Tourism in the Red Panda Habitats of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya: assessing and implementing appropriate strategies (18039-B)

REPORT ON STRENGTHENING INTERPRETATION IN SINGHALILA NATIONAL PARK, DARJEELING

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1. Background

Singhalila National Park (87° 59´ – 88° 53´ E and 26° 31´ – 27° 31´ N) in Darjeeling Himalaya, a high altitude Park in the Eastern Himalaya, India, officially promotes nature tourism since 1993. The fragile, biologically rich and aesthetically beautiful landscape of Singhalila National Park is important being home to the Endangered Red panda, *Ailurus fulgens*, threatened birds, and very high diversity of plant life. The Park supports Broadleaf temperate and Subalpine conifer forests and provides view of world’s highest Himalayan mountain peaks. Singhalila saw an exponential growth of as much as 250 percent in its visitation rate, within the first 10 years (1993 -2004). The Park currently receives more than 8000 international and domestic visitors annually (Pradhan et al 2013), while supporting livelihoods of as much as 70% of the local community.

An assessment of tourism in Singhalila by ATREE during the period of 2012-2014, identified many key challenges to sustainable and responsible tourism to Singhalila amongst which was inadequate interpretation of the National Park aggravated by very low capacity of the local nature guides to impart pertinent information of conservation and educational value to the visitors of Singhalila. Feedbacks received during the period from tourists, indicated visitor dissatisfaction among the group of visitors (52%) seeking experiences of nature tourism, whereas the other 48% of the visitors did not even know that Singhalila was a Red Panda (icon species of Singhalila) habitat. This was a strong indication of an absence of mechanisms to educate, build awareness and inform visitors on the natural resources and conservation value of Singhalila.

Hence a Booster Grant from Rufford, supported the Project “Tourism in the Red Panda Habitats of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya: assessing and implementing appropriate strategies”. The present project seeks to build the challenges to tourism in Red Panda habitats into responsible and sustainable nature tourism and preserve the conservation value of the region. For this, the project has two main objectives:

i) Assess challenges to sustainable nature tourism in two other Red Panda habitats of Barsey Sanctuary in Sikkim Himalayas and Neora Valley in Darjeeling Himalaya and

ii) Strengthen interpretation and education activities of Singhalila to enhance visitor experience, and positively influence their knowledge about the conservation value of Singhalila

The present report covers the second objective of the Project, which seeks to strengthen Interpretation in the Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling, India.
2. Developing the Interpretation Materials

Here, the process of building the Interpretation materials has been documented, from which the entire team of the Project had many lessons and experiences to gain.

2.1 Frames and boards

The 12 interpretation posters developed for Singhalila, came about with a lot of research, expert consultations and networking extensively for good photographs. These posters were then mounted and framed. Pictures 1 to 6 depict the process of developing the poster boards.

Figure 1 Initial sketches of the Poster Boards
Figure 2 Work on the frames in progress

Figure 3 A completed frame
2.2 Developing the posters

11 posters on various facets of Singhalila such as the history, people, fauna (Red Panda and birds, flora (Rhododendron and ground flora), Mountain peaks and destinations were made.
**People**

Shans, Tibetans, Qiang, others, Naxi, Lahu tribes, Han, Yi, and Shui are the key ethnic groups in this region.

Agriculture, animal husbandry, and tourism are the main livelihoods.

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**Ground Flora**

Changping Prefecture is very rich in plant life and is estimated to have over 2,000 species of angiosperms. Since 2005, Puguin National Park has been a center for horticultural species. Over 20 types of medicinal plants, including Rhododendrons, have been discovered in the park.

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**Birds**

Puguin National Park has a rich diversity of birds. Some of the highlights include: Pheasants, Pheasants, and Pheasants. The local mountain birds, such as the thick-billed thrush, are particularly important.

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**Forests**

The Puguin Landscape encompasses the Eastern Himalayas, providing temperate and subtropical forests between 1,200 – 3,000 meters.

The temperate zone comprises of Oak, Beech, and Pinus (Chinese Fir) mixed forests. The subalpine zone is dominated by Rhododendrons and subalpine meadows.

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**Rhododendrons**

Rhododendron is ranked by many as the best flowering evergreen plant in the temperate landscape. This species includes the most abundant and diverse flora of these plants. In the region, Puguin National Park has over 100 recorded species of Rhododendrons.

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**Red Panda (Allurus fulgens)**

Red Panda is an Endangered mammal. Red Panda is an arboreal, omnivorous mammal that is primarily found in high mountains. It has a distinct white fur with a reddish-brown back and black stripes on its legs. In Puguin National Park, the red panda population is growing due to conservation efforts.
Figure 5 Twelve posters for Singhalila National Park Interpretation
2.3 Final Poster Boards

The posters were mounted and framed.

Figure 6 Final Interpretation Poster Boards  for Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling
3. Handing over of the Interpretation Poster Boards

The poster boards were handed over to the Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal in a function on the 8th of September 2016. The function was attended by 45 people from representing various stakeholders viz. Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal, Gorkha Territorial Administration Tourism Department, Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Guides Associations, Hotelier Association, NGOs and local community representatives. Dr. Sunita Pradhan, ATREE delivered a presentation on ‘Revisiting Singalila for Tourism opportunities’, a talk which highlighted the ecological and cultural importance of the Singalila landscape and how this landscape had witnessed an exponential growth of tourists, and highlighted some of the key challenges to sustainable and responsible tourism in Singalila.

The highlight of the programme was the handing over of 12 poster boards to Mr. A. K. Pradhan, Addl. DFO, Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Govt. of West Bengal for the Nature Interpretation Center of the Forest Department at Manebhanjyang. The unveiling of the boards was done by the Addl DFO and Mr. Gopal Lama, Secretary, Gorkha Territorial Administration, Department of Tourism. The communication materials comprise of information on the Singalila’s history, people, flora, fauna (Red Panda and Birds) mountain ranges and destinations.

Figure 7 The Additional Division Forest Officer unveiling the Poster Boards
Figure 8 Posters being viewed by the Participants
Figure 9 Posters being viewed by the Participants

Figure 10. Interpretation Boards for Nature Interpretation Center of the Forest Dept., Manebhanjyang, Darjeeling.
4. Local Press and Media Coverage

The event was covered by local media, posted in ATREE Facebook.

Figure 11. Local media coverage of Handing over of the Interpretation Boards to Forest Department

http://darjeelingtimes.com/strengthening-interpretation-of-singalilanational-park/

ATREE FACEBOOK : https://www.facebook.com/ATREE.org/posts/1267990069891602