

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 6 July 2013

Nature's fury or human greed?

For the fortnight gone by, it is impossible to write about anything else other than the tragedy that has befallen our beloved hill state of Uttarakhand. As we live near Sahasthradhara road, the sound of choppers flying overhead to and from the Sahasthradhara Helipad are a constant reminder the disaster caused by heavy rain and flash floods. We spent a few days at the helipad, helping out with information on missing people, and the scenes we witnessed were horrifying. Relatives from distant places showing photographs of loved ones, people landing up from many different states, desperately looking for information, any information, of missing friends and relatives.

The media, of course, has been at the forefront of highlighting the tragedy. While a significant part of the reporting has focussed on the plight of tourists, not enough focus has been given to the short term and long term impact that this tragedy will have on the local people in the hills.

In addition to the damage to the roads, bridges and homes, lack of connectivity means that religious and eco-tourism in the flood-hit areas, too, will grind to a halt, impacting livelihoods. Hill crops have been damaged, and lack of road access means that everything, including food and other daily essentials will become more expensive for the local hill residents. While the short term effort is rightly focussed on rescue, soon we will need to begin asking the questions on short term and long term rehabilitation of the affected areas in the state.

While it was nature's fury that caused a large part of the destruction, it is worthwhile to pause and ask how much of a role human greed and short-sightedness played? Barren hill slopes shorn of trees, homes constructed near rivers flouting established norms, large number of tourists, without any thought of carrying capacity, roads and more roads, large and small hydel power projects...the list of unplanned development and activity in Uttarakhand is endless. Will this tragedy open our eyes and make us pursue a different model of development, more suited to the fragile Himalayan landscape? Will all stakeholders, government, civil society, ordinary citizens, men and women, wake up and support this path? A story comes to mind readily. In Aug 2012, flash floods hit Uttarakashi, causing significant damage to roads, homes and bridges. Does anybody remember this? In March of this year I was talking to some of the locals from Uttarakashi, querying them about the flash floods and its impact on their lives. The response from the locals was insightful-all of them agreed that at least part of the reason for Uttarakashi's 2012 disaster was manmade, due to utter disregard of construction norms. At the same time, with only 8 months having gone by, the locals responded that it was back to business as usual. While readily

acknowledging that human shortsightedness was one of the reasons for the disaster, one of the locals retorted ruefully “*Hum to aaj aur abhi ka sochte hain. Kal ka kisko sochne ka waqt hai*”. Will history repeat itself, or will the so-called “most intelligent” species on the planet emerge wiser from this tragedy?

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi@gmail.com

Making a difference:
What can you do?
Possibly the best way to put your hand up, if you cannot get directly involved in rescue and rehab is to send money to Uttarakhand based NGOs who are doing on-the-ground work.

Photograph caption: The fragile Himalayan landscape

© Sanjay Sondhi

