

Report on a Nature Guiding Training Workshop

held in

Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Submitted by:

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A good referral is golden, but seldom produces a customer immediately. Producing a crop does not happen overnight, you have got to earn it – Renzino Lepcha, Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim



Introduction and Background: The Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund provided a grant to SLC in 2003 to support training of local villagers in Nature Guiding, an activity identified during a reconnaissance trip to Spiti by SLC and The Mountain Institute (TMI) staff in August, 2003. For details see the report titled, “An Assessment of CBT and Homestay Sites in Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh,” dated 19 August 2003, and submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Downloadable at www.SnowLeopardConservancy.org

The workshop was led by Mr. Rinchen Wangchuk, SLC’s India Program Director and Mr. Renzino Lepcha, Director of the Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS), who has many years of experience in community-based tourism from both an NGO and travel agency perspective. The local resource person was Mr. Dorjey Susheel who is associated with the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and the International Snow Leopard Trust (ISLT), our partners in the program. At the local level, we partnered with NGOs working to facilitate community mobilization: the All Spiti Youth Association (ASYA), representing all five valleys of Spiti, MUSE (not an acronym), the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), and Mr Sonam Angdue, Child Development Program, Kaza, Government of Himachal Pradesh (HP). Mr. Angdue served as a resource person for the culture and natural history of Lahaul and Spiti, and was also instrumental in providing vital government support and linkage to ensure that the program will receive continued and meaningful patronage from the HP government.

SLC’s work on community-based tourism in Spiti forms part of UNESCO’s program on Cultural and Ecotourism in Mountain Regions of Central and South Asia, which is being implemented in seven countries: Kazakhstan (Tien Shan/Alatau), Kyrgyzstan (Issyk-Kul), Tajikistan (Murghab), Nepal (Humla), Pakistan (Chitral), India (Ladakh), Iran (Masouleh) and Bhutan (Phobjikha).

The primary objective of the workshop was to help qualified local guides improve visitor experiences and provide more professional nature guiding services. Although the motivating factor for the majority of domestic and foreign visitors to Spiti is its rich cultural heritage and unique landscapes, there are excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing and promoting the concept of community-based biodiversity conservation. We are approaching the development and implementation of tourism initiatives under the “incentive principal”: that is, communities are more likely to embrace biodiversity conservation if they derive tangible economic benefit from nature guiding, jobs with travel companies, guesthouse operations, or pack animal rentals, etc. However, this requires that such incentives are not only carefully developed *but also perceived as being implicitly linked* with conservation action in the eyes of the beneficiaries. Local people need to be given job skills training in order to raise service standards and compete more effectively with outsiders, and the locally provided nature guide services must be suitably marketed among local and outside travel agents.

Tourism enterprises operating in Spiti’s rural communities include restaurants, hotels, guest houses, tea shops, provision stores, taxis, and pack animal operators, but benefits to local communities are presently extremely limited, and there is little or no linkage to biodiversity conservation.

Overall Objectives of the Training:

- Provide basic nature guiding and interpretation skills to English- and Hindi-speaking tourists.
- Promote awareness of the biodiversity of Spiti among the youth and involve them in community conservation efforts.

The training was scheduled for the 15th – 21st June but had to be Postponed until the 18th June due to the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Selection Criteria and Names of Trainees:

- Must have a minimum qualification of Class 10th standard pass,
- Should be from a rural area of Spiti,

- Must commit themselves to monitoring of wildlife populations and their habitat after training, and
- Must complete all theory and practical sessions associated with the training.

Participants of the First Nature Guiding Training Workshop, Kaza, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh (with trainers Rinchen Wangchuk, SLC and Renzino Lepcha, ECOSS)



The following trainees participated in the workshop:

Number	Name	Village Address	Education
1	Kalzung Gurmet	Kibber, Dist kaza	Bachelor's degree
2	Tanzin Thinly	Kibber	10+2
3	Tundup Wangtak	Hemis-Shukpachen, Ladakh	10+2
4	Tsering Phunstog	Chilling, Leh – Ladakh	10+2
5	Subodh Kumar	Lari	Bachelor's degree
6	Sushil Kumar	Kibber	10+2
7	Tenzin Kunga	Kibber	BA-3 rd year
8	Kalzey Dolkit	Kibber	BA 3 rd year
9	Rinchan Dolma	Kibber	10+2
10	Kalzung Yangfil	Kibber	10+2
11	Ishita Khanna	Kaza	M.A.
12	Sushil Kumar	Mani Gaon	M.A.
13	Narendra Both	Kaza	Matric Class X
14	Skalzung Dorje	Kaza	10+2
15	Padma Dorje	Kaza	Bachelors Degree
16	Nawang Lotey	Kaza	B. Ped.
17	Chhuldim	Kaza	B. Ped
18	Angchuk Dorje	Kaza (ASYA)	10+2

Workshop Schedule and Topics:

Day 1: The workshop was inaugurated by a local leader, the Honorable Nono Sonam Angdui, who lit a butter lamp in traditional Himalayan Style. Renzino Lepcha introduced the course and proposed agenda followed by a discussion of the expectations of the participants. Rinchen Wangchuk reviewed the

participatory workshop norms including punctuality, respect for each others' views, active participation and maintenance of silence and attention when others were speaking. This was followed by an introduction to the Biodiversity of Spiti, given by Mr. Negi, the Wildlife Warden who spoke about the status of Spiti's National Parks.

The trainees were then introduced to tourism's "Customer Service Principles," and the importance of ensuring ongoing discussion and feedback among participants and trainers during the course of the workshop. Each day ended with a review and question and answer period. A variety of techniques were employed to solicit feedback, such as using a board with a bull's eye target and asking participants to post the names of the most clearly delivered sessions or topics in the centre and those requiring further discussion along the outer circle.

Day 2: The day started with an overview of the types of tourism and infrastructural requirements, with emphasis on nature tourism and community-based ancillary services. Renzino Lepcha then reviewed linkages between ecotourism and biodiversity conservation, which was followed by a quiz on Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary and natural resources found in this and other protected areas of Spiti. Rinchen Wangchuk gave an illustrated Powerpoint introduction to the mammals and other wildlife of Spiti and Ladakh, covering topics such as biodiversity, and the habitats, habits, status and distribution of key species. He discussed the concept of "resource mapping" and how it relates to the best use and development of tourism opportunities while also seeking to protect environmentally sensitive areas.

The trainees were divided into three groups to develop sample itineraries and a "discovery map" for three tourist destinations, including the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary and adjacent settlements, the 9th century world-famous Tabo monastery, and other Spiti tourism hotspots.

During the feedback session participants and trainers reviewed the value of linking cultural and natural conservation through interpretation of local resources, basic responsibilities of nature guides as spokespersons for nature conservation, and required skills. For example, in working together and learning from each other the participants realized the importance of careful observation when it comes to different signs such as the pugmarks and sign indicating wildlife has been feeding upon a particular bush. It transpired that few of the group had previously paid much attention to wildlife, concentrating more on the cultural aspects of interacting with visitors.

Day 3: The day started with a review and discussion of the basic responsibilities of service staff, so that they are more aware of the attributes of good trekking staff, and improve local standards to complement the typically warm hospitality of Spitians. Using flipcharts and drawing upon examples of good and bad practices by various tour companies in Sikkim and other parts of India, Rinchen Wangchuk reviewed the key aspects of safety and security while trekking. Renzino Lepcha then shared ideas relating to visitor management and the basic nature guide equipment in order to familiarize the trainees with the proper use and care of such equipment as binoculars, field guides, notebooks and logs etc.

Rinchen Wangchuk then provided an illustrated introduction to birds, with tips for beginners including the basic features of birds, their flight patterns, and different adaptations shown by their feet, bills and habitat preferences. The next session explored the topic of interpretation, and how it may enhance visitor experiences. The importance of holistic interpretation was highlighted using SLC's *Good Animal Husbandry* snow leopard poster. Most trainees correctly identified snow leopards and their prey, including the problem of depredation, but were unable to provide details of their behavior, movements, habitat preferences or the sign they leave in the environment.

Feedback was solicited using the concept of a learning continuum drawn on chart-board in which each participant was asked to identify position along the continuum, from being a novice to very knowledgeable on the day's topics, and to identify gaps in their understanding.

Days 4- 7: Field-based Practical Training conducted in Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary and near the Pin Valley National Park

The group trekked from Kibber to Rongolong, conducting observations of birds and mammals along the trail to a blue sheep grazing reserve established by NCF. In the afternoon, participants were divided into three groups each group being given guide books to Himalayan flowers and birds along with binoculars, and asked to identify flowers, birds, mammals, their scats and other sign. A cultural folk song program was organized by the trainees in the evening.

After an early morning session of bird watching the next day, workshop participants trekked to the campsite at Mermuthang, crossing the 5,050 meter Sahargibsa Pass and en-route observed blue sheep, along with wildlife sign, and a yak which had been attacked by wolf. Tashigang residents put on a cultural show in the evening. The third day involved a trek to Sagnam for bird watching and field observations of mammals, wildflowers and plants of this important national park (including a discussion of the local uses and value of 18 plant species seen along the trail). Topics related to campsite management and garbage control were also covered. On the last day, participants hiked across picturesque landscape via Gete to Kibber Village.

During the field excursion, Mr. Tundup Dorje Sushil of Kibber Village shared his wealth of knowledge on birds with the group, who identified some 18 species along the mostly alpine trekking route. Rinchen Wangchuk held sessions on the identification of direct and indirect animal signs, including animal alarm calls, pugmarks, predator feces, snow leopard scent sprays, blue sheep bedding signs, and predator kill remains. Before concluding the seven day training, a peer evaluation of trainees was conducted using the “Margolis Wheel” technique. This methodology provided a platform to check each persons understanding of the different topics and sessions covered during the training program. Some of the key questions asked in the peer evaluation process included:

- What are the qualities of a good tourist guide?
- Why is it important to brief clients and how would you do so?
- What are the different types of mammals to be seen in Spiti?
- What is the difference between an ibex and a blue sheep?
- Why is nature interpretation important and what are the different signs that a naturalist should look for?
- What are the attributes of well-trained service staff?
- What actions should you take to ensure the safety of your clients?



On the last evening a “Vote of Thanks” was offered by Ms. Ishita Khanna and the trainees were given certificates by Nono Sonam Angdui. SLC provided the ASYA with three pairs of binoculars, and three copies of field guides on Himalayan plants, mammals and birds for use by nature guides.

Outputs from Workshop: The primary outputs of the training were:

- Sixteen local Nature Guides from rural Spiti (including 4 women) and two nature guides from Ladakh introduced and given initial training to be independent nature guides;
- Upgrading of Nature Guide Manual with input from Renzino Lepcha on tourism-related topics;

- The 3 day itinerary from Kibber village passing through the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary and back was standardized after receiving feedback and inputs from participants from their field observations and experiences;
- Basic wildlife Monitoring Plan developed for use by the trainees; and
- Three Nature Trail itineraries along with maps.

Recommendations:

- Future workshops should be longer with greater field-based content. This will give more time for participants to develop their mammal and bird watching skills, to learn common names, and develop basic skills for observing wild animals or their sign;
- Field based arrangements need to be organized well in advance. The nature guide trainees should not be involved in the logistics and preparation for the training. Such arrangements need to be outsourced or reliable personnel hired for the job;
- Use of more visual methods to teach the theoretical sessions, including an LCD, videos and documentary films. While an LCD projector was available, it did not work after the first presentation due to technical snags (the available projector lacked UPS power supply backup);
- Involvement of more local resource persons, an action that would make the course more cost effective and self reliant;
- Since culture is such a strong motivation for visitors to Spiti, the participants recommended a special training focused on cultural guiding as beneficial;
- Better prior preparation by the collaborating organizations in Spiti, with more consideration being devoted to questions of venue and trekking logistics;
- Provide clear presentation guidelines to local resources persons for their sessions – making it an exercise for them to enhance their presentation skills;
- Clarity in communication between organizing committees to ensure that training logistic arrangements are done sufficiently in advance so all parties can be equally well prepared;
- Local organizing committee should be provided with a training program check-list to ensure that all basic relevant training items are available and do not consume valuable time during the workshop itself;
- Each day's training session should be thoroughly reviewed in advance so that the organizers are fully aware of each day's material and logistical requirements;
- For outdoor practical sessions it would be more effective if the participants were given their assignment a day in advance, thus facilitating preparation for the field hopefully leading to more meaningful observation by trainees. The format for this should be developed jointly by the organizers and the field based resource persons; and
- During candidate selection the workshop organizers should ensure that they receive full commitment from each prospective trainee, including a verbal agreement not to miss any important training session.

The Next Steps:

- Implement a standardized system and reporting format for encouraging more monitoring of the local flora and fauna by the trainees, as a means of upgrading their observational skills while also tracking more the easily detectible changes in representative wildlife species and habitats in areas visited by nature guides;
- The more interested, skilled and devoted trainees from this course should be invited for further training, as part of the upcoming ISLT-NCF SLIMS workshop;
- A market assessment of visitor needs and demand for local guides was initiated this summer by MUSE and ASYA. The results of this survey will be considered when designing ongoing training initiatives and in any promotions done through brochures and posters;

- Contacts, marketing and business linkages should be explored with Delhi- and Manali-based travel agents in order to promote the guides and itineraries that benefit Spiti's rural based tourism infrastructure, operators and service providers; and
- Proper sign postings along trekking trails – especially in the more heavily used areas, supplemented by attractive, accurate and informative interpretative boards – would further benefit visitors and help reduce the potential for over-exploitation of the area's fragile natural resources.

Evaluation: At the end of the workshop, the participants and trainers conducted a participatory evaluation (Appendix 2).

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Appendix 1: Topics covered

- Biodiversity of Spiti by Mr. Negi, Wildlife Warden of Pin Valley National Park, highlighting the benefits of Sea Buck thorn (*Hippophae*) habitat protection;
- How ecotourism fits with biodiversity conservation, resource mapping, tourist hotspots and trekking itineraries;
- Servicing of customers, how tourism operators and guides fit in, types of accommodation and ancillary services, booking systems, packaging and marketing of assets, tariff scales and pricing, visitor safety and security on treks;
- Natural history of mammals, bird watching, tracks & signs of wildlife;
- Outdoor campsite management - minimal impact, leave no trace principles;
- Field trip to Kibber Valley, bird / mammal watching and finding wildlife signs with the help of a local resource person, Shusheel Dorje from Kibber village.

Appendix 2: Participant Evaluation of Training Workshop

What was good	What could be improved
<p>Theoretical Sessions at Kaza</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good participation from Kaza and Kibber • The lunch and tea breaks good and on time • Availability of local resource persons • Training hall spacious and well equipped with generator • First half day we had LCD working • Gender balance was represented. • Trainers able to hold attention of participants • Timing and punctuality good. • Participants discipline good • Local logistic support good • Good energizers to keep participants alert • Use of Hindi as a medium for teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of more visual such as videos • Documentary on conservation and tourism complementing each other (e.g., Periyar) • Pin valley participation – absent (need community-based motivation) • More female participants • More regularity in daily attendance by participants (increased commitment) • Better ice breaking sessions on first day to introduce participants. (due to late start this had to be done quickly without using any tools or games) • Better timing of sessions and local resource persons- give prior briefing of time slot available • Basic infrastructure like printing, cartridges etc. are lacking in Spiti (keep workshop material needs simple, or bring all necessary items) • Better communication in making training arrangements • Increased detail and clarity of responsibilities in the trainers ToR • Presentation guidelines to be provided to local resource persons to manage time.
<p>Field Visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The selection of a training site (Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary) which offered good resources & opportunities for the training • Participants helpful and active in setting up camps, cooking etc. • Field logistics arrangements and equipment good. • Local resource person from Kibber knowledgeable and knew the area well. • Direct and indirect observation of birds, mammals, and flora along trail good. • Good interpretation of wildlife and outdoor skills • Camping sites were nice/beautiful and well managed. • Water sources at trekking sites good. • Trekking trail appropriate for a three-day outdoor training event. • Local cultural exposure at Tashigang campsite a treat. • Local hospitality good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms for field work • Toilet facilities could be improved • Session on campsite management be done on first day. • Cooks and camp staff should be sent ahead to set up camp • Food timing, especially dinner • Briefing of distances and campsites lacking by local resource person • Better garbage disposal mechanisms should be adopted • Participants should work in teams with resource persons. • Break groups into fast, medium and slow learners • De-briefing within teams. • Professional team sublet for Trek arrangements. • Camp sites should be a good distance away from cultural events. • Building team dynamics.