



5.1 The Mountain Shepherds Initiative: Evolving a New Model of Community-Owned Ecotourism

Rajiv Rawat



INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2006, the Mountain Shepherds Initiative, a community owned and operated ecotourism venture, was formerly inaugurated in the vicinity of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in Uttarakhand state, India. Born out of social struggle –the Chipko movement over thirty years ago and more recent efforts by the Nanda Devi Campaign to reclaim people’s land and forest rights, the people of the Uttarakhand Himalayas have been at the forefront of bringing justice, inclusion, and respect for natural and cultural heritage into the tourism debate in India and abroad. Guided by the groundbreaking 2001 Nanda Devi Declaration (annexure 1), the Mountain Shepherds Initiative has attempted to achieve a new relationship between tourists and host communities based on equity and mutual learning. As such, communities and groups from neighbouring protected areas are closely monitoring the initiative for its potential to set a positive example for the rest of the Himalayan region.

This brief report will trace the Mountain Shepherds Initiative from its origins in the environmental justice struggles of the local villagers from the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve buffer zone to the 2006 Inaugural Women’s Trek that marked their first foray into the tourism business. It will chronicle the evolution of Mountain Shepherds from concept design to its launch as a commercial venture and finally conclude with feedback from participants of the trek and some tentative next steps.

PART I: ANTECEDENTS

“The silence of the mountains is the speech of the unheard.”

The Mountain Shepherds story begins in Lata, a village situated in the Niti Valley of the High Himalayas (see Figure 1). The people of the Niti Valley, which forms the Western boundary of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, belong to an Indo-Tibetan ethnic group known by outsiders somewhat erroneously as the Bhotiya. Scattered along the frontier of the Uttarakhand Region of India and Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, the Bhotiya are further divided into several subgroups with varying degrees of affinity with either Hindu or Buddhist cultures in the region. Those found in the Niti Valley belong to the Marchha and Tolcha groups and have traditionally gained a livelihood as transhumant shepherds, traders, or farmers.

Two seminal events shaped the lives of the Bhotiya of Niti Valley – the 1962 India-China border conflict and the 1982 closure of the Nanda Devi National Park and later creation of the Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. While the former ended the age old cross-trade relationship with Tibet that had culturally and economically enriched the Bhotiya, the latter ended all mountaineering and trekking expeditions to Nanda Devi, one of Himalayas’ highest and most popular peaks. Both had devastating cultural and economic impacts, yet an incredible resilience born of the arduous life in the highest Himalayas allowed the Bhotiya to bounce back after each catastrophe.

In the 1970s, Bhotiya communities were at the forefront of the famous Chipko movement¹ that saw village women led by the now famous Gaura Devi to save their forests. From 1998 to the present, they have persisted in their efforts to regain access rights to the Nanda Devi National Park. With the creation of Uttarakhand state and its emphasis on the

tourism sector, this movement gave birth to the Nanda Devi Campaign in Lata Village. Sparked by the urgent need to ensure local control of the tourist trade, the campaign issued the progressive 2001 Nanda Devi Biodiversity Conservation and Eco Tourism Declaration to guide its future endeavours.



Figure 1: Selected Sites from Nanda Devi and Adjoining Region

1. In the 1970s, an organized resistance to the destruction of forests spread throughout India and came to be known as the Chipko movement. The name of the movement comes from the word 'embrace', as the villagers hugged the trees, and prevented the contractors' from felling them. The first Chipko action took place spontaneously in April 1973 in the village of Mandal in the upper Alakananda valley and over the next five years spread to many districts of the Himalayas. It was sparked off by the government's decision to allot a plot of forest area in the Alaknanda valley to a sports goods company. This angered the villagers because their similar demand to use wood for making agricultural tools had been earlier denied. With encouragement from a local NGO, Dasoli Gram Swarajya Sangh, the women of the area, under the leadership of an activist, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, went into the forest and formed a circle around the trees preventing the men from cutting them down. The Chipko protests achieved a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on green felling in the Himalayan forests by the order of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Since then, the movement has spread to many states in the country (<http://healthy-india.org/saveearth6.asp>)

In 2003, the Indian government made major revision to the park rules that had strictly governed the Nanda Devi protected area for over twenty years. A partial reopening began allowing 500 visitors to enter a small segment of the park's core zone every year, although the peak itself would remain off limits. The environmentally sensitive plan also called for the employment of local guides and porters, although this was not accompanied by any job training. Considering the move an opportunity for the economic rejuvenation of the local community, the Nanda Devi Campaign turned its focus on capacity building and infrastructure development for community-owned ecotourism in the local area.

For these efforts, the campaign pioneered several innovative and creative programmes to raise awareness of the Nanda Devi region and about the need for equity in the tourism industry in general. Conceived and organized by a consortium of researchers, social activists, and the Gram Sabha² of Lata, these programmes have embraced everything from artist camps to women's festivals on Republic Day, technology interventions, and participation in regional and international academic workshops. Over successive summers, student groups from American and Canadian universities also visited Lata as part of their studies in Mountain Geography and International Development. All the

programmes sought to raise the global profile of the region and diversify the community's economic strategies, while working towards the twin goals of cultural renewal and sustainable livelihoods. In 2004, these efforts were recognized when the area was selected as a runner up for Best Ecotourism Destination by Conde Nast Traveler. This was followed in January 2005 with a full feature article in French travel magazine GEO that highlighted the pertinent issues and concerns raised by the campaign with regards to ecology and cultural survival.

PART II: THE MOUNTAIN SHEPHERDS INITIATIVE

In 2006, the Nanda Devi Campaign launched its economic activities in earnest. After three years of steady progress that had brought both international recognition and a steady stream of visitors to the region, a major grant was obtained from the Winterline Foundation to train local youth in basic mountaineering skills at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM), Uttarkashi. Fortunately, Winterline had long maintained links to the region due its relationship with the International Woodstock School, Mussoorie. Moreover, its focus on "development of individuals equipped to be citizens of the world" matched the campaign's own emphasis on developing leadership skills while building the self-confidence of Himalayan youth. These youth in turn would eventually become the major stakeholders in Mountain

2. Gram Sabha: All men and women in the village who are above 18 years of age form the Gram Sabha, meeting twice a year. Meetings of the Gram Sabha are convened to ensure the development of the people through their participation and mutual co-operation. The annual budget and the development schemes for the village are placed before the Gram Sabha for consideration and approval. The Sarpanch and his/ her assistants answer the questions put by the people. The different problems and difficulties of the people are also discussed in the Gram Sabha, as well as decisions on community development. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gram_panchayat)

Shepherds, a new community-owned and operated tourism company initiated by the Nanda Devi Campaign.

Representing the future of their communities and the most willing and able to take advantage of new opportunities made available by new skills, the NIM training was also seen as providing a fresh start to many of the youth who could not finish school nor return to their



traditional livelihood. However, by reequipping their traditional knowledge with modern techniques, the youth would be enabled to enter into more specialized and therefore higher paying work. This would allow them to take greater advantage of the burgeoning tourist trade that has thus far relegated them to a supporting service role in their own neighbourhood. Most importantly, it would hopefully contribute towards strengthening local communities by increasing the chance of Himalayan youth finding gainful employment closer to home rather than in urban centres.

The prospective participants were selected in close consultation with the Gram Panchayats and core members of the Nanda Devi Campaign from the target area. Only those unemployed youth who were already involved in tourism and residing in the targeted villages were considered. Criteria were further developed to identify the entrepreneurship, discipline, and ability of each youth to work as a team. Eventually, the catchment area was expanded beyond the Niti and Mana Valleys, to include trainees from as far as Pithoragarh and Uttarkashi districts.

In keeping with the general socio-cultural outlook of Mountain Shepherds, NIM's basic curriculum was enhanced in consultation with the Principal. Thus in addition to a month of physically demanding mountaineering training, a week of lectures were held on topics as diverse as the special needs of the senior citizens/ disabled persons, the culture and history of Uttarakhand, flora and fauna identification, and mountain tourism. Successful candidates were also enjoined to make a formal pledge to the campaign indicating their commitment

to work collectively for the promotion of the collective enterprise as well as abide by the principles of the Nanda Devi Declaration and other progressive norms such as the protection of the girl child.

PART III: THE INAUGURAL NANDA DEVI WOMEN'S TREK

As key organizers of the Nanda Devi Campaign were preparing the training programme for the future staff of Mountain Shepherds, they also were simultaneously planning an event that would draw international attention and formally launch the company. For this, organizers decided to hold what was coined the Inaugural Nanda Devi Women's Trek, by reaching out to the world's women mountaineers to pay tribute to the mountain goddess as well as the region's women who have played a central role in movements such as Chipko and more recent struggles over local forest, land, and water rights. In this endeavour, Mountain Shepherds was greatly assisted by American students from the Appalachian State University, who gathered and delivered a significant amount of high quality mountaineering equipment through their successful "Gear for the Garhwal" project.

In July, seventeen women from India, the US, Canada, and Taiwan were selected and invited to the Nanda Devi region in October. Final choices out of over 60 applicants were made according to criteria that included interest and experience in women's issues, mountain environments, and social justice. To underline these goals, this first trek was organized as an exercise in mutual learning and exchange. Unlike the typical high end holiday package to the Himalayas, the participatory nature of the

tour was emphasized, so that the newly trained guides and organizers could learn as much from the trekkers as they could themselves impart about the history, geography, and ecology of the Nanda Devi region. The trek was also organized to acquaint the participants with the culture of the region's unique Trans Himalayan peoples. Visits to far-flung villages and home stays were thus seen as important as hikes in the rigorous terrain.

PART IV: EVALUATION

Upon conclusion of the Inaugural Trek, each of the participants was asked to submit their feedback and suggestions to Mountain Shepherds. Some of these are listed below:

1. Experiences with home stays and trekking were universally positive.
2. The difficulty level and length of each trek should be predetermined so as to provide multiple options to clients.
3. A briefing should be arranged at least once a day to coordinate meals, distances travelled, and rest stops.
4. For many clients, especially from North America, punctuality was a must. A new work ethic will thus need to be encouraged amongst the guides.
5. An initial briefing should include topics such as trash collection, water filtration, food safety, toilet options, and feminine hygiene. Sensitive issues should be addressed in a sensitive but meaningful manner for maximum comfort during the trip. Orientation towards Indian toilets should also be conducted. Indeed, this is perhaps the

simplest but most difficult problem faced by tourists when travelling in India.

6. The promotion of local handicrafts including rugs and woollen garments should be an intrinsic part of any trek itinerary. This would extend the benefits of tourism seamlessly throughout the community, especially if time is specifically set aside for shopping and the purchase of souvenirs.
7. A comprehensive information packet should be mailed ahead of time to clients.
8. English language training is absolutely necessary to permit sustained communication between guides and international clients. Without this ability to communicate, the region's charms as embodied by its flora, fauna, culture, and history, are only half realized. For regional tourism, enhanced communications skills gained from self-confidence and experience would likewise prove helpful.

PART V: NEXT STEPS

With the successful conclusion of the Inaugural Women's Trek, Mountain Shepherds has gained important momentum to tackle larger infrastructural and capacity building hurdles. In addition to enrolling the most promising youths in advanced mountaineering courses, continuing skill development will be conducted in the Niti Valley with the active involvement of the already trained manpower and technical support from NIM. Modalities have also been worked out with NIM to conduct low cost training for the remaining youth including village girls who have thus far not participated in the initiative.

The future course of action involves the following tasks that are either currently in progress or are in the process of being initiated:

1. A business plan and marketing strategy will be developed in collaboration with reputed business schools and ecotourism experts. The



- campaign has already initiated preliminary dialogue with alumni of a UK based business school for conducting leadership training for the Niti Valley, while advice has been sought from organizations like EQUATIONS that work on building equitable tourism.
2. A concerted effort will be made for e-marketing through the campaign website www.nandadevi.org and the newer www.mountainshepherds.com. There appears to be ample scope for this outreach strategy given that the campaign website regularly receives enquiries from all around the world.
 3. In general, infrastructure will evolve with the development of tourism business in the area, although steps have already been taken to ensure availability of technical gear for fulfilling the present demand. For instance, quality water filters have been made available to ensure safe drinking water for tourists.
 4. A small parcel of land has been acquired in Lata for building a centre for bio-cultural diversity and sustainable livelihoods as envisioned in the Nanda Devi Declaration. The centre will house a small museum as well as an office and meeting room for use by Mountain Shepherds and other community groups. Another office will be sought in Joshimath.
 5. Mountain Shepherds will eventually plan trips directly from arrival in Delhi to Nanda Devi. This is to ensure that no trip is marred by the incidental horrors that often beset travellers to India, whether in being overcharged in Delhi to facing harassment in Haridwar, to transportation chaos on the roads.
 6. In 2004, a focused training on vegetable dyes was conducted in Lata with the aim of replacing chemical dyes in the production of woollen products by women weavers. The results of these pilot experiments in souvenir design were encouraging and efforts are presently underway to upscale the production of vegetable dye-based products in the area.
 7. A durable relationship has been established with the Indian government's Department of Science & Technology leading to astronomy and stargazing training and the donation of science books and amateur telescopes to the youth of Nanda Devi. These will in turn be used to offer stargazing facilities to visiting tourists.
 8. Field surveys of various trekking routes in addition to climactic data are being conducted to better predict conditions on existing routes as well as design new treks. Using GPS, cameras, and maps, package tours will also be assembled to suit a diversity of potential visitors.
 9. A participatory process will be employed to provide youth with opportunities for incidental and direct learning on critical issues, including monitoring ecological conditions, resource and socio-economic level profiles, as well as the more proactive recovery of indigenous knowledge and skills.

CONCLUSION

With the launch of the Mountain Shepherds Initiative, the Nanda Devi Campaign is attempting the monumental task of establishing a community-owned operation in keeping with its aspirations for a future without human

exploitation and environmental degradation. As shown by the Inaugural Women's Trek and its future plans, the campaign hopes to implement its guiding philosophy in all aspects of tourism planning, especially in making mountain tourism accessible to all, regardless of age, gender, income, or ability. Nanda Devi's proximity to the Indo-China border adds further salience to the development of a viable local economy in the region for a lasting peace. The partial restoration of tourism in the national park addresses one concern of the Bhotiya, and there are high hopes that steps towards regional cooperation will one day restore a thriving trade relationship between counterparts in India and China.

It is thus fitting that the campaign has gained international renown while overcoming what were once believed to be insurmountable obstacles. With their visionary stand, the villages of the Niti Valley have managed to break out of their isolation and invite the global community to join their local struggle for cultural survival. With few resources yet enormous resourcefulness and strong national and international relationships, the campaign has made it this far. As a model, its success will have important bearing on the fate of the Himalayas and its people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Heartfelt thanks to many individuals are in order, especially Dr. Brijmohan Sharma of SPECS who put together the Winterline grant application and of course Dr. Sunil Kainthola and Shri Dhan Singh Rana who have spearheaded the Nanda Devi Campaign since

the beginning. Special thanks also to Justine Wilson, a participant of the Women's Trek who provided enormous enthusiasm and insight into how to polish the Mountain Shepherds idea into a finished product.

ANNEXURE 1: NANDA DEVI DECLARATION

The Nanda Devi Biodiversity Conservation and Eco Tourism Declaration

October 14, 2001 Gram Sabha Lata, Chamoli District, Uttarakhand

Today on the 14th of October, 2001 in the courtyard of the temple of our revered Nanda Devi, we the people's representatives, social workers and citizens of the Niti valley, after profound deliberations on biodiversity conservation and tourism, while confirming our commitment to community based management processes dedicate ourselves to the following –

1. That we, in accordance with the resolutions adopted by the World Tourism Organisation's Manila Declaration 1997 on the Social Impact of Tourism will lay the foundation for community based tourism development in our region
2. That in our region we will develop a tourism industry free from monopolies and will ensure equity in the tourism business
3. With the cessation of all forms of exploitation like the exploitation of porters and child labour in the tourism industry, we will ensure a positive impact of tourism on the biodiversity of our region and the enhancement of the quality of life of the local community

4. That in any tourism related enterprise we will give preference to our unemployed youth and under privileged families, we will also ensure equal opportunities for disabled persons with special provisions to avail such opportunities
5. That we will ensure the involvement and consent of the women of our region at all levels of decision making while developing and implementing conservation and tourism plans
6. While developing appropriate institutions for the management of community based conservation and eco tourism in our area we will ensure that tourism will have no negative impact on the biodiversity and culture of our region, and that any anti social or anti national activities will have no scope to operate in our region
7. We will regulate and ensure quality services and safety for tourists and by developing our own marketing network will eliminate the middlemen and endeavour to reduce the travel costs of the tourist
8. While developing the tourism infrastructure in our region we will take care of the special needs of senior citizens and disabled persons
9. As proud citizens of the land of the Chipko movement, we in the name of Gaura Devi will establish a centre for socio-culture and biodiversity, for the conservation and propagation of our unique culture
10. We will ensure the exchange and sharing of experiences with communities of other regions to develop ecotourism in accordance with the Manila Declaration of 1997 in those regions
11. Acknowledging the spirit of Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit, Rio 1992, the Manila Declaration on the Social Impact of Tourism 1997 and the International Year of the Mountains and Eco tourism, 2002, we will strive for biodiversity conservation and an equitable economic development within the framework of the Constitution of the Republic of India
12. Today on October 14, 2001, in front of our revered Nanda Devi, and drawing inspiration from Chipko's radiant history we dedicate ourselves to the transformation of our region into a global centre for peace, prosperity and biodiversity conservation

