

Mainstreaming Ecotourism in Sikkim's Economy

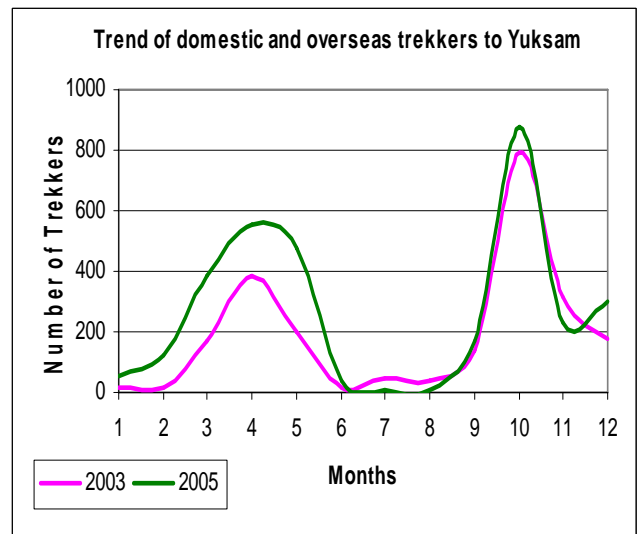
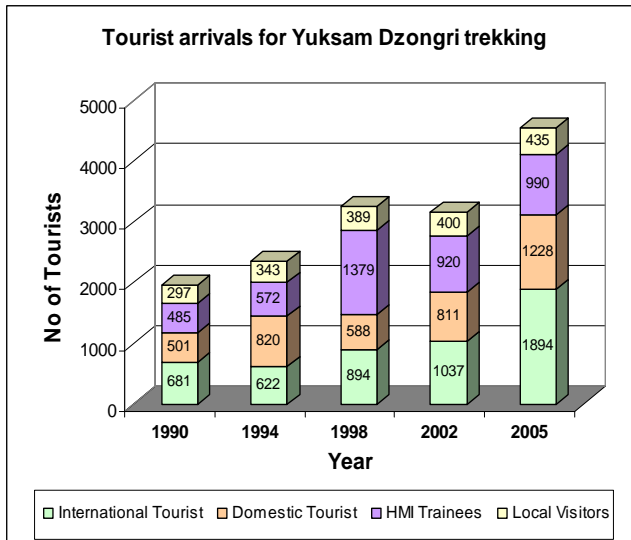
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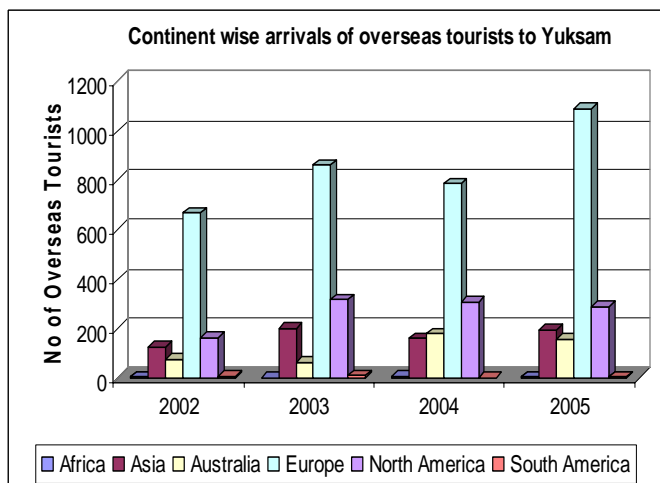
Sikkim has been taking rapid strides in the ecotourism sector and has now become a major ecotourism destination in the region. As per the latest figures, in 2005 more than 2.5 lakh domestic and 17,000 overseas tourists visited Sikkim. However one often wonders how many tourists are visiting our trekking destinations, what is their trend? Which are the peak and lean trekking tourism seasons and which is our major ecotourism market? And finally how can we promote Sikkim round the year to ensure the mainstreaming of ecotourism in the state's economy? To answer these questions a joint study was undertaken by the Forest Department, The Mountain Institute and the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) along the Yuksam Dzongri trekking trail.

1. Case study from Yuksam Dzongri Ecotourism

Yuksam-Dzongri is a high altitude trek along the Rathong chu river in West Sikkim passing through dense forests, placid alpine lakes and offering breath taking vistas of the third highest mountain – the Khangchendzonga.



The number of tourists visiting this destination has increased manifold over the last 15 years, increasing from less than 2000 in 1990 to more than 4500 in 2005. March to May and September to November are the two main trekking seasons with October being the peak month. Though the spring season is spreading off late, the monsoon months of June, July, August and the winter months of January and February continue to be the lean trekking months.



The majority of the overseas trekkers come from England, USA, Germany, France, Australia, Netherlands and Switzerland and consequently Europe is our biggest ecotourism market.

2. New Ecotourism Packages



Over the last few years, new trekking trails like the Everest Singalila in Hee Bermiok, Yambong Singalila at Nambu and Areylungchok Dzongri in Labdang have been opened. These have resulted in improving the socio-economic condition in these remote villages. In the words of Mr. Phupu Tshering Bhutia who has lived as a yak herder since he can recollect. My village is called “Chongri” or Yak” and is the remotest village of West Sikkim. The main occupation of the villagers is nomadic yak herding and trade in medicinal and aromatic plants. The intervention by The Mountain Institute in 2004 gave us great hope. We initiated off seasonal vegetable farming, restoration of drinking water, hygienic toilets, community dairy, promotion of Yambong tourism and a community campsite. We initiated community based tourism along Yambong Singalila <www.yambong.com> resulting in additional incomes from 180 tourists worth

Rs 7 lakhs mostly to ex-herders in 2005. Now we also have an NGO called Sindrabong Khangchendzonga Eco-friendly Society in the village where I am the President. The biggest impact has been in the mind, the herders who used to damage the forests have now shifted to trekking tourism. I earn more incomes now as an eco-guide, it has been a transformation from being a *Himal Rakshash* (mountain devil) to *Himal Rakshak* (mountain guardian).

3. Off-season Ecotourism Packages

In order to ensure that the opportunities from ecotourism are available continuously, our natural wealth needs to be packaged such that the ecotourism calendar remains full throughout the year. We need to design innovative ecotourism packages to beat the lean season. Some of these packages are detailed below:

3.1 “Monsoon Magic” Alpine Treks

Though the heavy monsoon rains result in roadblocks and communication hurdles, this is also the time when the alpine zone comes back to life after the long winter hibernation and becomes one of nature’s finest gardens where countless wild flowers bloom in quick succession. The flower enthusiast braving the rains has to literally wade through Primulas, Potentillas, Poppies, Cobra-lilies, Saxifrages, Rhubarbs, wild Roses, ground Orchids, dwarf Rhododendrons and many more. Dzongri, Singalila, Yambong, Areylungchok and Yumesamdong are some of the top alpine destinations. In an eight days “Monsoon Magic” package one can guarantee atleast 100 different alpine flowers in full bloom.



3.2 Subtropical Winter Treks

Winter snows block the high mountain passes during the months of January – February. Luckily Sikkim is blessed with extensive tracts of fabulous subtropical and temperate forests which are snow free throughout the year. The lower belt of Namchi, Soreng and Rhenock subdivisions along the Great Rangit, Rammam and Rangpo rivers hold immense potential. Some of the possibilities are the subtropical Sal forests



along the Greater Rangit valley along Melli-Sumbuk-Kitam-Ghoom-Majhitaar. The Namchi, Damthang, Samdruptse, Tendong and Bikmat through pristine Chestnut and Oak forests is another trekking circuit which can be explored. Trekking, white- water rafting, catch and release angling, birding and homestays in a traditional setting can be some of the tourist attractions here during winter.

4. Recommendations

The varied topography of Sikkim provides an ecotourism niche in every season whether it be winter, spring, monsoons or autumn. While the spring and autumn treks are quite popular and growing in volumes, we still need to market our monsoon alpine flowers and subtropical forests in winter more aggressively. If promoted they have the potential to ensure that ecotourism provides continuous round the year sustainable incomes for everyone. We have the prospect of doubling our ecotourism economy without affecting the carrying capacity since these off-season treks are in geographically different locations and will cater to the lean season.