POLICY

On

Development of Eco-Tourism

in

Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh Forest Department

May, 2001

No.FFE-A(A)9-2/2000
Govt. of Himachal Pradesh
Forest Department.

To

The Pr.Chief Conservator of Forests,
HP.Shimla-1.

Dated Shimla-2,the 11-5-1

Sub:- Eco-Tourism Policy for Himachal Pradesh.

Sir,

I am directed to enclose a copy of policy on
Eco-Tourism for Himachal Pradesh,duly approved by the Cabinet
in its meeting held on 1.5.2001,for your information and
further necessary action.

Yours faithfully,

Addl.Secretary(Forests)to the
Govt. of Himachal Pradesh.

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11/5/2001.

1. Introduction:

Himachal Pradesh is a hill state nestled in the western Himalayas. The state takes pride in its natural beauty manifested by the snow clad mountains; alpine pastures containing colourful flowers; landscape dotted with perennial streams, lush green forests, herds of grazing animals, picturesque villages, natives in traditional dresses, and indigenous architecture. The traditional hospitality and crime free society has added to the natural attractions of the state, making it one of the most sought after tourist destination in India.

However, what is generally publicised about this vast plethora of attractions in the state in the name of tourism is just the cool climate and hotel facilities available at various known destinations like Shimla, Manali, Dalhousie or Dharamsala. Tourists, in the absence of comprehensive tour packages, reach the known destinations on their own and start looking for any worthwhile tourist attractions only after landing at a place. Their short stay at a place allows them to visit only the nearby sites, which have become overcrowded and already started showing negative environmental effects of such tourism. On the other hand, the tourists are deprived of opportunities to enjoy the rural, remote and the most scenic parts of the state. Moreover, benefits of such mass tourism are reaped largely by the city dwellers. The state and the large majority of rural people are, therefore, not able to harvest this huge tourism potential.

The present policy has been framed with the intention to trap this huge tourism potential in the state by organizing tourism activities in an ecologically friendly and culturally acceptable way so that the State, the tourists, as well as the local people can benefit from such ventures.

2. Concept Defined:

This policy is based on the hypothesis that *involvement of local communities in the tourism (called 'eco-tourism' herein after) would support their livelihood needs and consequently create their direct stake in conservation of local culture, ecology and environment.*

'Eco-tourism', 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 the local communities in realizing the social and economic benefits.

More than 90% population of the state lives in rural areas, where, in the absence of worthwhile income generation opportunities, people have to largely live on subsistence agriculture, sale proceeds of NTFP collected from the forests and occasional labour provided by various government departments. This concept of *'community based eco-tourism'* would go a long way in providing better income generation options to the rural people. This would also mean less dependence upon the natural resources in as far as it amounts to removal of produce from these areas. There would be, moreover, greater incentive in conservation of local traditions, culture, heritage and environs, as these would be seen as aiding in local economy rather than an impediment to it.

The 'community based eco-tourism' would also help in creating better understanding and worldview about the state. Moreover, with the rising consciousness about rural livelihoods and conservation – both cultural and environmental - needs, a large number of responsible tourists would have a reason to make the state a prime tourist destination.

3. Objectives:

This 'community based eco-tourism' policy in the state is proposed with a long-term goal o conserving the rich cultural and ecological heritage of the state, so that various benefits from thi conservation endeavour, including the benefits by way of tourism, could continue to accrue to generations to follow.

The policy also aims at achieving the following immediate objectives:

- To enable the local communities in managing eco-tourism for optimum economic benefits to them.
- To develop ways and means to attract responsible nature and adventure loving tourists to the state so as to broaden the tourism base and place the state firmly on the international tourist map.
- To develop infrastructural facilities for such tourism.
- To develop and enforce protocols to minimize the negative impacts of traditional tourism on the ecology and social fabric of the area.
- To protect cultural integrity of local people and use the same to further eco-tourism concepts.
- To generate revenues which could be ploughed back for the maintenance and preservation of the environment.

4. Area of Operation:

In the state about 2/3rd of total geographical area is designated as forests, out of which about 12% are is under Protected Area Network. All these areas are dotted with scattered presence of villages and hamlets. Paths leading to some of the most beautiful and breathtaking sites in the state pass through these hamlets, which fall within and outside the PA network.

To benefit the maximum number of people in the state through eco-tourism, it is envisaged to encompass various treks, which have potential to provide insights into the cultural and ecologica diversity of the state. These treks, to be marketed as 'eco-trails', would be suitably named after some important local feature. For example, the eco-trek to and from Churdhar would be named "Churdha Eco-trail" and the one from Dharamsala to Triund as "Dhauladhar Eco-trail". Under the first phase o the programme, one to two 'eco-treks' per district would be identified and developed. As the concep catches on and the communities start seeing benefits accruing to them, more and more viable 'eco treks' would be added to the programme. The concept of 'eco-treks' has been proposed for the reasor that bridle/ inspection paths to some of the most picturesque areas in the state are already existing and with little expenditure can be made eco-tourism worthy. Moreover, it is easier to identify the beneficiaries/ stakeholders along this essentially linear strip, making the management of the programme easier.

The State also has 32 Wildlife Sanctuaries that can provide unique opportunities for observing nature in its pristine conditions. Camping sites can be developed within these and similar eco-tourism packages created as for "eco-treks".

5. Target Group/ Tourist Profile:

The proposed eco-tourism policy incorporates much more than the commonly perceived tourism o just enjoying the cool climes of the state without bothering about its effects on the environment. It is rather proposed to be an educational experience for the tourists. Under this programme the tourists would be taken on a journey through the rich cultural and ecological diversity of the state and woulc

be exposed to the customs and rituals of the area they visit. And all this under continuous reiteration of conservation values in their sub-conscious mind.

The following tourist profile, of both national and international tourists, for such type of programme is envisaged:

- Student Groups from Educational Institutions.
- Groups from various professional organisations/ business concerns.
- Elite and responsible tourists in family groups.
- Keen individuals looking for trekking, adventure and exploring something new.

6. Strategies:

To achieve the above objectives, following cost-effective strategies are proposed:

6.1 **Infrastructure Development**: Infrastructure requirements for programmes formed under thi policy would fall under the following three broad categories:

6.1.1 *Accommodation*: To put the programme into practice at the earliest it is imperative to look fo and arrange existing accommodation facilities, which would be kept modest. The following initi: arrangement is suggested:

The State Forest Department (SFD) owns and maintains a network of Forest Rest Houses (FRH) ar Inspection Huts (IH), in almost all parts of the state. Located, as they are, at vantage locations, the FRHs and IHs provide a bird's eye view of the scenery around and convey a feeling of staying wilderness, albeit under the watchful eyes of forest field staff. Most of these FRHs consist of tv bedrooms, with attached toilets, and a common living/ dining space, a design to suit the requiremen of touring officers. These FRHs can, after suitable alterations/ modifications and working c modalities for use by touring officers, be put to use for the purpose of enhancing eco-tourism.

Bigger groups can also be handled at these places by pitching tents in the FRH compounds/ campi grounds. SFD, at some places, also maintains tents and related field equipment including camp co sleeping bags, mats etc. This facility could also be utilised.

Some host families, having reasonable traditional accommodation in the villages enroute these e treks, would be identified to accommodate tourists on paying guest basis (adopted from eco-tour model in Annapurna Sanctuary, Nepal). This would ensure immediate economic benefits to the l families. As the programme develops, more local people would be encouraged to modify one/ two their rooms for such purpose. Suitable technical know how on the specifications for s accommodation and modalities for keeping paying guests would be provided to the host families.

6.1.2 *Trek-Routes*: Most of the Eco-trails in the state would fall on the network of bridle paths inspection paths being maintained by the SFD and village panchayats. Moreover, FRHs are loc within one day's trek (about 15 kilometers) from each other along most of these paths. Some of t paths would be developed further by providing lean-tos and resting places enroute. Approp directional and interpretative signage would be affixed along the route at appropriate places to pro information to the trekkers and for their reassurance about the correctness of their movement. Fu thrill would be added to the trek by providing the tourists with route maps and asking them to their way by using the given signage. The existing network of such trekking routes (bridle/ inspe paths) would be adequate to launch the programme.

6.1.3 *Information Centres*: The tourist groups visiting various eco-treks under the programme would need to be exposed to a pictorial and interpretative exhibition about the state, its customs, scenic beauty, richness of bio-diversity, characteristics of the area and issues of tourism concern, before being actually taken on the eco-track. It is for housing this interpretative exhibition that buildings need to be constructed at appropriate places.

To begin with, low cost temporary sheds with tin roofs would be put up in the compound of FRHs, from where the eco-tours would commence. It would provide the tourists an easy and relaxed access to this exhibition. In addition it would also save on the expenses related to watch and ward and general maintenance as the FRH watchman would take care of it.

6.2 Capacity Building: The proposed approach to this 'community based eco-tourism' is new to the state and would need orientation and capacity building of both the managers and the communities in this respect.

6.2.1 *Managers*: The managers would include officials of the SFD and other cultural and tourism related departments/ organisations of the state government. Since major responsibility in proposed eco-tourism activities in the state would rest with the local communities, the role of the managers would be mainly that of facilitators. At many places, the facilities available with the officials viz. FRH etc. would be put to use for the purpose of eco-tourism. Most of the eco-treks would be passing through forests and also link to temples, palaces or other heritage buildings.

The managers would, therefore, need to be provided orientation in their new role as facilitators and in strengthening the local community organisations for the ultimate aim of conserving the local heritage. They would also need to be enabled to design innovative ways to promote eco-tourism. Short term training programmes, participation in seminars, workshops and conferences and exposure visits to successful community based eco-tourism areas would definitely help the managers in acquiring knowledge and skills required for the success of this programme.

6.2.2 *Communities*: Community involvement in the programme is envisaged at two levels i.e management level and at the level of providing services.

This programme relies heavily upon the ability of the local communities in managing the eco-tourism, even if under facilitation by the managers. The role of communities in this programme would be to manage the eco-tourism initially at the local and ultimately at the state level. For this, local committees would need to be formed and imparted training in group dynamics and its management, eco-tourism planning, resource sharing, rights and responsibilities, record keeping, etc.

The other level of community involvement in the programme would be by way of providing services to the tourists viz. guides, porters, FRH attendants, cooks, park wardens, hosts for paying guests etc. All these categories would need training for their respective jobs. Souvenir/ local handicraft shops could also be set up by local communities or the eco-tourism Society.

Short-term locally organised workshops for skill development and exposure visits to successful eco-tourism areas will help the local communities in handling this new venture.

6.3 Extension/ Publicity: Although it is expected that interest in eco-tourism will spread more by word of mouth than by any other means, initial publicity of the scheme is a *sine-qua-non* for its success. Following publicity/ extension measures will be put in place:

An attractive web-site will be developed and linked with existing tourism web-sites. Advertisements, brochures and pamphlets giving details of the various packages and 'eco-treks' would be prepared and widely circulated.

Liaison with HPTDC and other tourist agencies of repute would be established and strengthened for directing interested groups to this scheme. These agencies would be offered tour packages, including use of infrastructure at reasonable rates. An initial tour for representatives of these agencies and other tour operators would be considered, *gratis*, to orient them to the scheme.

7. Implementing Agency:

The programme as envisaged under this policy is proposed to be implemented through a number of Eco-tourism Societies (here-in-after called The Society), each having its own geographical area and unique activity, such as trekking, nature walks, camping, wildlife observation etc..

Implementation of the programme in a Society mode has been preferred for obvious reasons of flexibility with the Societies to raise funds both for infrastructure development and working capital and ploughing back the profits into the programme. The inherent flexibility available to the Society will facilitate incorporation of changes in response to local needs and experiences. This model will also have the crucial advantage of encouraging local community participation and involvement.

Although they would be practically autonomous, functioning of these Societies would be overseen by the SFD, which would play the role of facilitator in evolving broad policy prescriptions, net-working with domestic and foreign agencies for raising funds, coordinating with various government departments, and so on. A special cell, headed by a Conservator of Forests (Nodal Officer, Eco-tourism) has been created in the o/o Pr. Chief Conservator of Forests to look after eco-tourism in the state. The SFD has already taken initiative in forming a Core Group on Eco-tourism comprising of five officers to act as think tank on the subject and to deal with issues related to the subject.

In addition, an 'Eco-tourism Advisory Committee' under the Chairmanship of FC-cum-Secretary (Forests) and having following members would be set up to formulate broad policy guidelines, to seek government approvals and to steer the programme.

2.	PCCF / APCCF	Vice Chairman
3.	Finance Secretary	Member
4.	MD, HPTDC	Member
5.	Director, Tourism	Member
6.	Member Secretary, State Council for Science & Technology and Environment	Member
7.	Member Secretary, Pollution Control Board (H.P.)	Member
8.	Director, TCP	Member
9, 10.	2 Non official Members (eminent persons actively involved in environmental conservation, ecology, tourism)	Member
11	CF (Nodal Officer, Eco-tourism)	Member Secretary

The Committee would also co-opt two members on rotational basis from the Eco-tourism Societies set up under the programme. The Committee may also co-opt specialists as special invitees, if required.

7.1 Structure of the Societies: FC-cum-Secretary (Forests) would be ex-officio patron of eco-tourism societies set up under the programme. The governing body of the Society would include members drawn from a wide spectrum of public life - public servants, representatives of immediate

stakeholders, NGOs etc., with a senior Forest Officer as its chairperson. The Society would be duly registered under the Societies Act. The executive committee of the Society would comprise of local Forest Officers and representatives of stakeholders. Committee may co-opt experts as special invitees.

Till the local communities are adequately empowered, member secretary of the Society would be a Forest official at a senior level to provide the authority required to manage inter-agency linkages for success of the programme. Adequate financial and managerial autonomy is essential for this officer to effectively implement the programme.

The society would have its own bye-laws based on the prototype formulated by the FD. The Society would undertake to abide by the policy guidelines on eco-tourism as formulated/ modified by the government from time to time. These local level societies would be suitably named after some locally important feature viz. 'Himalayan Nature Park Eco-tourism Society, Kufri', 'Chansil Eco-tourism Society', 'Potter's Hill Eco-tourism Society' etc.

Agencies involved in the implementation of the programme with broad responsibilities are depicted in the diagram below:
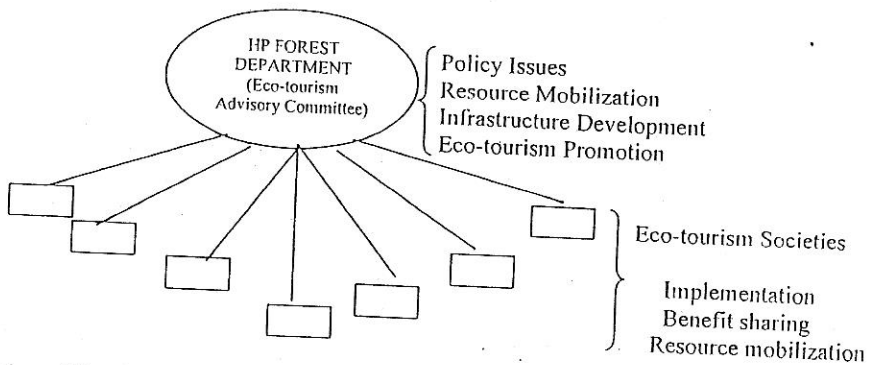
7.2 **Functioning of the Societies**: The Eco-tourism Societies would be given adequate autonomy to be able to perform effectively.

7.2.1 *Raising of Funds*: The Society will raise funds towards working capital and development of infrastructure. Even when the existing infrastructure of the SFD is proposed to be used for the programme, it will have to be modified, upgraded and refurbished to suit the requirements of eco-tourism. At many places toilets would need to be built and water supply augmented. At almost every place extra beds, furniture, crockery and utensils would need to be procured to be able to handle tourist groups. In addition, furnishings and fittings would need replacement at almost every place. The societies would make efforts to raise the required funds through tour operators, centrally sponsored schemes, EAPs etc.. This amount could also be raised as a loan. If the proposal is bankable, State Government may also consider standing guarantee on the merits of each case. The Society can, if it is able to manage a large donation, also act as trustee for trust fund.

The Society may also enter into long-term agreement with tour operators for suitable updating of ilities and allow them to use these facilities at concessional rates for an agreed period.

The Society would also need to be given autonomy to seek funding from international donors, like GEF, concerned with biodiversity conservation through involvement of local communities/ stakeholders.

The societies would be duly authorized to levy and collect fees for use of eco-treks and recycle the revenue so generated into the programme. In this respect it is proposed that the Society be allowed to fix its own fees according to its needs and the market acceptability.

7.2.2 *Infrastructure/ Ownership Issues*: It has been proposed that, to begin with, the existing infrastructure of mainly SFD would be made use of under the programme. A question would arise about the ownership of these assets. The FRHs have been primarily constructed for touring officers and would be needed for the purpose in future too. Therefore, a long-term workable arrangement has to be arrived at so that these assets could be put to optimum use without compromising the primary functions for which these were developed.

It is, therefore, proposed that ownership of these assets would remain with the organisations to which these belong. The Society would, however, enter into MoU with these organisations for use, upgradation and maintenance of these assets for an agreed period, under supervision of officials of the concerned organisation. Provisions for making these facilities available to touring officers (as per their programme circulated well in advance) would be incorporated in the MoU.

portion of the trekking routes passing through the forests would continue to be under the overall management of the Forest Department, but this function would be delegated to the concerned Society under adequate supervision. Upkeep of these routes, likely to bear increased traffic and consequential increased wear & tear, would also be the responsibility of the Society. The Society would also seek permission for putting up/ erecting signposts, information boards and resting places from its own funds enroute the identified tracks. It will be the responsibility of the Society to maintain these facilities created.

Once the MoU is signed with the Society, the officials of the concerned departments would be responsible for making these assets/ facilities available to the society for eco-tourism purposes.

7.2.3 *Capacity Building*: Initial responsibility for capacity building would have to be shouldered by the SFD. Both the officials and the community representatives would need to be oriented before taking a plunge into this programme. Agencies like Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Centre for Environmental Education (CEE), National Museum of Natural History, HP Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Forest Training Schools of SFD have necessary wherewithal to organise special training programmes for communities in eco-tourism. The SFD would be responsible for organizing these training programmes till the Society becomes adequately functional. Once the Society is set up and its initial members get tuned to the idea of eco-tourism, training programmes for the eco-track level societies and for service providers (cooks, guides etc.) would be taken up. Local crafts persons would also be d to produce and exhibit their articles for the eco-tourism purposes too.

7.2.4 *Promotion/ Publicity*: This shall initially be the responsibility of the SFD, though the ultimate objective would be that the individual societies undertake their own promotional activities. Publicity would be started with attaching an advertisement in the web-sites of HPSTDC. Society' own web-site would be developed gradually with linkages established with existing web-sites on the subject.

Liaison will be established with the HPSTDC and other local tour operators to guide the tourists to the eco-tours. As a promotional strategy, these agencies could be provided the use of these facilities on concessional rates.

As the resources build up, advertisements in national newspapers and in the brochures of international tour operators would be inserted. Society would also prepare and widely circulate its own brochure and pamphlets. Appropriate literature and exhibition material for each eco-track would be developed by the Society under guidance of local Forest Officials.

7.2.5 *Income Generation/ Sharing of Benefits*: Eco-tourism, marketed and managed in a professional way, could turn out to be a good source of income generation for local communities and the government. The entire programme is based on the premise that even the communities living in remote localities and having no real income generation opportunities may benefit from the eco-tourism potential in their areas. Whereas the major benefit to the local communities is envisaged by way of their providing direct services such as hosts, guides, porters, cooks, etc. to the tourists, the Societies would earn revenue by way of levying of fees and providing of infrastructural facilities.

Rates for direct services by local people would be fixed by the society and service providers would be called to the job by turns so that in the zeal to get a client, they may not enter into competitive wage rates. It would also reassure the tourists of fair deal and any suspicion of their being fleeced by the local people would get eliminated.

Revenue generated by the Societies would be used for repaying the loans etc., meeting establishment charges and for recycling into infrastructure upgradation and maintenance. A fixed percentage of the fees collected would be paid to the government as royalty for use of natural resources, but only after a few years, when the Societies are established and have become viable.

Exemptions: Since these Eco-tourism societies would be functioning at the village level, and since their objective is to benefit the population at grass root level, they would be exempt from any registration with the Tourism Department and from the payment of luxury tax etc..

8. Points of Concern:

Eco-tourism, if managed professionally and with conviction, is a recognised strategy to improve the living standards of local communities along with conservation of natural resources. However, assumptions regarding possible adverse impacts of such tourism, if it slides downs to the level of unorganised conventional tourism due to lack of professional management, need to be kept in view.

Some of such assumptions are as under:

'natural resource tourism may have negative impact on the resource base via demands created upon firewood, environmental pollution and conflicts with resource needs of local communities'.

'there may be more number of tourists interested in a particular eco-track than its carrying capacity, causing added pressures on resource base and environment quality'.

'the tourist influx may result in cultural pollution of the area'.

'the programme might be highjacked by the influential people even in remote areas and the have-nots continue to remain deprived of benefits'.

Even as issues like 'carrying capacity' and 'assessment of environmental impact' could be taken up for research and regular monitoring through competent agencies, most of these assumptions raise points of serious concern. Definite strategies to address these assumptions need to be developed and put in place.

9. Eco-trail Profile & Government Assets:

The programme proposes to identify and develop eco-trails in all parts of the state so that the benefits could be extended to the maximum number of people. Before the programme is launched at the state level, some pilot eco-treks shall be identified to work out and refine modalities of the programme.

The exclusive staff of Forest Department in these units would continue to draw their salaries from the SFD as heretofore but would be deployed with the concerned society, and budgetary support to them for salaries frozen at current levels. The government would also continue the budgetary support for other charges such as maintenance, office expenses, rent rates and taxes etc. at current levels. Societies would be allowed to retain the revenues earned by them from their eco-tourism operations. This arrangement would be reviewed after two years, by which time the financial viability and sustainability of these units would become clearer.

10. Linkages with other Policies/ Programmes of the State Government:

The State Government has recently issued its 'Tourism Policy –2000' with various objectives including the ones related to 'economically, culturally and ecologically sustainable tourism' and generation of 'employment opportunities in rural, tribal and remote areas'. This policy also recognises the importance of village and nature tourism and has provision for incentives to village level tourism cooperatives and for developing paying guesthouse facilities in the villages. These provisions in the Tourism Policy would be taken advantage of while designing proposals for eco-tourism development in the state.

Eco-treks identified under this programme pass through some of the pristine forest areas in the state. These eco-treks and their surrounds would need to be maintained as such for continuation of their ecological functions and to retain their appeal. The Department of Town and Country Planning would, therefore, have to keep a strict vigil over any unplanned development along these tracks.

A SFD project on sustainable rural livelihoods is under finalization with financial support from DFIDI. Eco-tourism concept, as proposed in this paper, would go a long way in achieving the objectives of this project. Appropriate linkages with this project would be established as the concept grows further.

11. Initial Selection:

1. Nature Park, Kufri
2. Van Vihar, Potter's Hill, Shimla
3. Khajjiar
4. Renuka
5. Chansil Pass Eco-Trail
6. Great Himalayan National Park