



India

Can Ladakh Embrace Tourism While Protecting Its Fragile Ecosystem?

Ladakh's tourism has boomed in recent decades but faces challenges like waste and environmental damage. Locals are pushing for responsible tourism practices to preserve Ladakh's unique culture and ecosystem



Ladakh is the highest plateau in India Shutterstock

Ashish Kothari, Kunzang Deachen

Updated on: 26 Apr 2024, 12:31 pm 7 min read

The year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of tourism in [Ladakh](#). In 1974, when the region was opened up, it got a total of 527 tourists. In 2022-23, the count reached 5,31,000 and 5,25,374, greater than Ladakh's resident population. The numbers have shot up over the last few decades, with air connectivity and easier road access from Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. This was aided in no small degree by the film "3 Idiots," featuring the spectacular Pangong Lake, after which tourist numbers shot up from 74,000 to 1,80,000.

Related Stories



Nearly 2 Lakh Tourists Visited Mizoram In 2023

OT Staff 19 hours ago



Stok Palace: Of Ladakh's Lores And Legacies

Shreya Cheema
29 Apr 2024



A Summer Trek To Markha Valley

Su Deep Kohli
14 Nov 2014



Mapping It Out

Priyanka Kapoor
13 Mar 2024

Close Ad



Tourism has become an essential opportunity for a region needing to generate new livelihoods. Ladakh's traditional occupations—pastoralism, agriculture, trade—are struggling to survive for various reasons, and there are only limited jobs in government. Tourism has generated employment and income opportunities, including running hotels and homestays, opening restaurants and shops, trekking, mountaineering and nature guiding, renting bikes, driving cabs, and selling local produce, including fruits and crafts. It now reportedly makes up over 50 per cent of the monetary economy. It is, therefore, understandable that many Ladakhis and outsiders want even more tourist flow, greater infrastructure and access.

Adverse Impacts

The boons that tourism has brought are only one side of the coin. The detrimental impacts are also now generating discussion and some corrective action. These include the degradation of Ladakh's fragile ecosystems and wildlife, a burgeoning solid waste and effluent problem, unregulated construction (much of it not following ecological and climate-sensitive approaches), increased vehicular load (especially visible in Leh town where traffic jams are becoming common), and detrimental socio-cultural changes such as the introduction of junk foods and homogenous western lifestyles. The entry of a commercial, competitive, and individualistic mindset that was relatively rare in Ladakhi has begun to displace aspects of traditional life crucial to well-being, such as the economy and social life centred around the gift economy and self-sustainability.



Unregulated construction for a tourism is a serious threat to Ladakh's ecological sustainability Ashish Kothari

Several civil society organisations and some Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) members have been raising concerns about the above impacts. Over a decade back, for instance, the Ladakhi Women's Alliance of Ladakh campaigned against the use of plastic and water bottles, which were contributing significantly to piles of garbage in and around Leh town and in major tourist destinations. Groups like [Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust \(SLC-IT\)](#) and Nature Conservation Foundation have been warning of the impacts on wildlife, where new roads are opening up areas previously undisturbed, or due to activities such as tourists feeding "cute" [marmots](#) or chasing after Black-necked cranes (severely endangered, with Ladakh having India's only breeding population) to get photographs.



Endangered Black-necked cranes Ashish Kothari

Policy Directions

In February 2022, the Union Ministry of Tourism prepared a draft, "Tourism Vision for Ladakh," which was put up for public comments with an impossible deadline of five days. There has been a general tendency to impose such policy directions emanating from New Delhi with hardly any meaningful participation of local people. The vision has been finalised without considering comments submitted by the Ladakh Tourist Trade Alliance (a regional body of all tourist trade associations) and others, but it has not yet been implemented.

It makes several recommendations, including conducting a carrying capacity within

two years, diversifying destinations to reduce the pressure on the few current tourist hotspots, incentivising low-impact tourism, and enabling communities to manage a substantial part of the tourism. However, it also contains contradictions, such as recommending a considerable increase in road construction and making an international airport, which could have large impacts.

There Are Alternatives

Several civil society and trade association groups have already demonstrated the possibilities of responsible tourism in Ladakh. Amongst the earliest of these was the innovation of homestays, started by SLC-IT in the early 2000s after a village woman asked in a meeting it had organised: 'Why can't visitors stay in our homes, enjoy our hospitality, and give us the earnings'? This may be the first such initiative in the Himalayas since homestays have become quite the buzzword with tourism promoters. Unfortunately, not all of these follow a *process* that involves building capacity, instilling ecological and visitation ethics, and ensuring some degree of fairness, such as rotating hosting opportunities. However, in principle, as demonstrated by SLC-IT's "Himalayan Homestays" programme, this is a viable alternative for hoteliers and tour operators who are cornering most tourism income.



During peak season, mass tourist arrivals have overwhelmed civic services Shutterstock

The NGO Local Futures has focused on preserving local food systems and protecting related traditional practices through activities like hosting workshops and dialogues on food, farming and traditional knowledge to promote more responsible tourism and produce short films on the significant issues facing Ladakh today. The Ladakh Art and Media Organisation (LAMO) holds art exhibitions, residencies, festivals, workshops, music performances, film screenings, and other activities and events featuring artists from Ladakh and worldwide. In collaboration with the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation (HCHF), it documents cultural practices and historical sites along Nubra Valley's silk route and proposes measures for more sustainable tourism there.

Other initiatives include Ladakh Environment and Health Organisation (LEHO)'s Ladakh Ecotourism, Thinlas Chorol's Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, Tsetan Dolma's De Khambir as a restaurant specialising in local cuisine, Soljacafé started by Spalzes Angmo, Dolkhar & Lchang-nang establishments promoting locally inspired architecture, cuisines, and cultural experiences, and enterprises like Ladakhi Basket, Siachen Naturals, NimaGoosGoos, Organix Ladakh and Reetsot.

Responsible tourism promotion by Ladakhi operators is also increasing. Deleks Namgyal, president of All Ladakh Tour Operators Association, admits that some of these activities have had negative impacts recently. He told us about the trek to Stok Kangri Peak, which used to be a favourite destination for trekkers and mountaineers because of its proximity to Leh town. However, there were no regulations and no power within the local community to enforce responsible behaviour, so in 2020, the villages en route simply blocked the road and refused to allow anyone in.

"We have learnt from this experience and are now trying to promote responsible trekking and mountaineering, such as ensuring all waste is brought back, no trees or bushes are cut for fuel, local people are treated with respect, and as far as possible, homestays are availed of", said Namgyal. He added that more norms were needed, such as no off-road driving (a massive problem in places like Changthang where flat grasslands and desert ecosystems are easy to drive on), trekkers to take back their non-biodegradable garbage, a local escort being mandatory in sensitive areas, etc. A model trek in the Ko Valley is being developed to demonstrate these norms.

Hotel Association president Skarma Tsering Dehlex spoke of the norms that hoteliers have set for themselves, e.g. only Ladakhis are allowed to set up hotels, and no one is allowed more than 35 rooms. The taxi association has resolved that no one should own more than 2-3 vehicles and that it will oppose the entry of companies like Ola and Uber. Several resolutions have been passed by tour operators since 2000; the latest, on 28 April 2021 (signed by all tourism-related associations, religious bodies, and political parties), resolved "for the preservation of Ladakh as a unique tourist destination and for protection of avenues of entrepreneurship and livelihood of the local people, and to protect the fragile ecosystem, investment in the tourism sector from outside the region in any form, will be discouraged and opposed." Ladakhi operators stopped a proposal by the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation to start a large hotel. Dehlex admitted that some Ladakhis were violating norms, and inequalities between those with substantial investment potential and others remained a problem.

A few government-sponsored programmes are also promoting sustainable tourism. A car-free section of Leh town, within its primary market, has become a favourite for locals and visitors, enabling women from nearby villages to sell fresh produce. The UT Administration is promoting festivals showcasing Ladakhi culture and cuisine, such as a Buckwheat festival. However, sometimes, one feels that their aggressive promotion of these is distracting from several serious issues Ladakh faces.

The Need For Paradigm Shifts

Tourism cannot be seen in isolation from the economic, political and socio-cultural transformations Ladakh is facing. While it was a district within J&K state, there was already a feeling of neglect and alienation. Since it became a Union Territory in 2019, this has increased since most decision-making is happening at the best of the central government. The way New Delhi looks at this region is how it has looked at India as a whole: promoting a model of development based on unending economic growth, mega-infrastructure, and meeting consumerist demand with no consideration of impacts and supply-side constraints (including environmental). Its hold on Ladakhi policies and programmes is vice-like, with little genuine attempt to provide a meaningful voice to Ladakhis themselves.



Nubra, also called Dumra, is a historical region of Ladakh that is currently administered as a subdivision and a tehsil in the Leh district Shutterstock

Since 2023, an increasing number of residents have protested the failure of the central government to fulfil promises like providing Ladakh autonomy in the form of statehood or under the Constitution's 6th Schedule, the latest being a mass rally and total closure of Ladakh on 3 February 2024, and a 21-day fast by local educationist, inventor and entrepreneur Sonam Wangchuk. There are real fears that local institutions, such as the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, will lose control over land allocation. With major Indian and foreign corporations eyeing profit-making opportunities in Ladakh, these fears are not exaggerated.

Whether tourism goes how it has gone in so many favoured "destinations" worldwide, metaphorically killing the golden goose, or can be transformed into something truly beneficial to the region and visitors will depend on how these larger contexts play out. Meanwhile, there has to be continued action and advocacy for the alternative approaches described above, including the positive elements of the Tourism Policy. These issues will be at the centre of a series of events organised by local civil society groups and tour operators in mid-2024, including a Vikalp Sangam that brings together all alternative approaches.

Ashish Kothari is an Indian environmentalist and author. He is a founding member of Kalpavriksh.

Kunzang Deachen is from Ladakh and joined the Local Futures Ladakh team in the summer of 2019.

Ladakh Leh Sustainability

How a Simple \$250 Walmart cfd Investment Can Benefit You

CPX | Sponsored

Blood sugar level 400? Try This Ayurvedic Method.

The Care Lab | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Crossout: New Apocalyptic MMO

Check out the new Crossout 2.0 for free. Discover PvP and PvE in our upgraded Action MMO. Countless unique Vehicles, PvE and PvP, Trading. Are you ready? Destroy vehicles your opponent took hours to craft and enjoy. Join now for Free

Crossout | Sponsored

[Play Now](#)

See How a \$249 Walmart CFD Investment Can Benefit You (Apply Today)

CPX | Sponsored

High Sugar Level up to 400? Don't Worry its Easily Manageable.

The Care Lab | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Best Adjustable Beds 2024 (See Prices)

Adjustable Smart Beds For Sale | Search Ads | Sponsored

[Search Now](#)

Airports Say Don't Use This Type Of Suitcase

investing.com | Sponsored

All-New Small Volvo for Seniors (Take a Look at the Prices)

Volvo Cars | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Fully Redesigned 2024 Dodge Ram 1500 Is Finaly Here (Take a Look)

All-New Dodge Ram | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)