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DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES

Homestays developed as a part of Himalayan Ark, that shifted its focus from tourism to digital upskilling, reviving traditional crafts and long-term food security. Image Credit: Malika Viridi

Communities Shaping Sustainable Tourism in the Himalayas

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Editorial



Tourism for the Himalayas: Communities Protecting Nature, Culture, and Livelihoods

In this editorial, Dr Swayamprabha Das explores the transformative power of community-led eco-tourism in the Himalayas, where local voices shape sustainable travel practices that protect nature, culture, and livelihoods. This edition delves into how Himalayan communities are driving eco-conscious initiatives, fostering economic growth, empowering social structures, and preserving fragile environments.

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Lead

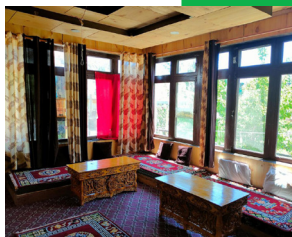


Community-Driven Ecotourism: A Vision for Himachal's Future

Responsible tourism can transform travel into a journey that is not just about reaching a destination, but also about celebrating shared stories, traditions, and the vibrant spirit of the region. In this article, Rahul Bhushan explores the concept of responsible tourism, which revitalises community systems and honours indigenous knowledge. He argues that this approach ensures the coexistence of heritage and modern livelihoods.

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Can Homestays Be More Than Just a Stay in Ladakh? A Policy Review of Ladakh Homestay Policy, 2023

In this article, Aishwarya Kulkarni examines the potential of homestays in Ladakh, highlighting global success models. It emphasises the need for better infrastructure, waste and water management, and skill development, advocating for a comprehensive sustainability framework to position Ladakh as a leader in eco-hospitality while supporting local communities.

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Fostering Ecotourism in Markha: Community Voices and Challenges

In this article, Drishika Sharma explores the captivating Markha village located within Hemis National Park, where eco-tourism beautifully integrates with authentic Ladakhi culture. She highlights the small community's efforts to enhance its eco-tourism potential by improving facilities and building partnerships as the village aims to become an appealing destination for travellers interested in exploring nature, culture, and sustainable living.

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Ground story



Apricot Blossoms of Takmachik: A Celebration of Community-driven Eco-tourism

In this article, Rinchen Angmo introduces Takmachik, a village located in the fertile Sham Valley of Ladakh. Known for its organic apricot orchards and rich agricultural heritage, he says the village offers visitors the opportunity to engage with sustainable practices and appreciate the beauty of its natural surroundings, thus helping them foster a deeper connection to the resilient Ladakhi way of life.

The views expressed in the articles in this newsletter are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Development Alternatives.

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Tourism for the Himalayas: Communities Protecting Nature, Culture, and Livelihoods



Community-driven tourism ensures local ownership, fair income, and conservation of resources.

Eco-tourism has emerged as a global phenomenon where experiential tourism and local hospitality, combined with local cuisine and traditional crafts and music, hold the travel economy together. The growing desire to live and travel sustainably has become the hallmark of young and experienced travellers worldwide. The urge to explore the unexplored and live the unlivable makes community-led eco-tourism sites appealing. Eco-tourism worldwide is all about sharing, learning, and co-creating value that has a lasting 'positive' impact. It aims not only to reduce carbon and ecological footprints but also to enhance how the travellers contribute to making nature more positive, which is worth the challenge.

Community involvement is the cornerstone of successful eco-tourism in the Himalayas. Unlike traditional tourism, community-led eco-tourism prioritises community empowerment, environmental conservation, and equitable distribution of benefits.

Local residents are empowered not just as service providers—guides, homestay hosts, artisans—but also as stakeholders who set the direction for tourism and conservation efforts. Effective participation means communities have real stakes in decision making, receive skill-building and economic opportunities, and take responsibility for stewardship of natural resources. This engagement leads to developmental activities like better sanitation facilities and improved access to water resources, which benefit the local population. They then actively plan, manage, and benefit from tourism initiatives centred on their natural and cultural heritage, as can be seen in the Hindu-Kush region and globally.

Social, Economic, and Environmental Impacts

Ecotourism, well accepted, is grounded in the concept of long-term socio-environmental sustainability, with minimal ecological

footprint. More recently, emphasis has been laid on responsible travel to natural areas, with purposes such as acquiring knowledge, co-creating local solutions, learning about the local culture, and admiring natural environments. This contributes positively to preserving ecosystems and the local economy's growth and development, and also strengthens the local community's social and cultural traditions and knowledge. It is widely accepted that the fundamental principles of ecotourism include being nature-based, emphasising preservation and conservation, providing education, promoting sustainability, ensuring a fair distribution of benefits, and upholding ethics, responsibility, and awareness.

Eco-tourism with community participation offers threefold benefits:

- **Economic gains:** Job creation, entrepreneurial ventures, and supplementary income for farming families.
- **Social empowerment:** Skill training, women's involvement, educational connections, and retention of youth in mountain villages.
- **Environmental stewardship:** Conservation of fragile habitats, reduced ecological footprint, and adoption of traditional knowledge for sustainable practices.

These initiatives address traditional challenges such as poverty, gender disparities, and environmental degradation. Revenue generated from tourism is often channelled towards conservation, education, and local infrastructure, allowing communities to thrive while attracting responsible tourists who seek meaningful, low-impact experiences.


What Works and What Does Not

Studies show that successful long-term implementation of community-based ecotourism requires significant community involvement. As eco-tourism initiatives are typically planned in sensitive areas, they can only be sustained when local communities are considered, and where environmental protection and ecotourism benefits increase,

as the need to improve the quality of life and conserve resources are priorities. There are a number of successful case studies that emphasise the need for community participation in tourism planning as a pathway to sustainable tourism and poverty alleviation.

It is worth highlighting that low community participation produces low levels of awareness and engagement in projects. And eco-tourism provides avenues for alternate and diverse development mechanisms to achieve conservation and support local livelihoods. Hence, community-led eco-tourism has the potential to contribute to the social and economic sustainability of the local people by providing a new source of income, product creation, and employment.

The Indian Himalayan Region's eco-tourism journey offers compelling evidence that community participation is the bedrock of sustainable progress. By giving local people control, building their skills, and celebrating their culture, eco-tourism delivers profound socio-economic and ecological rewards.

In this edition of the newsletter, we will explore the many layers of community-led tourism in the Himalayas. In the lead article, Rahul Bhushan, founder of NORTH, reflects on how ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh can regenerate culture, livelihoods, and ecosystems. The Ladakh Homestay Policy, 2023, by Aishwarya Kulkarni talks about policy recommendations for making homestays models of eco-hospitality. From the ground, we share stories of Takmachik's Apricot Blossom Festival in Ladakh and highlight the community-driven homestay practices in the quaint village of Markha. These narratives capture the everyday realities, challenges, and hopes of mountain communities. Together, these perspectives remind us that the future of tourism in the Himalayas lies in the hands of its people and their enduring connection to land and their traditions. 

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Community Driven Ecotourism: A Vision for Himachal's Future

Tourism is often considered one of the key drivers of the green economy. However, in Himachal, we have a unique opportunity to shape it into something more meaningful, something that transcends mere economics. Responsible tourism, when rooted in the culture and wisdom of the mountains, can serve as a bridge between our heritage and modern livelihoods. It is not just about travellers visiting a destination; it is about ensuring that the land, its people, and their traditions continue to thrive together. For us in Himachal Pradesh, this means that tourism must embody the essence of our homeland.

Living the Rhythm of Local Life

Through cultural tourism, visitors become not mere spectators; they live the rhythm of local life. They see homes made from stone, wood, and mud, built with techniques that are centuries old. They share meals that come directly from the farm, made from seasonal vegetables grown without pesticides, harvested and prepared as part of a 'farm-to-table' ethos. They stay in family-run home stays or spaces rooted in the Himalayan way, where hospitality is seen not as a transaction but an intrinsic value of life. And by engaging this way, they become contributors to economic and social upliftment, creating income streams for families while motivating communities to continue their day-to-day practices with pride.



'Nai' by North, showcasing vernacular architecture rooted in Himachal's sustainable traditions



Permaculture farm run by local women

Picture: NORTH

At NORTH, we believe that responsible tourism is the most effective way to carry forward indigenous knowledge systems and craftsmanship. Our work is not limited to buildings or destinations; it is about creating experiences that resonate with both the heart and the spirit. Guests are invited to cook traditional cuisine alongside local families, try their hands at wood carving with master artisans, taste wild honey collected from the forest, or walk heritage trails that unveil the forgotten stories of our valleys. Festivals, rituals, and community gatherings are not mere 'events' staged for outsiders; they are lived realities that travellers are welcomed to partake in. This approach transforms tourism into a blend of education, preservation, and celebration. The role of the community in this vision cannot be overstated; it is not merely an accessory to the model but truly the soul of it.

From Conventional to Regenerative Tourism

Conventional tourism often views local people as merely service providers, creating competition instead of collaboration. Regenerative tourism, on the other hand, emphasises the principle that the community itself must be the nucleus. It is not about building hotels that overshadow villages; it is about revitalising community systems that have kept the mountains resilient for centuries. When a guest stays in a local home, eats food grown on terraced farms, and listens

to a folk song passed down through generations, they are not only enjoying an experience—they are investing in its continuity. This is the essence of regenerative tourism: ensuring that what is shared today remains intact tomorrow, stronger and more vibrant.

Tourism can have both destructive and transformative effects. When approached

with care, it holds the potential to regenerate entire ecosystems—economically, ecologically, and culturally. Community-driven ecotourism cannot simply be an industry; it has to be a way of honouring the mountains, of ensuring that their blessings continue to nourish future generations. □



Local women engaged in mud plastering work, Himachal Pradesh

Photo: NORTH

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Can Homestays Be More Than Just a Stay in Ladakh? A Policy Review of Ladakh Homestay Policy, 2023

Globally, homestay policies have successfully connected tourism with community benefits, environmental conservation, and cultural authenticity. For example, Thailand's Homestay Standard Licensing integrates hygiene, safety, and ecological compliance. In Nepal, the Community Homestay Network (backed by non-governmental organisations and the government) sets training and revenue-sharing norms, often with women leading operations and communities sharing in the benefits. Similarly, Bhutan has integrated homestays into its 'High-Value, Low-Impact' tourism model, which requires licensing that emphasises cultural authenticity and environmental compliance.

In the Indian context, especially in the fragile ecosystems of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), in Uttarakhand, Deendayal Upadhyay Griha Awaas Yojana provides support for homestays through soft loans and subsidies. In Himachal Pradesh, initiatives like *Har Gaon Ki Kahani* and the state homestay policy encourage heritage- and culture-based stays, while a robust homestay program under the Sikkim Rural Tourism Policy that enables households to receive subsidies for room upgrades, eco-sanitation, and training.

Examples of good ecotourism practices include Photoksar (Ladakh), a social enterprise model where villagers manage nomadic camps to fund conservation. In Demul (Spiti), a rotational homestay system ensures equal income for all, especially women. WWF-led initiatives in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh empower women through eco-café, guiding, and homestays. Mawlynnong (Meghalaya), famed as one of Asia's cleanest villages, successfully integrates ecotourism with practices such as banning plastics, rainwater harvesting, composting, and cultural preservation.

Against this backdrop, Ladakh has witnessed a remarkable transformation over the past two decades, with the tourism sector undergoing a remarkable shift. Once visited only by



Mattresses received by homestay owner as part of Ladakh Homestay Policy, 2023

adventurous travellers, Ladakh is now a major destination, welcoming thousands of tourists each year. Owing to the largely rural landscape of Ladakh, this boom has created opportunities for rural households, particularly through homestays. Recognising this, the Union Territory administration announced the **Ladakh Homestay Policy 2023**, building upon its 2020 initiative of Homestay Policy. The policy sets a target of 10,000 homestays over five years, with half of them located inside protected areas. Incentives include ₹1.25 lakh for winter-friendly toilets, up to ₹50,000 for furnishing, and non-fiscal kits containing essential household items. The policy also emphasises requirements for hygiene, signage, and registration, while offering training, market linkages, and annual awards. District and Union Territory committees oversee verification and monitoring. The overarching vision is to enhance livelihoods, preserve culture, and make Ladakh a model of eco-sensitive tourism.

Opportunities in Alignment with the Homestay Policy

- **Opportunity for deeper retrofits:** The financial incentives and non-fiscal provisions provide a strong foundation, which can be further expanded to support advanced upgrades such as wall insulation, solar thermal systems, and decentralised wastewater solutions.
- **Scope for technical guidance:** Incorporating clear specifications (manuals, guidebooks, and toolkits) on insulation values, glazing standards, frost-proofing, and water systems, would enhance comfort and ensure that homestays are better equipped for Ladakh's harsh winters.
- **Strengthening waste and water management systems:** Beyond toilet facilities, integrating decentralised wastewater management and winter-proof composting can reinforce ecological sustainability in fragile, high-altitude settings.
- **Expanding skill development:** Complementing the current focus on hospitality and marketing, providing technical training for masons, solar technicians, and plumbers would build local expertise for sus-

tainable construction and maintenance.

- **Evolving certification framework:** Proposed awards and badges could grow into a robust, tiered sustainability certification system with measurable indicators like energy use per guest-night, water efficiency, and waste diversion, making Ladakh a leader in eco-hospitality.

Way Ahead

For Ladakh's homestays to become globally credible models of eco-hospitality, the policy must evolve from a support scheme to a comprehensive sustainability framework. Some policy recommendations for the same are as follows:

1. Strengthen green infrastructure by introducing a Green Upgrade Grant (e.g., 50:50 co-funding) for solar thermal systems, PV+battery units, insulation retrofits, and winter-proof water solutions with clear technical guidelines on insulation, glazing, frost-proofing, and decentralized wastewater. Additionally, training programmes will be implemented to strengthen local livelihoods.

An important non-economic consideration is the enhancement of community



Shared common space for tourists in a homestay in Alchi village, Ladakh

capacity through training, development of interpersonal skills, and active engagement, all of which will complement eco-friendly infrastructure improvements.

2. Build local technical capacity by complementing the existing hospitality training with modules for masons, plumbers, and technicians on hybrid vernacular-modern construction, solar maintenance, and winterisation techniques. Additionally, provide capacity-building programmes to improve experiential tourism packages and communication skills.

This approach will foster behavioural and communication skills, enabling local communities to confidently engage with travellers from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing the visitor experience and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

3. Operationalise a tiered Green Homestay Certification (basic, silver, gold) linked to measurable KPIs on energy, water, waste, and cultural authenticity. This initiative will

enhance marketing visibility, provide incentives, and offer recognition, supported by small annual service subsidies or vouchers for system maintenance.

4. Responsible tourist behavioural shift by introducing measures such as an advance deposit or bond, requiring visitors to maintain cleanliness and follow homestay guidelines, with fines or deductions for non-compliance, fostering accountability and respect for local spaces.

By establishing clear technical standards, stronger financial instruments, and a robust certification framework, Ladakh can ensure that homestays are not only more abundant but also comfortable for visitors, financially viable for hosts, and regenerative for the fragile mountain ecosystems that sustain them. □

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Fostering Eco-tourism in Markha: Community Voices and Challenges



Markha village

In the Leh district, Markha village, located in the heart of Hemis National Park and Markha River, is a small community comprising just 17 households. It serves as an important stop along the famous Markha Valley trek. The community is engaged primarily in subsistence farming with wheat and vegetable agriculture as the main crops. Over the past decade, the community has increasingly turned to eco-tourism practices as a means of sustaining their livelihoods. Currently, all households in the village operate as homestays and are registered under the Ladakh 2021 Homestay Policy. These homestays offer trekkers and urban life escapers not only a place to rest but also an authentic experience of Ladakhi culture and hospitality. However, while eco-tourism has created new livelihood opportunities, it has also brought into focus the prevailing concerns of Markha village.

Local Perspectives for Fostering Eco-Tourism

In Markha, most trekkers stay for just one night before continuing deeper into the valley. The local communities have

identified several factors contributing to this trend. First, most trek operators and travel guidebooks have positioned Markha primarily as a halting point rather than a destination in itself. Second, Markha's limited online visibility and inadequate homestay promotion mean that trekkers and tourists, who often pre-book their itinerary, have less time to discover what Markha truly has to offer. Third, the homestays in Markha often lack modern amenities, which makes tourists less likely to extend their stay. Although a rotational hosting system among homestay owners is prevalent to ensure equitable guest distribution, the community members of Markha have reflected on these limitations and highlighted priority actions to enhance eco-tourism in the village.

- **Diversifying eco-tourism-linked roles:** Eco-tourism opportunities beyond homestay operations can be broadened, with inclusion of eco-guides, porters, artisans, etc. within the village. This will allow livelihood income to be spread evenly within the community members and enhance tourist experience by offering them with enriching Ladakhi culture engagement.

- **Improving sanitation facilities:** Homestays in Markha lack adequate modern sanitation infrastructure. These days with majority of the tourists preferring western-style amenities, there is a need to improve such infrastructure to sustain eco-tourism within the village.

- **Targeted training:** Organising targeted capacity-building and training programmes for homestay owners in hospitality management, language skills, and digital literacy to allow them to meet the needs of the tourists to enhance their experience and stay in the village.

- **Collective institutional efforts:** The most important action to enhance eco-tourism in the village is to foster institutional support from associations like Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), All Ladakh Tour Operators Association (ALTOA), and All Ladakh Hotel and Guest House Association (ALHAGHA). Training, joint marketing, cultural activities, and eco-trekking experiences by them will attract more tourists and encourage longer duration stays.

Markha's story illustrates how community-driven eco-tourism can blend livelihoods, culture, and conservation in ways that are



Participants in a focus group discussion on eco-tourism practices in Markha village

both resilient and inspiring. Along with the community's strong environmental stewardship, Markha can progress from being a one-night halt to a sustainable model destination, where visitors sojourn longer, engage with the community deeply, and contribute equitably. □

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Apricot Blossoms of Takmachik: A Celebration of Community-driven Eco-tourism



Apricot blossoms in the Sham Valley Region, Ladakh

Takmachik, nestled in Ladakh's fertile Sham Valley, is renowned for its lush organic apricot orchards, which are deeply woven into the region's ecological and cultural fabric. Often referred to as the 'green heart of Leh', Sham Valley serves as a hub for agriculture, and Takmachik proudly embodies this legacy. Rich in tradition and agricultural heritage, the villagers of Takmachik came together to celebrate the Apricot Blossom season on 13 April of this year. The Apricot Blossom Festival, first initiated in 2021, is a unique initiative rooted entirely in community-driven eco-tourism.

The festival is celebrated across various apricot-growing regions of Ladakh during the bloom season, which typically falls in April. Unlike monastery-based festivals, the Apricot Blossom Festival is not associated with a single religious institution. Instead, it is celebrated in community grounds and public spaces across apricot-growing villages in both Leh and Kargil. In 2025, for example, celebrations were held in Skyurbuchan, Alchi, Domkhar, Sumoor, and Tar in Leh district, while in Kargil, events took place in Sanjaq, Garkone, Hardass, Shilikchey, Gongma Minji, Gound Minjee, and Karkitchhu.

This festival is a vibrant reflection of Ladakhi culture. The community hosts serve authentic Ladakhi meals, perform traditional songs and dances, and even organise age-old sports like archery—activities that were once central to village life and are now being revived with pride. Unlike commercial tourist events, this initiative is not led by investors or travel companies, but by the villagers themselves—by the community, for the community. It honours their deep connection to the land, their ancestors, and the sustainable lifestyle they continue to uphold. Additionally, the Apricot Blossom Festival itself is free to attend, with no entry fee. All revenue comes from the sale of apricot products and participation in local stalls, ensuring that the income directly benefits the community and supports household livelihoods without the commercialisation of the event.

Eco-Tourism in Takmachik

Back in 2011, the Takmachik village was formally launched as a tourist destination by the Ladakh Environment and Health Organisation (LEHO). This initiative helped establish 12 homestays in the village. Later, with government support and the Ladakh Homestay Policy, five more



Map showcasing the location of Takmachik village in Ladakh

homestays were set up through financial assistance. As a result, Takmachik has become one of Leh's model eco-villages, recognised for its designation as being an 'organic village'. The homestays are run by local families, where guests are welcomed not just as tourists but as members of the household. Visitors are invited to experience life the Ladakhi way—eating traditional food, participating in seasonal agricultural activities (like ploughing fields with the help of yaks), and learning about sustainable practices (such as local compost toilets and

glacier melt irrigation methods) that have supported generations. The village, famous for its apricots, is also a biodiversity hotspot as it is located on the border of the Hemis National Park and known for its ecotourism activities like birdwatching and trekking.

In 2025, more than 100 tourists attended the Apricot Blossom festival in Takmachik. While many visitors came for just the day, only a smaller proportion chose to stay overnight in village homestays. This highlights both the potential and the challenge of encouraging day-trippers into become longer-stay guests. Most importantly, visitors come to connect with the local culture, not merely to consume. They seek authenticity—not luxury—and leave with a deeper understanding of Ladakh's culture, environment, and resilient communities.

The Apricot Blossom Festival in Takmachik is more than a seasonal event—it is a model of how tourism can celebrate culture, support conservation, and uplift communities without compromising their identity. □



Takmachik village in Sham Valley, Ladakh

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Eco Chalo

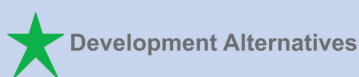
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