

Social Entrepreneurship through a Community Based Eco-Tourism Policy in the Himalayan State of Uttarakhand

Kapil Kumar Joshi^{1*}, Vinay Sharma²

¹Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Uttarakhand, India; ²Department of Management Studies, IIT, Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

Uttarakhand is a Himalayan state with magnificent biodiversity. It is a place of religious as well as natural tourism. Millions of people visit this state annually. Though many organizations and institutions are working in this state for tourism regulations but still there is a gap for an eco-tourism policy. Himalayan region being the most fragile eco system in the world needs an ecologically sound, least impact, low carbon, sustainable, economically viable, and socially accepted and community based tourism policy to provide a unique and incomparable experience to its visitors. This paper is an attempt to address all such issues by drafting a community based eco-friendly policy on tourism for the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.

Keywords: Community based tourism; Himalaya; Heritage; Forest; Eco tourism activities

INTRODUCTION

Any policy is to be perceived differently from policy goals, and contains both a strategic statement and a settled course of action to be followed by an institution [1-3]. The objective of a tourism policy is to provide tools for containing growth of tourism beyond viable, acceptable and sustainable natural, social and economic thresholds. As far as Ecotourism sub sector is concerned, clear planning and control of the sector is a globally identified need [4]. This paper intends to outline the policy needs of the Ecotourism sector in Uttarakhand state of India.

Uttarakhand is uniquely placed for its social, cultural, floral and faunal diversity. With its pristine, pure and picturesque environment, Uttarakhand is also known as abode of Gods. Snow clad mountains, panoramic alpine meadows, mighty Himalayan crisscrossed valleys, life giving perennial rivers stippled with lush green forests and mega biodiversity are some amongst many other factors which initiate inspiration to the soul and make Uttarakhand a spiritual heritage of the world [5].

Uttarakhand, the 28th state of the Indian Union came into existence on 9th November 2000 [6]. With a geographical area of over 53,483 sq. km. this state constitutes nearly 1.67 percent of the country's total geographical area. The state is inhabited with a population of about 10 million comprising two major ethnic groups named as Indo-Aryans and Indo- Mangolids [7]. Various communities amongst these groups play a major role in conservation of various natural resources of the state. Over 12000 Van Panchayats,

functioning in the state are India's earliest examples of community based natural resource management with its roots since the early 20th century [8].

Uttarakhand state's recorded forest area is 34650.56 sq.km which is 64.8 % of its total geographical area and 4.5% of the national forest area. Its forest cover is 24,465 sq. km. which represents 45.74% of the state's total geographical area and 3.61% of the forest cover of the country [9]. 6 national parks, 7 wildlife sanctuaries and 4 conservation reserves comprising over 12000 sq km of forest area works as a vast reservoir of magnificent biodiversity of the state. Uttarakhand is a home to nearly 4048 species of angiosperms and gymnosperm, out of which nearly 116 species are specific to Uttarakhand and about 161 species are recognized as rare or threatened under the categorization of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Faunal diversity of Uttarakhand included 102 species of mammals, 623 species of birds, 124 species of fish, 69 species of reptiles and 19 species of amphibians. Highly endangered species like the snow leopard, Musk deer, tiger, Asiatic elephant, bharal, monal, cheer pheasant, king cobra etc. find suitable habited in the forest of Uttarakhand(UFD,2007). All above facts support state's potential to develop as a top tourist destination for nature, wild life, religious spiritual, herbal and adventure tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At present many departments or institutions are working for tourism development in the state. These institutions are Uttarakhand Tourism Department (UTD), Uttarakhand Tourism Development

*Correspondence to: Kapil Kumar Joshi, Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Uttarakhand, India. Tel: + 91 9412085207; E-mail: kapilkjoshi@rediffmail.com

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Board (UTDB), Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam(KMVN), Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN), Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation (UFDC) and Forest Department (FD) . Amongst these institutions, Uttarakhand Tourism Department, Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam, Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam and Forest Corporation are presently working in a commercial manner by not giving many opportunities to the community's involvement in tourism sector. At present the average annual tourist influx in this state is of the order of over 30 million in the year 2010 . Out of this a major share goes to the religious tourism in the form of Char Dham pilgrimage [10].

This pilgrimage consists of:

- **Badrinath** (in Chamoli district), is one of India's most important Hindu pilgrimage sites. Located on the banks of Alaknanda River, the town is famous for its temple of lord Vishnu.

Kedarnath (in Rudraprayag district), is known for its temple of lord Shiva. One of the holiest pilgrimage sites, the shrine is located in the high Himalayas, near the Chorabari Glacier, and is a 14 km trek from the nearest road. The temple is believed to have been built in the 8th century.

Gangotri (in Uttarkashi district), is where the river Ganges originates. Pilgrims believe that bathing here will help cleanse their sins.

Yamunotri (in Uttarkashi district), is where the river Yamuna originates. Pilgrims visit the temple dedicated to the goddess Yamuna after bathing in the river.

Uttarakhand is primarily known for this type of pilgrimage tourism where millions of tourist arrives here annually to perform their various rituals. It is worth mentioning here that a very small or almost negligible share of tourist comes under the category of eco-tourism in this state. It is further true that there is no proven system of data collection or proper inventory of the tourist exclusively coming for eco-tourism in this state. This is primarily because of the following facts:

- Absence of any legally binding eco-tourism policy.
- Lack of a legally recognized institution to carry out eco-tourism activities.
- Incoherency in policies, vision and objectives of various institutions working in tourism sector.
- Unorganized or insufficient community owned infrastructures like home stays, log huts, mud houses and other basic amenities for visitors.
- Inadequate capacity building amongst the local communities.
- Rampant migration of rural youth from hilly areas to plain areas in search of better livelihood options.
- Difficult terrain and repeated natural calamities in the state during the last decade. Flash floods, landslides and cloudbursts continue to affect thousands of people in Uttarakhand, it has adversely affected the local hospitality and tourism industry.

After becoming a separate state in the year 2000, one of the first policies announced by the government was the tourism policy in 2001 and the setting up of Uttarakhand Tourism Board. The intent to focus on this sector was set through a vision statement saying "to make Uttarakhand synonymous with tourism". The

focus has been to attract a higher number of tourists and keen to get more investments into the region. However over the years the state's ranking in arrivals in comparison to overall tourists in India has dropped from 5 in 2001 to 7 in 2010 for domestic tourists and from 14 to 16 for foreign tourists, for the same period. In 2001, Uttarakhand received 9551669 domestic and 44429 foreign tourists as compared to 30206030 domestic and 127258 foreign tourists in 2010 [11].

In spite of this decline, the tourism industry has been accorded the status of a thrust sector with the State coming up with many schemes and rebate in taxes for new developments. The Government of Uttarakhand is probably the most ambitious state in the country to promote tourism for revenue generation, and has raised the state budget allocation for tourism by nearly 224% between the 9th and 10th Plans. The state has enthusiastically embraced Public Private Partnerships (PPP) as the main method of developing the state's infrastructure. Within the tourism sector, 74 projects are running / set to be run on the PPP model [12].

Rush to develop tourism as well as the other sectors have led to irreversible damages in the state. The heavy influx of tourists has led to visible stress signs on the natural ecosystem – with a meltdown of glaciers, water sources drying up, deforestation and pollution. Though there has been an increase in tourist numbers and hotels in Uttarakhand but the vision that was shared before the formation of the new state was of employment to locals, preservation of local culture and traditions, and preservation of the environment – not much of which have been realised.

In view of the above depicted scenario, this policy is being framed while keeping the community involvement in tourism sector at the top and Forest Department and the Forest Corporation of the state as the central acting institutions to propel the eco-tourism activities.

CENTRAL THEME OF THE PROPOSED POLICY

This eco-tourism policy will work within the frame work of the following important statements

Preamble of the policy

This ecotourism policy will work as an exclusive guiding principal to conserve and preserve the rich natural and cultural heritage of Uttarakhand along with development of social entrepreneurship traits in local communities through nature based activities. The policy would aim at minimizing the impacts of nature based tourism, increasing livelihood opportunities to the communities, and ensuring adequate economic returns to the state [13].

Vision of the policy

The vision of the policy is to conserve and develop the social, cultural and natural heritage of the state through community participation in various eco-tourism activities while ensuring their sustainable economic upliftment along with a unique and memorable learning experience to all the visitors arriving in this part of Himalayan belt.

Objectives of the policy

- To identify, sustain and promote the stations of various heritage values (social, cultural and environmental) within the state.

- To develop such stations as “Eco tourism destinations” in an eco-friendly manner.
- To associate local communities and other stakeholders in promoting these values, through ecotourism activities.
- To establish alternate income resources for the local communities through their capacity building in hospitality, interpretation, communication, cultural and natural heritage, guiding and legal skills.
- To engage and harmonize various stake holders (local communities, government department, entrepreneur, civil societies, tour operators, and others) for the development and presentation of the state's exclusive values before the visitors.
- To regulate visitors and facilitate them to observe and appreciate the rich natural and traditional legacies of the state, through community driven eco-tourism activities.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ECO-TOURISM POLICY

Ecotourism in the state will be a conservation centric activity based upon responsible travel and respectfully involving local community within the existing legal framework of the state and the country. Following guiding principles are mentioned to develop and manage eco-tourism in the state of Uttarakhand.

- All ecotourism activities shall be carried out within the provisions of Indian Forest Act of 1927. The Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, notifications issued by the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change, National Tiger Conservation Authority, Management Plan prescriptions, orders issued by various honorable courts and guidelines issued by Government of India and the State of Uttarakhand [14].
- All ecotourism activities shall aim at conservation of local biodiversity and generating economic advantages to the local communities while respecting their social, cultural and traditional values.
- "Community Based Ecotourism Model" shall be adopted for planning, implementing and monitoring of the activities, which will be in strict conformity with the environmental and socio-cultural fabrics of the area [15].
- Income generation through ecotourism shall be fundamentally based upon the capacity building of the local communities. Modules for capacity building shall be need based. Various customized training courses shall be developed for the purpose of carrying out eco-tourism activities.
- While developing and maintaining ecotourism destinations, sustainable use of locally available natural resources and larger emphasis on green technologies with least impact on indigenous values has to be ensured.
- Multi stakeholder partnership under the ambit of government agencies through PPP or any other appropriate modes shall be encouraged for developing and maintaining ecotourism sites.
- Classy, leisure and learning experience of nature, culture and traditions shall be provided to the visitors whose number

shall be limited by scientifically determined carrying capacity of the site.

DISCUSSIONS ON STRATEGIES

Eco tourism in Uttarakhand may be propelled in a sustained manner with least impacts on socio-cultural and environmental values. The basic fact for its propulsion lies in a perfect, indigenous and socially accepted policy framework. A brief sketch of the various strategies for this policy along with the crisp justification based upon the factual conditions of Uttarakhand state, it's inter departmental relationship and the available resources are given in detail as follows:

- In order to develop and maintain eco-tourism activities in the state the Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation shall be the working agency and the Forest Department shall work as a coordination department for Forest Corporation to carry out the activities. This is in view of the fact that almost all the locations of the pristine natural beauty is under the control of the Forest Department and Forest Corporation is the only recognized working agency for any operation within the forests [16].
- For the purpose of ecotourism activities, Forest Development Corporation shall establish a separate dedicated cell, within its existing structure, headed by an officer not below the rank of Chief Conservator of Forest. This cell will be a subsidiary of the corporation and an officer of the level of Conservator of Forests or equivalent shall be the member secretary to this subsidiary. This is in view of the fact that Forest Corporation in the state is already having a full-fledged working under the companies act and the forest officers mentioned above are very senior level officers with a service span of over twenty years.
- Main activities of this subsidiary shall be to identify, develop and maintain the ecotourism destinations within the state of Uttarakhand with the active support of the ecotourism wing of the Forest Department headed by a Chief Conservator of Forest. This coordination is mentioned because of the fact that Uttarakhand Forest Department is already having a dedicated wing named as eco-tourism wing headed by a very senior officer of the rank of chief conservator who enjoys the functional control over the whole territory of Uttarakhand Forest Department as far as the eco-tourism activities are concerned.
- The prime responsibility of the Forest Department through its eco-tourism wing shall be to explore new initiatives in ecotourism, capacity building of the various stakeholders, maintaining basic amenities in and around the FRH, development of trails, providing various technical and legal inputs to the corporation and scientifically determining the carrying capacity of the ecotourism destination [17].
- The eco-tourism wing of the Forest Department would provide a list of activities to be carried out in ecotourism destinations, a list of probable/potential eco-tourism destinations and a set of selection criterion for ecotourism destination. The activities conducted in and around the ecotourism destination shall be subject to the legal provisions applicable in the area.
- Eco tourism is protected areas shall be subject to the

permission of Chief Wild Life Warden of the state. A separate ecotourism plan for each protected area shall be an integral part of its wild life management plan. This Plan shall mandatorily mention ecotourism zone, eco sensitive zone, carrying capacity of the area and coordinating modalities with the working agency of ecotourism in the state.

- Based upon the observations given by National Forest Commission, 2006 "Tourism which was earlier thought to be adversary to the conservation goals, is now recognized not only to be compatible but facilitative to the same" this ecotourism policy strategically aims at conservation of natural and cultural resources clubbed with the development of the area.
- Following possible activities like trekking, nature walk, nature Camp, herbal tourism, adventure spots, interpretation center and awareness programs in and around the ecotourism destinations are to be carried out depending upon the area and the scope of the work.
- Infrastructure Development at ecotourism sites shall be a core issue of its strategy. A set of clean, hygienic, basic set of amenities shall be developed at selected destinations. Though already constructed structures shall be preferred but in case of need private guest houses, tourist lodges, home stays, tent colonies, mud houses outside the PA and forest areas may be developed by the working agency in an eco-friendly manner. General principles of "Rural Tourism" shall be kept in mind while formulating the working modalities for operating such places. This shall be done by a close consultation process between the Forest Department, local communities, working agency and the stakeholders.
- Capacity building in an another important part of this strategy where as per the requirements of the Forest Corporation, Forest Department shall regularly conduct trainings in areas like housekeeping, cooking, guiding, study tours for exposure visits, lectures on heritage values and legal issues. Participants to these capacity building exercises shall be various stakeholders like staff and officers of Forest Department/Forest Corporation, local communities, tour operators and other relevant persons. The capacity building work shall be carried out by a set of qualified, dedicated and domain specific experts. Finance for capacity building shall primarily come from the state department and may be supplemented by the eco-tourism subsidiary cell created by the Forest Corporation.
- In order to ensure quality ecotourism products on a sustainable basis various standards and benchmarks like ecotourism operating manual, F.R.H operation manuals, best practices code, implementation model and accreditation schemes shall be developed by the working agency with close construction to the Forest Department.
- Due consideration to publicity and extension of the ecotourism activities are to be given as marketing strategy under this policy. Smaller circuits are to be laid dower with specific reference to the desirable products of the circuits. Development of all kind of hard and soft material for publicity, extension and marketing shall be helpful for the sustenance and development of the ecotourism destination.
- Generation of funds for operationalising ecotourism

activities is a major concern of the strategy. Funds are needed for developing, operating and maintaining the ecotourism destination and it's other related activities, like capacity building, publicity, extension, marketing, monitoring and evaluation. Primarily the working agency i.e UFDC will put its own financial resources for carrying out these ventures. UFDC may enter into any mutually binding agreement with some legally operating individuals, institution or civil societies for propelling the ecotourism activities. This binding agreement may use any instrument like joint ventures, profit or equity sharing, loan, grant, market share or PPP mechanism.

UFDC can also seek assistance form state government funds, Uttarakhand Tourism Department, Rural Development, Uttarakhand Forest Department, UTDB or any other government institution to support some part or the whole of the ecotourism destination development process in the area. A sum of 10% of the total sale proceeds from an ecotourism destination shall be kept in a revolving fund so created by the UFDC and shall be plough back in the nearby area by the concerned forest officer to maintain the infrastructure like FRH, nature trails, footpaths, viewpoints, signage and interpretation centers with basic amenities.

- Every ecotourism destination shall be evaluated on annual basis over certain parameters by the working agency and the Forest Department. Monitoring and evaluation protocol shall be developed based upon the basic principles of carrying capacity, biodiversity index, use of biodegradable and renewable resources, involvement of local communities, waste disposal, rain water harvesting, number of lodges developed, and impacts on social cultural and natural values of the area. Such a protocol shall mandatorily be developed through nationally or internationally recognized individuals or institutions.
- There shall be a withdrawn back plan for each destination for enabling the management of the destination by the local communities/society. This plan shall be made by the working agency at some appropriate time when the Forest Department and the working agency find it fit to further propel the management of the ecotourism destination on a self-propelled made by the local communities.
- Eco tourism activities through local communities should get special privileges from the government like soft loans, grants, tax exceptions, subsidies, no or easy licensing system and single window sanction for electricity, water, and sanitation approvals.

SOME EXISTING MODELS OF ECO TOURISM IN INDIA

The only document available with regard to ecotourism policy at national level is the Ecotourism Policy and Guidelines 1998, which identifies key players in Ecotourism as: Government, Developers/operators and suppliers, Visitors, Host community, NGOs and Research Institutions. It also prescribes operational guidelines for these key players. The policy defines and hence approaches ET with a clear conservation bias. It lays out cardinal principles suggesting the importance of involvement of local communities, minimizing the conflicts between livelihoods and tourism, environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacities. Based upon above guidelines many state in India has come up with clear policy documents in the

Table 1: Status of existing Policy initiative in ET sector, India.

	India	Karnataka	Kerala		Sikkim	Madhya Pradesh	Himachal Pradesh	
	Ecotourism in India: Policy and Guidelines 1998	Wilderness Tourism Policy 2003.	Kerala Tourism Eco initiative 2004	Conservation and Preservation of Areas Act 2005	Participatory Ecotourism Programme of Forest Dept 2005	Sikkim wildlife (Regulations of Trekking) Rules, 2005	Policy on Development of Ecotourism 2001	
Objectives	Same as general tourism; to be a unifying force, preserving natural and Cultural heritage	Opening up forest areas for ecotourism	Eco-Certification Scheme to make each sub-sector within the tourism sector to be eco-friendly	Avoid unsustainable tourism	Promotes participatory Ecotourism Programme through EDC/VSS	To regulate trekking activities in the state	Opening up forest areas for eco/adventure	Opening up of forest areas for community based ecotourism
Strengths	Identified key players in Ecotourism	A beginning	one of the first standards issued by a state, intends to cover all sector of tourism	Regulates unplanned growth of tourism	Inter-departmental cooperation, financial assistance for establishing community ecotourism	Details Penalties for offense and rewards for reporting offences	A beginning	Community involvement, well detailed institutional setup
Weakness	No institutional set-up, fiscal incentives or community ownership	Public sector gets priority/ Monopolized access to forest areas.	Less Stress on socio-cultural aspects including local empolymnt, insufficient incentives for achieving the standards	In conflict with the expected powers and rights of panchayathi raj instutions	Difficult Procedural formalities involving many sanctioning authorities	Confines only to trekking activities	Stress on adventure tourism and private sector. Lack of community involvement	Too much stress on trekking and less on ecotourism activities.

form of policy, rules, regulations or initiative. States of Karnataka, Kerala, Sikkim, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh are doing well in this direction. A brief description of Status of existing policy initiatives in the ET sector in these states is given in the following Table 1. This table clearly gives a quick overview of their policy, strength and weakness.

CONCLUSION

The basic theme of the Ecotourism lies in the fact that a tourist coming from outside to a place should observe and appreciate the natural, social and cultural heritage of the area. While doing so he should be exclusively assisted by the local communities living in and around the area. And must leave a zero or -ve carbon footprint behind him. In exchange the local communities must get appropriate remunerations for their services like lodging, boarding, guiding and educating. The policy aims at bringing support to the local communities in the initial phases but gradually taking the task to a self-propelled made where the whole management of the destination is fully controlled and regulated by those communities.

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