongovernmental organization by the name of Ecotourism and Conservation society of Sikkim (ECOSS) which started its operations in April 2001. Its mission was to ensure a 'thorough and correct understanding of the concept of ecotourism' which is closely linked and goes hand in hand with conservation in their vision. The major environmental issues of concern to both ECOSS and the state government seem to lie in lack of modern amenities in the urban areas including disposal of solid waste management, improper water supply and sanitation, air pollution, depletion of forest and other natural resources. The emphasis of ECOSS is on a paradigm shift from the experience of neighboring Darjeeling hills which has seen flooding of tourists at the cost of the fragile eco-system and environment.

Ecotourism in Sikkim is more likely to take a unique turn taking into consideration the visionary concept of the political leadership. This vision is like a revolution to free the human mind from negative thoughts and individualism which has led to differences among people causing human suffering and misery. This holy revolution which has been philosophized is a movement of pure thought and commitment to ensure safety of man in nature to maintain a harmonious relationship between man and nature which is the underlying theme of world ecotourism.

The present leadership in Sikkim has clearly outlined that ecotourism will be the occupation of the young Sikkimese in this 21st century. The promotion of ecotourism with utmost care to the ecology has emerged as the most potential industry in the State especially with regard to village tourism, adventure tourism, homestay and culture tourism which have become essential components of the tourism industry. The Government is attempting to ensure that the benefits of tourism are equally dispersed among the cross section of the people in Sikkim.

Cultural tourism in the State has reached new heights with the construction of several pilgrimage sites resulting

from the religious and spiritual orientation of the local people and the visitors arriving to have a glimpse of nature as well as experience the enervating spiritual environment blessed by the presence of the towering Himalayas which have long since been acknowledged in the Vedas as the abode of the gods. Cultural centre at Samdruptse, Char Dham, Buddha Park and other ongoing projects undoubtedly have transformed Sikkim from a state of religious slumber to one of great activity for one and all.

The Government calls for active participation and proactive role from the citizens to make ecotourism as a thriving industry in the State due to the availability of tourism and related projects and programmes have also received the importance so that proper facilities are available to the visitors on his/her visit to the State.

Infact the Chief Minister of Sikkim has even mentioned that despite having visited many places in the world he couldn't find a better place than Sikkim and therefore, is of the opinion that tourism can be the most important business venture and flourishing dream turned into reality with the active participation and hard work of Sikkimese entrepreneurs themselves who could even be world players in the tourism sector ultimately.

By the year 2015, rail and air connectivity are hopefully to be completed and expansion of 873 kms of the roads under the Border Roads Organisation to be of better standard which would act as a catalyst to boost the tourism industry in the State.

It has been aptly said that "In the 21st century humankind will increasingly depend on mountain resources such as water, bio-diversity, and recreation"- Arnold Koller, Sikkim has the perceptible potential for different activities that could provide the ideal recreation for those who seek it in terms of having the right attitude for conservation and preservation of nature and culture in the mountain region of the world's highest himalayan range. The ecotourism policy has been made keeping in mind the importance of the environment and rural development with the aim to benefit local communities from ecotourism ventures while ensuring their participation and wellbeing.

The need for close and proper coordination amongst the stakeholders would help in the promotion of the State as a truly unique destination and with time become one of the most popular places for visitation and could even become the benchmark for accreditation for other states in the country. The government's role as facilitator has commenced and regulations need to be implemented in a strict manner to safeguard the tenets of ecotourism. As the famous poet Robert Frost has said : "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, and I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep....."

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