

Award Rationale
HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM
In INDIA



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On behalf of

Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.

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Location



1 INTRODUCTION

The application for the TO DO Award 2022 was submitted by the Social Enterprise Himalayan Ecotourism from Banjar, Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh, India, and was nominated by the TO DO Award jury. From 18th November to 4th December 2021, on behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e. V.), expert Dietmar Quist (PhD) travelled in India to verify the information provided in the application submitted by Himalayan Ecotourism on location. He had access to documents, calculations and statistics; he was able to participate in internal meetings, could interview staff, got any support possible, and was able to participate in a four-day mountain trek with a guide and accompanying team members.

Based on his findings and insights, the author recommends awarding the project **HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM** with the TO DO Award 2022.

2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

India! A country like a continent!

For the sixth time, the TO DO Award goes to a project in India. This time to HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM (HET) in the far North of India, in the foothills of the Himalayas, with a head office in Banjar/Kullu in Himachal Pradesh (HP). Travel from Delhi takes another two hours by flight and then another two to three hours by car. This may be one of the reasons why this region in India has so far hardly been discovered by international tourism. Not more than 25 percent of all visitors were/are foreigners, and less than ten percent are from Europe.

Himachal Pradesh is very much unlike other states of India. Common and often cliché type of images of India hardly ever apply to local realities.

HP has a population of 123 inhabitants per square kilometre while in the Kullu region it is less than 80. India on average has about 382 inhabitants per square kilometre (Germany 231). HP is larger than Lower Saxony in Germany and only has a population of seven million inhabitants.

Just about ten percent of the inhabitants of Himachal Pradesh live in cities (India: about 32 percent, Germany: about 77 percent). About 95 percent of the population are Hindus, 89 percent speak Hindi. The state has a literacy rate of 83 percent (India: 73 percent). In the Human Development Index (HDI), a measure by UNDP that takes into account life expectancy, education, standard of living), HP ranks 3rd among the 28 states of India (HDI India rank 131, similar to Namibia, Tajikistan; Germany rank 6).

Before 1990 there was no tourism worth mentioning. Just a few pilgrims visited the „Land of the Gods“, often on their way to Tibet. In 1864 the British declared Simla the ”Summer Capital” of India. The alpine and high alpine mountain landscape is comparable with the Alps, though at higher elevations (with mountains of 5,000/6,000m) and it has a much lower population density. People usually live in individual farmsteads, hamlets or villages. The tourism authority of HP is now trying to extend the summer season in tourism to the entire year: “A destination for all seasons and all reasons”.

Until 2017, tourist arrivals increased by five to seven percent annually, registering almost two million visitors, among them 500,000 foreigners. About 12,000 visitors each came from France, Italy, and Germany. There are still very few hotels in the mountain regions. Good accommodation has become available in homestays.

In 2020, as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, tourist arrivals dropped by 80 percent: Only 317,000 tourists, among them 42,000 foreigners, came to HP. In 2021, however, tourist arrivals picked up again. The Covid-19 pandemic hit India severely and many Indians sought ‘refuge’ in the fresh air of the mountains in this sparsely populated region: 563,000 Indian visitors came, but less than 5,000 foreign tourists.

Especially in the mountains and valleys, tourism – particularly hiking tourism – more or less came to a halt.

HP has landscapes ranging from tropical monsoon-dependent and subtropical areas to high alpine mountain ranges in the main chain of the Himalayas (of up to 6,800m) and cold-arid plateaus. Almost 70 percent of the area is covered by forest, 90 percent of which has been declared nature reserves.

The most important conservation area is the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP). The GHNP includes a strictly protected area of about 905 km². Since 1984 the area has been a nature conservation area and since 2014 it has been recognised as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site. There are less strictly protected reserves of 675 km² and 500 km² adjacent to the core area. The UNESCO reserve, “without human disturbance“, extends over an area of more than 30 percent of the size of the German Saarland. Together with the buffer zones it extends over an area of more than 80 percent of Saarland.

In the park’s core area there are no settlements, no huts, no markers, no paths; only small paths at best. Starting a fire is allowed in a few designated spots only.

To protect the alpine and high alpine, often endemic flora and fauna the conservation area is a huge step. As far as local people in the adjacent valleys are concerned, it has deeply curtailed their rights to hunt and to use wood and timber. Activities that earlier covered a major part of their needs are now prohibited.

3 THE PROJECT HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

3.1 History and Objectives

The foundation of HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM (HET) is strongly linked to the GREAT HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage. Hiking and mountain tourism started to increase in 1994 after the region had been declared a nature reserve. In 2014, when the national park was upgraded to UNESCO status, the interest in tours to the conservation area increased further. Various agencies offered guided tours to the national park. Hiking and mountaineering for more than one day was and is hardly possible without guides and porters. The paths are not marked. Provisions, dinnerware, cookers, tents, mats need to be carried. The guides and porters employed mainly came from the region, the Tirthan Valley. Their pay, however, was minimal. The low income from tourism could not compensate for the losses once hunting and extracting wood and timber were no longer allowed. This imbalance between conservation and possible benefit led to the foundation of a cooperative in order to achieve stronger participation in decision-making related to tourism.

The founder of Himalayan Ecotourism (HET) and applicant for the award, Stephan Marchal, a Belgian social entrepreneur, came to the region for personal reasons. He learned about the problems and gave recommendations and assisted in setting up the cooperative, so that the members would be able to agree on fixed higher wages, which would protect them from being played off against each other in negotiations. Another objective was to retain part of the new tourism income in the area. 65 guides, cooks, and porters joined as members. Tour operators refused to contract the members. Those who were part of the cooperative no longer got jobs.

However, giving up was not an option, neither for Stephan Marchal nor for the members of the cooperative. A tourism company, Himalayan Ecotourism, was founded and has, from then on, been bringing visitors and groups for the cooperative.

That’s how the project The Himalayan Ecotourism Social Enterprise came into being, uniting a cooperative and a tourism company. Both entities act independently of each other, but they are closely linked. Stephan Marchal manages the tourism company with the objective of handing it over to local people once they have been trained to take over.

3.2 Concept and Programme

The objectives of the Himalayan Ecotourism Social Enterprise are clearly defined. The income from tourism is to compensate for the losses incurred by the local population when the Great Himalayan National Park became a conservation area. The project should remain independent of government funding and people's personal responsibility and self-confidence are to be strengthened.

The company Himalayan Ecotourism (HET) canvasses customers for the cooperative. HET was purposely not founded as a non-profit organisation, even though its objectives are clearly social objectives. The income ensures that it does not depend on government support and donors. Part of the income from tourism remains with the company to cover administrative costs, another part is used to buy and replace equipment (tents, sleeping bags, etc.) and for promotion. The members of the cooperative equitably decide who will do a tour and under what conditions. The biggest part of the income is paid out to the guides and porters. Another part is retained by the cooperative to build reserves. During their regular meetings the members of the cooperative decide on how the reserves are going to be used.

In fact, even though this has not been put down in writing, the entire community is represented by the cooperative. All members of the cooperative must hail from the region and must be living there. This means that due to small community structures and close family relations almost every family is represented and may influence decisions.

It became clear that the cooperative represents the interests of the local inhabitants when in 2019 HET was the Overall Winner of Best Adventure Operators and was honoured with the Indian Responsible Tourism Award. The entire Tirthan Valley celebrated this award and felt like a community. The people felt as the winner and were proud of this recognition. How the prize money was to be used was finally also decided by the community. It was to be invested in reforestation (about five hectares) in areas adjacent to the settlements where the forest cover had been cut and burnt down a long time ago. Only now that the areas of today's GHNP may no longer be used did the community realise the importance of the forests for their own livelihood. During the pandemic, the decision on reforestation turned out as a stroke of luck for the members of the cooperative. They may all join the reforestation project and contribute to their family incomes despite very low numbers of visitors.

All the communities and families mainly live on agriculture. This allows for self-sufficiency and a hard life free from hunger, but the families are less involved in the national circulation of money. The income earned by the guides and porters now created a special situation. At first it was mainly the men who earned money. This changed the balance within the families and put the women at a disadvantage. Therefore, along with the cooperative HET also launched a women's project. From the apricot trees that flower all over the valleys the apricot kernels usually remain unused. Using the oil extracted from the kernels along with other natural ingredients, oil and soap can be produced, packed, sold and dispatched. For many of the women this is an additional income which also strengthens their self-confidence and self-esteem.

4 EVALUATION AGAINST THE TO DO AWARD CRITERIA

Assessing the activities of Himalayan Ecotourism (HET) against the contest criteria for the TO DO Award leads to the following evaluation:

4.1. Participation

How were/are the interests and needs of the local population taken into account in the planning phase and throughout the project?

Himalayan Ecotourism (HET) has since 2013 been the link between a socioeconomically and environmentally responsible tourism enterprise and a cooperative with 65 members (local guides, cooks, porters) in the Tirthan Valley bordering the Great Himalayan National Park. The project wants to strengthen sustainable, eco-friendly tourism. All the people involved should be paid in a fair manner. And the project was designed to put an end to the insecurity that resulted from workers not being able to safely plan the time during which they were meant to be working. Self-determination, transparency, and participation in decision-making that concerns them and their region were to become the responsibility of the members of the cooperation. They all hail from the region and live there.

The local population was hardly involved in the foundation of the UNESCO conservation area. So it was even more important that tourism would compensate for their loss of income from hunting and from using forest resources. To make this possible, the guides and the tour operator had to join forces in order to establish fair income opportunities. The daily rates for members are slightly higher than the wages paid by other tour operators. The rates are discussed and fixed at the meetings and remain binding during one season. After each guided tour written feedback including an evaluation by the participants must be submitted. The guides who perform better may be employed more often. And there is more competition: The English speaking guides are employed more often to guide foreign groups, they may be assigned more groups, and often get higher tips. The guides may access the guests' bills, so as to avoid any cause for distrust among the guides. Transparency is ensured in all the accounts. Members must not compete with the cooperative. Those who are in direct contact with (potential) guests (repeat visitors, recommendations) may only work as part of the cooperative. Concerns about members being placed at an advantage or disadvantage may lead to friction.

Both parts of HET have responsibilities. The cooperative is in charge of conducting the tours and accompanying the guests; HET is in charge of the bookings. Bookings may only be given to the cooperative. Full internal transparency and openness between both parts is a precondition for a trustful cooperation. The feeling of being placed at an advantage or disadvantage is an important recurring issue and can only be solved in a regular open discourse. And it works. Eight years on, nobody left the organisation. There are more than 100 applications for membership. However, new members are not admitted at the moment; it won't be possible until the pandemic is over.

From the beginning, close family relations ensured that along with the cooperative the families also have a say and are being heard. The cooperative is managed by local people; they take their own decisions. The representative of the tourism company has an advisory role. The cooperative is organised into groups of about ten persons each.

From the income, a reforestation project, a women's project, and a project for children are being financed.

In this way, as a matter of principle, local people participate in all decisions and go along with the decisions. In many cases there are long, open and heated discussions. The author had the opportunity to participate in one of these meetings. For hours it was being discussed how the reforestation should happen in detail, how the seedlings can be protected and who will be involved in taking care of them.

When tourism collapsed almost entirely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this stimulated the search for alternative sources of income. The cooperative's reserves are now being used to fund the reforestation

programme which may take three years to complete. This not only reduces the impact of the crisis and ensures wages for the members, but also supports the region's sustainable development. At the same time, it improves communication between the park administration and the local authorities in charge of forest conservation outside the park. Over the years, time and again there had been tensions in this relationship.

On the long run, predictable income opportunities (hopefully soon) are likely to also reduce migration to the cities.

The self-managed women's project Himalayan Eco-Creation which involves the production, packing, dispatch and sale of soap and oil from apricot kernels helps to generate an income for women as well and/or it helps them to contribute to family incomes.

4.2. Economic Benefit

Ensuring the economic participation of broad local population strata in tourism

The income from tourism and the sale of self-made soap and oil may be small according to economic criteria. Nevertheless, it has become the most important source of income, even more important than the sale of agricultural products. Ultimately, the income benefits all local families.

The reforestation project may contribute to improving the situation especially in times of the Covid-19 pandemic or in times of crisis. There are donors and environmental organisations with the intention of supporting the project. After all, the area has a size of five square kilometres and contributes to stabilising the ecosystem and to reducing CO₂. But the land is owned by the state and nobody can provide guarantees that the emerging forest will not be cut down at a later stage. This assurance, however, is a precondition for the involvement of organisations and donors.

But even now many families are in a better financial position than before the cooperative was founded.

4.3. Awareness Raising

Enhancing the awareness of local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development for their economic, social and cultural lives

The members of the cooperative assume responsibility for conducting the tours. Furthermore, they discuss decisions that concern their region. Their families, the whole village go along with the decisions – after in-depth discussions. They all assume responsibility for the development of their environment. Things do not just happen in their surroundings; the people are involved. They have a say in the decisions taken. During their meetings they also regularly discuss environmental protection and climate and waste related issues. The conservation of the regional flora and fauna is an issue. Questions of local geography are being discussed, and also dos and don'ts, and trends and innovations in tourism. The minutes of the discussions and the results are taken down in Hindi. In regular intervals, the results are printed out, bundled, and of course also read by members of the community.

That's how ideas, suggestions and wishes develop. This information leads to more self-confidence, gives courage, and promotes community activities. The increased awareness strengthens active citizenship. Young members are being trained during the tours and are being prepared for future tasks.

4.4. Cultural Identity

Strengthening local culture and the cultural identity of local people, avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism, supporting intercultural encounters and exchange between hosts and guests

The local community is tightly connected to nature, forests, rivers, valley foodplains, fields, and terraces. This connectedness is maintained and enhanced. Local traditions, regional cuisine, and people's own lifestyles are strengthened. The danger that they may one day be considered as inferior is low.

However, bad practices, such as burning down of patches of forest, are being brought up as being harmful for the community.

4.5. Decent Work

Creation of qualified jobs and/or improvement of the working conditions in tourism with regard to social security, working hours, education and training, and remuneration

The guides are basically day labourers who only get paid when they have work. At least, their wages have increased. And reserves are being built by the cooperative. When they don't have jobs, the guides and porters often work in agriculture, try to build homestays, or accept casual work.

All HET guides and porters go through a training programme in order to achieve fixed standards in tour guiding, management, respect, politeness, handling of equipment, etc. This increases their self-confidence, as they feel qualified for the job.

The work is now easier to plan and there is more fairness, which gives more security and self-assurance.

4.6. Gender Equality

Equal participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes within the frame of their cultural background and values

As far as gender relations are concerned, the population in rural India is very conservative. Women in their roles are not considered as having equal rights. So from the beginning it had been envisaged to also integrate women into the cooperative. Some of the women know the mountains and having gone through the training programmes they are well qualified. They are able to guide groups. It is not difficult to guess that men with a traditional mindset have problems with this development: Women alone in the mountains! And possibly even among male strangers. And what is more: the women demand higher wages, as they believe that they anyway work significantly more than men, always and everywhere. In this way the women are in direct competition with the men. This leads to conflicts. Therefore, the women have so far only worked as guides when requested by female groups. But the discussions about changing conceptions alone open up perspectives for new developments. And after all, the additional income earned by the women is very important.

Over eight years, mutual trust has developed in the families and communities. Slowly and carefully training programmes began, such as soap production for women. As planned, the women's groups now produce local products which can be sold to tourists. Young women who completed school are employed as teachers in order to ensure better schooling for the children. All this is small progress, but of great importance for the region and especially for the women's self-perception and self-confidence.

The circumstances under which women could meet or work are difficult. They are involved in the household and have very little leisure time. From almost every house, settlement and village meeting points are far to reach. The women and also the children often walk downhill for 15 minutes while the bus takes 30 minutes. To come back uphill the bus takes 45 minutes, which is faster than on foot. So

from two hours of leisure time, only one hour remains for education or work. The project currently tries to find new rooms in order to make more central, accessible places available to the women.

The Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down the development of projects. After the pandemic, they are to be continued with more intensity. The children's project to support schooling has also been suspended; setting up a library has been postponed.

4.7. Environmental sustainability

Taking into account criteria of low environmental and climate impact and sustainable use of natural resources

Many organisations and visitors understand ecotourism as contact with nature, hiking and trekking, happily also in conservation areas. HET is vehemently opposing this misconception. The training of guides includes respecting and protecting nature. Returning without having left traces is their motto and they share it with the guests. The guides pick up discarded plastic bags or little candy wrappers which they find on the way and carry them back in waste bags. Responsibility for plants and animals, knowledge of the flora and fauna are integral components of their training. The guides are very much aware that an intact nature, especially in the national park, is the basis of their livelihood. Part of HET's income is invested in raising awareness in the region. They organise presentations on a regular basis, covering topics such as nature conservation, reforestation, protecting the forest from wildfires or illegal hunting – topics which are also part of school curricula for children to develop a similar understanding.

Sustainability and eco-awareness are deeply rooted in the management's value system. The author noticed that the camping equipment provided is of very good quality. The answer to his question with respect to that: "We can't buy inferior quality and replace it year by year, can we? It might be cheaper, but sustainability and the protection of the environment and climate also apply to the equipment. As an eco-tourism organisation we feel that's our obligation. This also applies to our private households!" This short remark on the way tells a lot about the basic conception of HET.

And it was certainly not a coincidence that the cooperative (with the families in the background) decided to implement a reforestation project.

This clear position with regard to nature, the environment and the climate became publicly known thanks to the award the project received in India. Committed young people from all parts of India regularly come to volunteer with HET as interns. The project has become widely visible and finds important, qualified, and committed helpers!

4.8. Future Sustainability

Ensuring the economic and institutional sustainability of the project

Since HET was founded eight years ago, the turnover has been increasing year by year. In 2014, HET guided 30 groups. In 2019 there were already 100. The group size used to be five participants on average, doing four days of trekking. About seven team members were needed to accompany a group. It was possible to use the guides to capacity. In addition, several projects were implemented. Like in other parts of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic derailed plans and concepts. Tourism came to an almost entire standstill. The reforestation project HET initiated will enable them to survive for at least three years. In addition, however, HET is looking for new sponsors.

As a positive aspect it is to be noted that the women earn an additional income from taking care of the seedlings and watering them.

5 CONCLUSION

The author strongly recommends to award HIMALAYAN ECOTOURISM with the TO DO 2022. Himalayan Ecotourism very convincingly fulfils all the criteria of the TO DO Award.

Thanks to its status as UNESCO World Natural Heritage, the Great Himalayan National Park attracts a large number of tourists. Flora and fauna in the Himalayan region are protected in a sustainable manner. For the people in the adjacent Tirthan Valley, however, it caused economic losses, as they may no longer use the forest resources. The cooperative Himalayan Ecotourism for tour guides, along with the tourism company attached, ensures fair and calculable wages. Participation, transparency, and control over all decisions and processes lead to solidarity and allow for solutions in cases of conflict. Surpluses from the income generated by the tours organised are being used to conduct training programmes and to establish women's projects (e.g. Himalayan Ecocreation), school projects and eco-projects (e.g. reforestation). The inhabitants of the farmsteads and settlements are included thanks to the close contacts and family relations with members of the cooperative.

The economic losses – any use of the conservation area is prohibited – are compensated by the income from tourism. The self-confidence in the region and the self-esteem of men and women in the entire Tirthan Valley has been strengthened. There has also been an improvement in the tense relationship between the park and the forest administration.

With the reserves accumulated over the past eight years, the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are absorbed.

Himalayan Ecotourism is a project that is fully participatory and transparent, that directly strengthens the local population, that empowers women and that has ecologically sustainable impacts even in a serious global crisis. It is a worthy award winner in 2022.

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