

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

By Rajiv Rawat

Introduction

In the fall of 2006, a unique ecotourism event was staged to mark the launch of the next phase of the Nanda Devi Campaign, an environmental justice movement in Uttarakhand, India. Named the Mountain Shepherds Initiative, the new community owned and operated ecotourism venture attempted to employ this Inaugural Nanda Devi Women's Trek as a way to kick start its commercial activities, gain exposure to international clientele, and engage more experienced trekkers in improving and giving shape to their nascent operation.

On a larger level, the trek was framed as a prototype of a socially conscious tourism model that could potentially revolutionize the industry in the Himalayas and beyond. Born of social struggle with Chipko over thirty years ago and more recent efforts to reclaim the people's land and forest rights, the Nanda Devi Campaign has 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, the campaign's Mountain Shepherds Initiative has attempted to establish a new relationship between tourists and host communities based on equity and mutual learning. As such, communities and groups from neighbouring protected areas have closely monitored the experimental trek for its potential in setting a positive example for the rest of the region.

This paper will thus 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 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 being launched as a commercial venture and finally conclude with initial 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 Indian 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 have 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-border trading relationship with Tibet that had culturally and economically enriched the Bhotiya, the latter ended all mountaineering and trekking expeditions to Nanda Devi, one of the Himalayas' highest and most popular peaks. Both had a 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.

Thus in the 1970s, Bhotiya communities were at the forefront of the famous Chipko movement that saw village women led by Gaura Devi 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 later 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

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 Gram Sabha 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 Condast Traveler. This was followed in January 2005 with a full feature article in French travel magazine GEO that highlighted all the pertinent issues and concerns raised by the campaign.

Part II: The Mountain Shepherds Initiative

In the fall of 2005, the Nanda Devi Campaign made preparations to launch 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 Nerhu Institute of Mountaineering (NIM), Uttarkashi, India. The successful application was submitted under the aegis of Dehradun-based Society of Pollution & Environmental Conservation Scientists after various other fundraising attempts had only achieved partial success. Fortunately, Winterline had long maintained links to the region due its relationship with the International Woodstock School, Mussoorie, India. 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 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 the very land they knew best. 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 training 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 to name a few (see Appendix I). 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. Upon completion of the programme, the youth joined students at the International Woodstock School for a three-day cross-cultural trek.

Part III: The Inaugural Nanda Devi Women’s Trek

As key organizers of Mountain Shepherds were preparing the training programme for the future staff of the initiative, 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. Thus on International Women’s Day, a web site and online application process were launched, inviting selected participants to Lata in Fall 2006.

By coincidence, this trek was also able to draw upon mountaineering history and folklore by commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Nanda Devi Unsoeld's untimely passing near the summit of Nanda Devi. As part of the ill-fated 1976 Indo-American expedition, the twenty-two year old daughter of legendary American mountaineer Willi Unsoeld had harboured grand ambitions to climb her namesake, yet was struck by a fatal stomach ailment before the final ascent. Five years later, Rekha Sharma, Chandra Prabha Aitwal, and Harshvanti Bisht did become the first women to successfully summit the mountain just months before the blanket ban was imposed on further expeditions. Both Harshvanti Bisht and Chandra Prabha Aitwal were in turn invited to the basic training graduation ceremony, where Dr. Bisht delivered the keynote address.

In July, a list of finalists for the trek was publicly announced. Seventeen women from India, the US, Canada, and Taiwan were selected and invited to the Nanda Devi region in October. The selection process for the expenses-paid trip (i.e., travel, accommodation, and access fees from Lata and back) was itself an international affair with long-time campaign associates Keith Bosak in the US, Khila Bisht in the UK, and Pratibha Naithani in Mumbai interviewing candidates. 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 (see Appendix II).

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. In addition to exploring Nanda Devi's incredible vistas, landscapes, and biological diversity, this 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. However, the final trek itineraries were eventually developed in close consultation with the selected candidates.

Part IV: Evaluation

Upon conclusion of the Inaugural Trek, each of the participants were 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 traveled, 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 traveling in India.
6. The promotion of local handicrafts including rugs and woolen 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. An information packet should be mailed ahead of time to clients. The packet could include:
 - o a packing list
 - o trekking itinerary
 - o travel itinerary with confirmation numbers
 - o travel advisory (how to travel cheaply, safely, and with the least amount of hassle)
 - o accurate maps of the region and other important locations (i.e., Delhi, Dehradun, Rishikesh)
 - o orientation to Indian-style hygiene
 - o a short pamphlet on the culture and language of the region
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.
9. While the young guides were still shy and in the process of building their self-confidence, participants found them to be well-mannered, sweet, and extremely helpful.

Finally, there was also some confusion among a few of the participants about the nature of the trek. While its experimental purpose was not in doubt, its level of organization may have been overestimated, giving the impression of a completed professional product as opposed to a work in progress. Moreover, the concept of community-owned ecotourism may have also been too novel to grasp immediately, for upon further reflection the purpose of the trek became clear as an exercise in participatory product design. Despite this misunderstanding, the overall feedback was generally very positive owing to the natural allure of the region, cultural vibrancy of the local communities, and social mission of Mountain Shepherds.

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 inquiries 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. More spectacular have been the efforts of a group of volunteers from Appalachian State University who coordinated a successful gear donation drive entitled

“Gear for the Garhwal” in 2006. With the participation of local businesses, the volunteers led by ASU student Ian Snider collected over \$10,000 worth of equipment, which they were able to ship at minimal cost to India.

4. A small parcel of land has been acquired in Lata for building a centre for biocultural 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 travelers to India, whether in being overcharged in Delhi to facing harassment in Hardwar, 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 woolen 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 will be collected 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 suite 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 (see Appendix III). 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 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, and thus deserves to be supported by all.

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

I. NIM Basic Training Special Sessions Organized by Mountain Shepherds

Capacity Building for Community-based Eco-Tourism:
Mountaineering Training for Local Youth in the High Himalayas
Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, India
August 20 - September 23, 2006

Sponsored by SPECS (India) and Supported by the Winterline Foundation (USA)

Session on issues facing senior citizens and people with disabilities:

- Dr. Satyakam Dubey, National Institute for the Orthopaedically Handicapped
- Dr. Brijesh Sharma, National Institute for the Visually Handicapped
- Dr. Sunil Kainthola, Mountain Shepherds Coordinator, Formerly with the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped

Session on the culture and history of Uttarakhand:

- Dr. Shekhar Pathak, PAHAR (People's Association for Himalayan Area Research)

Session on the preservation and promotion local culture:

- Harish Chandola, Veteran Journalist

Sessions on flora identification and stargazing:

- Dr. G.S. Rajwar, Reader, Department of Botany, Government PG College (Rishikesh)
- Dr. Birender Kumar Tyagi, Senior Scientist, Ministry of Science & Technology (Vigyan Prasad, India)

Session on mountain tourism:

- Dr. Harshvanti Bisht, Mountaineer, Conservationist, & Reader, Department of Economics, Government PG College (Uttarkashi)

Three days on communication skills:

- Subhash Rawat, Theatre in Education, National Institute of Drama

Three day trek from Mussoorie:

- Darab Nagarwalla, Hanifi Centre for Outdoor Education and Environmental Study
- Tenzin Nima & Tsring, Momo Tours