

Revisiting Shimla Eight Years later: Has anything changed?

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Abstract This study is part of a series of ‘investigative snapshots’ of the state of tourism in the capital city of the Indian State of Himachal Pradesh (H.P.), Shimla, which has undergone many cycles of expansion and densification, thus providing major opportunities and challenges for institutions and individuals at all levels. The initial surveys by the author in 2001 and 2002 and the recent one in 2009 bring out major issues with respect to tourism. To deal with the mountains of complex issues facing Shimla, tourism planners and marketers need to be honest about the scale of the challenges and recognize that a systemic and transformational change, not incremental gestures, is required. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for sustainable tourism policy implementation issues for Shimla.

Key words: Sustainable tourism, mountain environment, Shimla, Eco-tourism, policy

Introduction

Eight years have elapsed since the author first reported on eco-tourism in the Shimla region (Batra, 2001).

Located in the State of H.P. in Northern India, the Shimla region refers to the area surrounding the capital, Shimla. Originally, a small town tucked away in the lap of the lesser Himalayan ranges that rise up to 2600 meters, its picturesque beauty had caught the fancy of the British who developed it into a summer resort to escape the heat of the plains. The ‘Queen of Hills’ as fondly called by the Britons has now established itself as a ‘must’ destination for the rising ‘nouveau riche’ Indians who, like their British predecessors, flock to the area during the summer holiday as they escape the scorching heat of the Northern plains.

The author selected the Shimla region for an analysis of eco-tourism for several reasons. Firstly, Shimla is a classic example of a destination area where the past and present co-exist, which made it simple to understand the process of change in community life. Secondly, tourism has emerged as a major contributor to the economy of the area. Thirdly, Shimla is considered a successful tourist destination. And finally, as an area for the author to survey, Shimla offered the dual benefits of a limited geographical extent and absence of linguistic barriers. An additional –

and more subjective – motivation for taking up the study was the author’s interest in seeing how a state with vast resource potential had earned a name in the field of tourism both in India and abroad.

It is to be noted that in this region there is no coherence between demand and supply. Whereas in the summer tourist numbers are beyond carrying capacity, winters and other months are underutilized (honeymooners are the exception).

The issue at the core of the author’s 2001 paper was that in the 1990s, Shimla had developed into an ill-reputed center of environmental degradation. “*The touristic value of the city appear[ed] to be on the decline as environmental problems ha[d] severely inhibited its capacity to attract tourists. Remedial actions ha[d] been formulated, but excess stress on carrying capacity continue[d] to occur, indicating failure of existing policies or their ineffective enforcement*” (Batra, 2001).

The author’s aim in that paper was thus to “*investigate the perceptions of tourists on eco-tourism in the Shimla hills which would optimally predict the integrated development of tourism in this region*” (Id). The paper was premised on the assumptions that eco-tourism was one of the main attractions of Shimla and had immense growth potential, and that there was a direct correlation between peak season and environmental pollution. The author concluded that, “*Shimla require[d] special consideration in conservation of ecological*

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order [...] Many of the problems, which ma[d]e tourism unsustainable, relate[d] to the fact that many principles fundamental to eco-tourism [were]not being acknowledged” (Batra, 2001).

Additional research on that region was conducted a year later by the author (Batra, 2002) in order to examine policies related to tourism, assess their implications with regard to the environment, and articulate solutions that were “*sustainable in the context of a mountain environment,*” (Batra, 2002).

That second study further highlighted the serious environmental problems that the unplanned and mercenary growth of tourism in that region had created and reiterated the need for proper planning, effective policy and an institutional framework in the face of aggressive tourism activities. Echoing the author’s initial concerns a year earlier, it was abundantly clear that tourism development as hitherto implemented was not unsustainable: “*A long-term policy should be developed on the basis of a comprehensive appreciation of the value of the environmental resources in the hills. [...] It is high time that the municipal corporation and the government attach utmost priority to ensure appreciation of the value of environmental resources. Only planned development based on research and well conceived sustainable tourism policy, respecting limits of growth and involvement of local people can promise desired results in the realms of ecology and economy*” (Id, 2002).

Which raises some important questions: What has happened since? Has the author’s call for action been heard? Has a comprehensive policy been formulated? And if so, what impact has it been having?

As those two papers reach their seven- and eight-year marks, this article will address these questions by evaluating the situation today as compared to when the author’s first reported on the Shimla region.

After briefly defining eco-tourism and reviewing the factors found at the time to limit the growth of eco-tourism and the recommendations made thereupon, this paper will evaluate the situation today, assessing the

extent, relevance, and appropriateness of the governmental action in the region.

1. - Eco-tourism

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defined eco-tourism as “*tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both of the past or the present) found in these areas*” (David, 1997, p.12).

The origin of eco-tourism is more evolutionary than revolutionary. As one earlier definition pointed out, “*ecological tourism implies a scientific, aesthetic, or philosophical approach to travel, although the ecological tourist need not be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher*” (Ceballow Lascrain, 1991, cited in ECOCLUB (2006), Year 7, Issue 85, p. 1).

A slightly less restrictive definition offered by the International Resource Group (1992) describes eco-tourism as “*travel with a concern for the environment and with an appreciation of natural attraction being the prime purpose of trip*”. This is an apt description and one that, if adhered to and abided by strictly, would solve a lot of problems. This is particularly applicable when it comes to something as vital and fragile as nature – where rules should not be broken.

Eco-tourism can take many forms and magnitudes. Statistically speaking, the most popular activities of eco-tourists are trekking, wildlife safaris, bird watching, nature photography, camping, mountain climbing, fishing, river rafting, and botanical study.

Whatever form it takes, however, eco-tourism incorporates both a strong commitment to nature and a sense of social responsibility. That responsibility extends to the sensitivity of travelers. The importance of the traveler to the environment can not be overstressed. As a traveler, one has an enormous effect on the destination through the choices one makes.

In short, the key elements of eco-tourism include a natural environment as the prime attraction, an optimum number of environment

friendly visitors, activities which do not have any serious impact on the eco-system and the positive involvement of the local community in maintaining an ecological balance.

2. - 2001 and 2002 studies: Factors Limiting the Growth of Eco-tourism.

Several factors were found to limit the growth of eco-tourism in the Shimla region:

1. *Unplanned and haphazard growth of Shimla town* – Even though Shimla, one of the country's most important hill resorts, required special consideration in conservation of ecological order, nothing tangible was done to guide the growth of the town along scientific lines. Planning has been done to attract foreign tourists rather than as a concerted effort to make the area sustainable. As a result, Shimla has been subjected to environmental stress, exploitation, and degradation.
2. *Congestion of traffic* - Peak summer season created utter chaos and mismanagement.
3. *Flouting of building norms* - Although municipal laws allowed only four-story buildings, many had more floors.
4. *Problem of garbage disposal* - People lacked a civic sense and continued to dump garbage in the drains, back lanes and natural streams. Shimla was in real danger of being overrun by the huge quantity of garbage left behind by tourists. One could find mountains of filth and plastic lying accumulated on the mountainside.
5. *Pollution* - Increasing air pollution in Shimla was linked to the rapid rise in population pressure and the number of vehicles entering Shimla.
6. *Lack of tourist education* - The H.P. Government's decision to ban the use of polythene bags had not been put into practice.

By way of concluding his 2002 paper, the author wrote: *“One of the essential facts in the planning and development of mountain regions is that mountains are inherently weak and fragile, having meager tolerance for human intervention, especially resource-consuming activities that interfere with their cybernetics and inbuilt anti-repair system. Mountain*

Tourism has a tendency to spoil the unspoiled. Only planned development, based on research and well conceived sustainable tourism policy, respecting limits to growth and involving local people can promise desired results in the realms of ecology and economy [...] fresh thinking is called for to strengthen the fibers of eco-tourism in the state [...] Shimla requires special consideration [...] Many of the problems which make tourism unsustainable relate to the fact that the principles fundamental to eco-tourism are not being incorporated into the conception, planning, design, development, operation or marketing of the product”(Batra 2002, p. 2).

3. - 2001 and 2002 studies: Recommendations Made

Some of the suggestions deemed to be worth pursuing by the author to achieve a sustainable Shimla included:

1. *Policy for Hilly Areas* - Any sound policy framework for the urban development of Shimla should address the problem of demand expanding more rapidly than supply and should always consider the delicate cultural balance the hill people have evolved to survive in their often very harsh environment. Very carefully drawn up plans of direct relevance to hill peoples need to be implemented to buffer them against cultural shocks and ease the pressure on their largely subsistence-level existence.
2. *Sustainable development* – sustainability means the solidarity, mutual respect and participation of all players implicated in the process, especially those indigenous to the locality. The author takes the holistic approach that the perception of tourists but also that of key stakeholders, such as, locals, hotels and travel agents perspectives on tourism in Shimla hills should be included.
3. *Appropriate Planning by the Government* – Tourism planners should act responsibly to prevent the excessively rapid growth of hotels and resorts. A few areas within Shimla proper should be declared a 'Heritage Zone' and there should be a

limit to the number and height of tall structures and buildings which should blend well with the local architecture. Land transactions in violation of the law should be stopped and defaulters given exemplary punishment.

- Government and other offices should be relocated from the central areas of town and decentralized to district headquarters.

- The government should encourage out-of-season promotions for tourists to come at a time when tourism is at low ebb. Differential pricing may be used to encourage off-season visiting and some alternate destinations promoted during peak summer season so that some rush can be diverted to near by places.

4. *Coordination Among Departments* - There is a failure of basic urban services in Shimla, a lack of coordination among government bodies, and improper policies or strategies to achieve the goals framed.
5. *Traffic & Transportation* - Walking, cycling, or using public transportation rather than private cars needs to be encouraged. A guided rail transit system along with electric trolley buses should be introduced to eliminate air and noise pollution on hill roads and to ease traffic congestion.
6. *Tourists* - Tourists should choose operators known for being ethical and environmentally responsible and for traveling in a culturally and environmentally sensitive manner, refraining from inappropriate behaviors which affect the host community or degrade the local natural environment. Tourists should also refrain from purchasing or using those products, services and transportation which endanger the local ecology and culture and should not leave behind any non-biodegradable litter like plastic bottles, polythene and should not damage or remove plants.
7. *Locals* - It is self-evident truth that the local inhabitants must be involved in efforts toward environmental protection. One way of avoiding or at least reducing

conflict with the local community is to inform and involve locals in any decisions affecting the future shape of tourism in their area. Decision makers must listen to what locals have to say and open communication channels established between the on-site community and tourism developers.

8. *Hotels* - Hotels should be designed to optimize the use of natural light. Rooms should have master switches. During monsoons, rain water should be collected to be used for many purposes. Stationery and promotional materials should use recycled paper. Leftover juices and wines can be used to make vinegar which can be used as a cleaning agent.
9. *Tourism Industry (Travel Agencies, Transportation, etc.)* – All those involved should ensure the sustainable use of land, water, and forests for tourism activities and conduct regular environmental audits, for example, assessing the environmental performance of an entire business operation (i.e., monitor water quality, carrying capacity, energy consumption, sewage, etc.).
 - They should also promote green marketing, by undertaking ‘soft’ tourism that minimizes adverse environmental and cultural impacts. One of key areas of concern is the training of personnel of different allied sectors of the tourism industry (forest department, tourism industry representatives with direct field responsibility, etc).
10. *Sewerage & Sanitation* - The present utility, drainage, and disposal systems needs modernization and the sewerage system should get a centralized treatment facility.

4. What Has Changed Since?

Consideration of the changes that have taken place since 2002 and the eco-tourism policies implemented as of 2002 takes us back to 1998, the year when according to Seema et al. (2006), the first eco-tourism initiatives were taken by both the Department of Tourism (DOT) and Ministry of Environment and Forests. “The only document available with

regard to ecotourism policy at the national level is the *Ecotourism Policy and guidelines 1998*” (Seema, 2006, p.11). The document “identifies key players in Ecotourism as: Government, Developers/operators & suppliers, Visitors, host community, NGOs & Research Institutions. It also prescribes operational guidelines for these key players. The policy defines and hence approaches Ecotourism 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, environment and socio-cultural carrying capacities” (Ibid.).

In May 2001, in order to open up forest areas to community involvement, H.P. Forest Department articulated a well detailed institutional policy on the development of ecotourism in H.P. in a document, entitled “*Policy on Development of Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh*,” (H.P. Forest Dept. 2001). This policy defines ecotourism as follows: “[*Ecotourism*] in a very broad sense, means venturing into and enjoying nature in such a way as to assure that the negative impacts on the cultural and natural environment are minimized and mitigated. It is, therefore, responsible tourism that, besides being ecologically and culturally sensitive, helps” (p.1).

This definition of Ecotourism mainly rests on the forest cover of the state as the basic product to be offered to tourists. Therefore, to provide nature enjoyment opportunities to tourists, various treks with the potential to provide insights into the cultural and ecological diversity of the area were marketed as ‘eco-trails.’

In 2005, in a document entitled, “*H.P. Forest Sector Policy & Strategy 2005*,” H.P. Forest Department identified eco-tourism as one of the avenues to alleviate poverty and enhance livelihood options (Forest department, Government of HP, 2005). The need for an appropriate Forest Sector Policy emerged from the recognition that the economic, environment, social and institutional circumstances are changing. The Forest Sector Policy sought to

achieve Sustainable Forest Management in H.P. i.e., forests, watersheds, wildlife, biodiversity and habitats, for the maintenance and rehabilitation of its environment. This document set the tone for the revision of the 2001 eco-tourism policy of H.P.

With this *H.P. Forest Sector Policy & Strategy* document as a back drop, the policy on the development of ecotourism in H.P. as expounded in 2001 was thus reappraised by H.P. with a new document entitled ‘*Revised Policy on Development of Eco-Tourism in Himachal Pradesh*’ by H.P. Forest Department. The revised policy was aimed to bring the wilderness and solitude of Himachal closure to the tourists visiting the state. It attempted to implement adequate safeguards and systems leading to the preservation of these natural resources. The central theme was to decongest the overflowing city tourist destinations, bring the tourists closure to nature and ensure adequate economic returns to the state and livelihood opportunities to the local communities.

What differentiates the 2005 H.P. eco-tourism policy statement from the 2001 one is that the H.P. Forest Department was made the nodal agency for the development of ecotourism, which put then in charge of exploiting nature tourism, while the H.P. Tourism Department would take care of other aspects of tourism (The Times of India, 2005). The intent of this initiative sought to ensure that the booming tourism in H.P. was environmentally benign, decentralized and that its benefits were equitably distributed – especially to local rural households.

This 2005 revised policy on development of Ecotourism was well received. Most notably, by Jasjit Walia, the Chief Executive Officer of Ecotourism Society of Himachal Pradesh (EcoSoc H.P.), who came in support of it, stating that: “*Nature based tourism including wilderness tourism will be promoted in consonance with the eco-tourism policy of the State with an aim to maximize benefits for local communities...*

✓ *The government will encourage rural tourism for enhancing rural livelihoods.*

- ✓ *Dispersed tourism will be encouraged to decongest popular destinations and promote equitable benefits.*
- ✓ *Regulatory systems to minimize potential negative impacts of tourism to the forest sector will also be set up.”* (Walia, 2007)

It was later pointed out by Seema et al. (2006, p.12) as a weakness of H.P., in a *White Paper on Eco-tourism Policy*, which explores eco-tourism situations in various India states, including H.P. In that same White Paper, they also pointed out that too much emphasis was placed on trekking while other ecotourism activities were ignored.

Made operative in 2006, through required facilitation provided by the HP Forest Department as per *Revised Eco Tourism Policy of Government of H.P. 2005*, EcoSoc is an autonomous and independent body, whose main aim is to preserve and protect H.P. natural, historical and cultural heritage in order to make it a preferred destination for visitors. EcoSoc promotes Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) in H.P. using in particular the latest approaches of Participatory Forestry Management, for sustainable development of the forests. Harmony is to be fostered between the people, environment, conservation and development. It work in partnerships with the civil society (local communities, NGOs, academic institutions and private enterprises/businesses) and the State (Forest Department, the Tourism Department and other related departments) <http://www.himachalecotourism.nic.in/ECO%20TSM%20%20POLICY.pdf>.

A workshop on Viable Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh: Strategies, Challenges & Opportunities was conducted by the Eco Soc H. P. in Shimla on November 29, 2006 and attended by H.P. government representatives. The workshop was organized to “introduce the salient features of the *Revised Policy on Development of Eco-Tourism in H.P. 2005*, introduce EcoSoc to a range of stakeholders delving in ecotourism, identify key issues and priority actions to be taken up by EcoSoc, and obtain a mandate for future action for EcoSoc”

(p.2) <http://himachalecotourism.com/Final%20Workshop%20Proceedings.pdf>.

It was concluded that “*the Himalayas were the unique selling point of HP and that ‘hill’ tourism needed to be seen as an overall experience rather than mere sightseeing. Responsible tourism requires that the ecology of the state be preserved in order that tourism may flourish. It was also acknowledged that the existing regulatory mechanism is extremely weak for service providers in the state. Several conventional tourist destinations are on the brink of being destroyed beyond recovery*” (p.10).

In H.P., the concept of eco-tourism has been incorporated in ongoing Tourism activities. Furthermore, the State Government has enacted legislation banning the use of non-biodegradable packing material. This, as reported in the author’s 2001 and 2002 papers, was one of the issues responsible for environmental pollution in Shimla. It is hoped to reduce the mountains of filth and plastics left behind by tourists.

These same papers had also reported that the existing parking slots for tourists in the state capital remain jam-packed. Some careless tourists park their vehicles on the roads leading to frequent jams for hours. H.P. Tourism Department subsequently provided funds for parking places, construction of benches, paths and facilities for bird watching in the state. A highlight of departmental efforts has been updating of forest department rest houses which are made available to tourists. These rest houses mostly in the lap of nature provide tourists an opportunity to stay in the wild and observe the natural habitat and be a part of natural setting (The Tribune, June 17, 2009).

Another recent development was an agreement for 8 Forest Sites in Himachal for Eco-tourism signed by H. P. forest department (Makhaik, 2009). The concept was developed on the policy laid out for private public partnership to promote eco-tourism. The sites consisting of rest houses and camping locations are to be leased out for a period of 5 years and would be monitored on a yearly basis for any environment degradation caused

if they are not properly managed. Strict guidelines have been laid out for management of forest sites. A do's and don't list was prepared which includes proper disposal of waste, using a mix of electric and renewable energy, no TV's and only temporary structures are allowed. 'In a bid to promote eco-tourism and attract more nature lovers to HP, the state government has decided to turn 143 forest rest houses into quality eco-lodges. The amount allocated will be used for building eco-friendly infrastructure as part of a public-private partnership under the aegis of eco-tourism society' (<http://blogs.ibibo.com/ITZAMY/hp-to-promote-eco-tourism>). The author's previous papers had raised concerns about the rapid urbanization in many areas in Shimla, flooded with concrete buildings.

'As part of its efforts to restore the lost glory of the "Queen of Hills", the Forest Department will revive old walking trails, water bodies and undertake plantation of ornamental species along with landscaping to promote eco-tourism. Having already launched its "Revival of deodar trees in Shimla" project in association with 11 voluntary organizations on August 8, the Forest Department is now considering expanding its ambit to cover other components as well. To restore the old-world charm of Shimla, thrust will be on undertaking maximum possible plantation whether it is that of the majestic deodars, colourful hydrangeas or other herbal plants which are fast dwindling' (Chauhan, The Tribune, August 14, 2009).

The state has decided to explore new eco-friendly ways to boost tourism. Heritage walks are being promoted at Shimla, while there are plans to develop other virgin areas around Shimla. Plans are afoot to organize activities like "herbal treks". There are plans to set up health resorts, nature cure centres and Ayurvedic treatment centres with the help of private sector to exploit the State's vast resources of herbs, medicinal plants and hot sulphur springs. The package will be planned in collaboration with the State Institute of Research in Indian Medicine, Joginder Nagar.

'Another area which will be taken up is restoration and development of walking trails popular during the British occupation which

are practically lying abandoned. There are plans to restore these and develop them from eco-tourism point of view by fixing names of plants, especially herbal, and listing its uses and benefits. Some of these old trails near Tara Devi, Viceregal Lodge, Glen and Jakhu area were very much in use during the British time as there were very few roads and hardly any vehicles' (Chauhan, 2009).

Adventure sports are the culmination of eco-tourism activities. Trekking routes, Paragliding and other water & ice sports, which provide ultimate enjoyment without harming the environment, are being given a boost. Department proposes to harness the tourism potential of Forest and Wildlife Sanctuaries in the state. There are 29 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 3 Nature Parks and 2 National Parks in the State. Tourist facilities like parking places, construction of benches, paths, and bird-watching towers are being developed in these areas.

It will be the endeavour of the government to prevent mushroom growth of hotel industry which has already exceeded desired limits in many key tourist places. The new arrangements should stress the dispersal of tourism to lesser-known areas and develop pilgrimage places as important destinations for tourists.

Recently, HP Government has decided to completely ban the construction activity in certain areas of Manali, Dalhousie, and Macleodganj. It is high time everybody realized that high-rise buildings and high hills do not go well together. Decades upon decades of a free-for-all pseudo culture has already turned these beautiful towns into concrete jungles. The ban can become a model for other lesser-known towns that are also on the verge of construction calamity. In the capital, Shimla, Government has already imposed a ban on all construction in green belt and restricted the height of new buildings to three from six storeys.

The current institutional arrangements appear inadequate to tackle head on the various problems afflicting Shimla. The policy statements, vision, objectives may be fine for the ecological conservation of the hilly state

but not enough attention is being paid to urban hill cities such as Shimla. Every tourist season, the influx of tourists invariably leads to shortages of water, traffic congestion; and residents, jostling shoulder to shoulder with tourists on the crowded walking streets, are part of the daily scenes. No remedial solutions, such as 'carrying capacity' (Batra, 2002, pp. 217-218) and 'assessment of tourism-led environmental impact' have been made to deal specifically with these issues during the tourists' season in Shimla. In addition, 'eco-audits' for baseline information on ecology (Batra, 2002, pp. 217-218) should be conducted for the different categories of hotels available in Shimla by the relevant agency. Before the next tourist season begins, the problems experienced in the last tourist season should be taken up for discussion, along with sustainable solutions, among the players in the tourism industry in Shimla, either as part of short-term training programmes, seminars, or workshops.

The different types of domestic tourists visiting Shimla can be categorized as: students groups of educational institutions; family-friend groups; newly-wed couples; and middle aged professionals and business people looking for a change and cool climate. In the absence of specific data, it is too early to establish which of these groups behave in a more environmental-friendly way. But it is not too late to conduct such a study. Different socio-demographics imply different levels of environmental awareness and behavioral intention while in Shimla. It would be quite helpful to determine which group(s) needs their environmental awareness to be raised. Tourist information center booths in Shimla need to expose the ecological treasures of the city, show the characteristically vulnerable points, and address tourism concerns with regard to maintaining cleanliness and with waste disposal. Displays of tourist brochures covering the whole the state and/or its customs and culture are not enough. The official marketing response must be recalibrated to the level and urgency of the threat.

Conclusion:

Even though a beginning has been made there is a long way to go. It seems that state has developed several guidelines for the preservation of the ecology of the state but Shimla, in particular, needs special attention. There is still a very high concentration of tourist activities in a limited time and space in spite of the implications of such a policy in terms of pollution. As a result, many areas in Shimla are still under tremendous environmental pressure. The issue of inadequate parking spaces at different locations around Shimla has still not yet been adequately addressed. No mechanism has been developed for prior information about the availability of accommodation and parking spaces at entry points to Shimla. Much remains to be done for a large-scale awareness program to mold the stakeholders to follow in the line of sustained practices, even though simple user-friendly guidelines have been provided on the State tourism website for Eco-tourists visiting H.P. An honest attempt to prevent excessive growth of hotels, in and around Shimla is needed. Mass tourism's insensitivity to environmental concern, a factor that the marketers' concerned eye has missed is still there. A fresh approach must be science-based, not a lowest-common denominator compromise, watered down by vested interests. Tourism in Shimla, unless carefully designed, will exacerbate the simmering crisis.

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