Strengthening Interpretation of Singalila National Park

Written by Dr. Sunita Pradhan

Tourism in Darjeeling is not an uncommon phenomenon, where as early as mid 1800 British, Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Bengali aristocrats from Calcutta and Dhaka visited Darjeeling (Subbha 1988)[#1]. Tourism holds a vital economic importance to Darjeeling. Some of the remote wilderness areas of Darjeeling have been of significant attraction to visitors amongst which Singalila landscape is prominent. Visited by the globally renowned botanist J.D. Hooker in the mid 1880s, along with eminent mountaineers, writers and explorers, Singalila was officially open to tourists after it was declared a National Park around 1992-1993. Tourism thereafter saw an exponential growth in the first ten years which had both positive and negative implications for Singalila National Park (SNP). The Park currently receives more than 8,000 visitors annually. One of the first assessments of tourism in the region was conducted by Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) from 2012-2014. The assessment found a positive impact of tourism on the livelihoods of the local communities. However there were some challenges to the ecological integrity of the landscape. These include-littering and solid waste management, increase in built up area along the tourists routes, dependence on the Singalila forests particularly for fuelwood, overcrowding, vehicular traffic, change in visitor profiles from minimalist trekkers to luxury travellers and lack of interpretation mechanism about the Singalila landscape.

Interpretation is an integral part of a Park and an essential management function which also find mentions in National Ecotourism Guideline of India (Govt. of India 2010)[#2]. Interpretative programmes enrich...
visitors’ experiences by developing their awareness, appreciation and understanding of the range of natural and cultural values inherent in National Parks. Various types of education, publicity materials and nature guides play a vital role in interpretation.

Following up on the assessment findings and visitor feedback, ATREE in 2014 started a capacity building programme for the local guides along with developing interpretation materials for SNP. These materials are in the form of 12 mounted posters depicting various facets of SNP- history, people, flora, fauna (Red Panda and birds), mountains and destinations. These information posters will be kept in the Interpretation Centre of the Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Singalila South Range Office, at Manebhanjyang. These interpretation materials are expected to orient, engage, communicate, sensitise, build awareness and educate visitors, public and community for promotion of responsible and sustainable nature tourism in the region. We hope to build understanding and appreciation for the Singalila National Park which supports the remaining Eastern Himalaya Broadleaf and Subalpine Conifer Forests, the Endangered Red Panda and diverse range of birds, insects and plant life. The Park also supports the livelihoods of a large section of local communities both in Nepal and India through tourism.

Ultimately we also hope to upgrade the profile of Singalila National Park to retain its conservation value. The 8,000 annual visitors to Singhaila has been a rise from the humble 1,000 visitors in 1993. At the same time it is also important ask – if this trekking destination is encouraging mass tourism? Can Singalila support 8,000+ visitors sustainably? How can we encourage tourism while retaining the integrity of the landscape?


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