

Yuksam-Dzongri Trail

Do you know why wood is not used for building bonfires? Have you heard of a male lake and a female lake and what made the female lake move away from the male lake? Are you surprised that insects are secretly taken out of India for research?

A group of tourists was trekking on the Yuksam-Dzongri trekking trail in Sikkim. They were accompanied by a guide, besides porters and cooks. At the end of the day, the tourists were tired and cold. They requested the porters to build them a bonfire. For the tourists, this seemed like an exciting idea to get warm and cozy. However, much to their surprise, the porters refused to comply with their request. On being asked why, they said they had been taught during their training that wood should not be collected for bonfires along the trail since this led to its degradation. So amazed were the

tourists with this insight that they wrote a letter to the Chief Minister of Sikkim commending these people and congratulating the State for its 'ecosensitive' attitude.

Yuksam-Dzongri is a well-known trekking trail on the route to the mighty Khangchendzonga, the world's third highest mountain peak. The trail runs along the periphery of the Khangchendzonga National Park, famous for the red panda and many other animal and bird species. It starts from the village of Yuksam and winds its way to Dzongri and finally to Goecha La, covering a distance of 45km and reaching an altitude of

4,940 m. This is also one of the few trekking trails in Sikkim open for Indians as well as foreigners.

The village of Yuksam lies tucked away in the far western corner of Sikkim. Although highly revered (it is said that this was the place where the Gods first came and settled), it is known to be the first capital of Sikkim. Two of the State's sacred lakes, Kathok and Khecheopalri, are also situated in this area. Local elders tell an interesting tale about these lakes. Kathok is supposed to be a male and Khecheopalri a female lake. Kathok was given more importance, while Khecheopalri was neglected and polluted, by people dumping garbage into it. It is said that Khecheopalri became annoyed at this and went and settled far away from Kathok lake.

Yuksam used to be a sleepy little village. Tourists hardly spent any time at Yuksam before setting off on the trek. The villagers had very little interest in the tourists or the trail since only those who were hired as guides, porters or cooks earned from trekking activities. This remained so until a few years ago when a project on Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism started in this village. The aim of the project was to ensure that the people of Yuksam benefited from the trekking tourism on the trail, to address the threats that the biodiversity on the trail faced and then to try and influence the State government to introduce better facilities for tourism in general and ecotourism in particular.

The project tried to achieve these aims through training many different groups of people. There were training programmes for the guides who took tourists on the trail. These programmes made the guides aware of the do's and don'ts on the trail. The guides were also made to realize the importance of this trail because of its unique biodiversity. There were training programmes for porters and cooks, focused on how best they could carry

on with their activities without causing much damage to the trail. As a result of the training, these people became aware of the significance of this trail and this knowledge instilled in them a sense of pride and responsibility towards it. As feedback about these well trained and well-informed guides, porters and cooks went back to the State government, their wages were increased and this was an added incentive to do a good job.

Most of the guides, porters and cooks belonged to the village of Yuksam. As the other villagers watched these trainings and what resulted from them, they also got enthused and wanted to contribute to the project. They realized that if they made their village and houses more attractive to tourists, then perhaps these people who spent

Code of Conduct for the Yuksam-Dzongri Trail (You can follow this on your other travels too!)

- * Leave only footprints, take only photographs
- * High altitude vegetation is frail. Avoid trampling follow trails and do not pick plants or flowers
- * Do not disturb wildlife or its habitat.
- * Do not buy endangered animal or plant
- * Use kerosene or bottled gas for cooking, heating and lighting. Avoid using firewood
- * Ensure that you are properly equipped with warm clothes.
- * Avoid littering. Deposit garbage at designated sites.
- * Keep all pollutants away from streams and lakes
- * Do not give treats to local children; it only encourages begging
- * Respect the sanctity of holy lakes and historical sites.
- * Avoid smoking, drinking or loud talk
- * Educate yourself about the ecology, customs, manners, and culture of Yuksam.

only one night in the village might stay longer. Many villagers started giving out rooms in their houses for tourists to spend the night. Shopkeepers started storing more things in their shops. Residents opened a few more restaurants as tourists started spending more time in the village. Yuksam seemed to suddenly wake up and take pride in its existence!

The youth of the village then decided to get together and form an organization which they called the

Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC). The Yuksam-Dzongri trail being on the periphery of the national park is managed by the Forest Department. The KCC, however, decided to help the Forest Department in keeping the trail clean, by organizing regular clean-up campaigns. The KCC also developed a Code of Conduct (see box) for all trekkers, very clearly pointing out what could and could not be done on the trail. Visitors to Yuksam were requested to follow the Code of Conduct. Planning for all these activities was carried out along with all the villagers, who had an equal say on what should be done.

Once, while members of the KCC were cleaning the trail, they came upon two

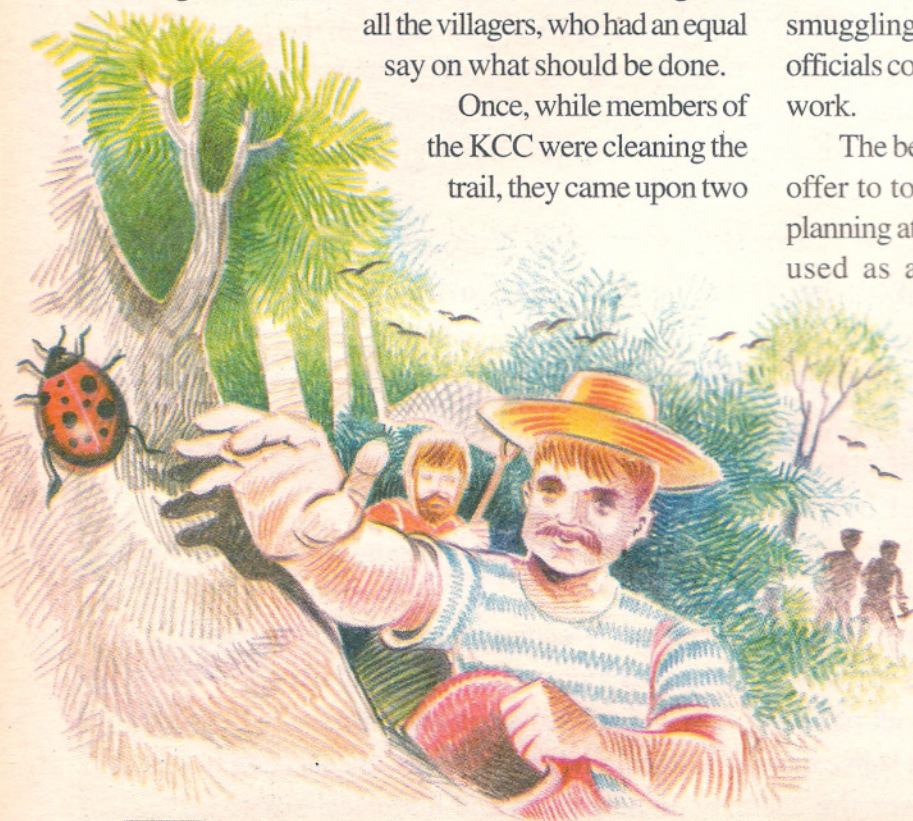
foreign nationals collecting insects. When questioned, they said they were scientists and the insects were for research. Members of the KCC got suspicious and asked the foreigners if they had taken permission from the Government to do so. At this point, the foreigners gave some excuse for not having taken permission and tried to leave the place. However, the members of the KCC were on the alert. The foreigners were handed over to the Forest Department officers in Yuksam. Investigations later revealed that they were part of a much larger group smuggling insects out of India! The Forest Department officials complimented the KCC members for their good work.

The beautiful Himlayan State of Sikkim has a lot to offer to tourists in terms of natural beauty. Tourism planning at Yuksam for the Yuksam-Dzongri trail is now used as a model for Sikkim. The State government is using this model for planning tourism in different parts of Sikkim. Perhaps the most important impact this project has had on planning in government is to ensure that different kinds of people ranging from the villagers, tour operators and government officials all sit together and plan for a particular area.

If ever you visit Sikkim, don't forget to trek on the Yuksam-Dzongri trail.

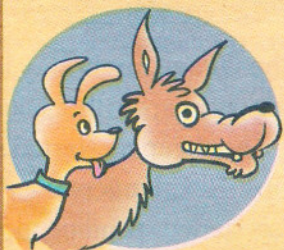
- By Seema Bhatt
Kalpavriksh

- Environment Action Group



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YOU
KNOW?

Glaciers occupy only about 11 per cent of the Earth's land surface but hold roughly three-fourths of its fresh water.



A carnivorous animal of the canidae family, the wolf is believed to be the ancestor of the dog.

The Amazon River valley is the largest basin area in the world, and its rainforest stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the tree line of the Andes in the West.

