

The Rufford Small Grants Foundation

Final Report

Congratulations on the completion of your project that was supported by The Rufford Small Grants Foundation.

We ask all grant recipients to complete a Final Report Form that helps us to gauge the success of our grant giving. The Final Report must be sent in **word format** and not PDF format or any other format. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work. Please be as honest as you can in answering the questions – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please complete the form in English and be as clear and concise as you can. Please note that the information may be edited for clarity. We will ask for further information if required. If you have any other materials produced by the project, particularly a few relevant photographs, please send these to us separately.

Please submit your final report to jane@rufford.org.

Thank you for your help.

Josh Cole, Grants Director

Grant Recipient Details	
Your Name	Sunita Pradhan
Project Title	Tourism In The Red Panda Habitats Of Red Panda In The Singhalila And The Neora Valley Neational Parks Of Darjeeling Himalayas – An Assessment For Appropriate Interventions
Rsg Reference	Renizo Lepcha, Rebecca Pradhan, Dr. Amritraj Chritie Williams
Reporting Period	1.6 Months
Amount Of Grant	& 6000
Your Email Address	Sunita.Pradhan@Atree.Org
Date Of This Report	3.8.2014

1. Please indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
1. Document the current status of supply demand of tourism in the Singhalila National Park			Fully Achieved	We were able to generate a baseline information on the demand and supply of tourism in the Singhalila Trek Route, Darjeeling. This baseline information produced through this project can be confidently used for further research, monitoring and interventions.
2. Assess tourism's contribution to the local economy in Singhalila			Fully achieved	Here too, we have a baseline information on the employment generated, tourism contribution in income of the communities, leakages and other multiplier effects of tourism in Singhalila.
3. What regulations govern tourism in Singhalila and Neora?			Fully Achieved	A review of the Indian Tourism Policy, Ecotourism policy and specific policies of the mountain states of India were done to understand policy implementation in these remote mountain areas.
3. Investigate the challenges in developing a sustainable tourism strategy in the study areas			Fully Achieved	Extensive consultations were done with the stakeholders to understand the challenges in developing a sustainable tourism in the Singhalila Trek Route
4. Undertake a scoping study of tourism in Neora			Fully Achieved	Unlike the detailed study in Singhalila, a scoping study of tourism was done for Neora which gave an opportunity to understand the issues and challenges of tourism in Upper Neora Red Panda habitats.

2. Please explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled (if relevant).

We fortunately didn't come across any unforeseen difficulties in implementing the project.

3. Briefly describe the three most important outcomes of your project.

Three most important Outcomes of the Project:

3.1 Putting words into action: Follow up on the action points of the Strategy Plan to Conserve the Red panda, *Ailurus fulgens*, in the Darjeeling Himalayas.

“Tourism” was one of the identified threats in the Red panda habitats of Darjeeling Himalayas. To understand and reduce the impacts of tourism in the Red panda habitats was one of the action points in the draft strategy developed for management and conservation of Red panda in the Darjeeling Himalayas (Pradhan 2012a), through a project supported by Rufford Small Grants - 2006. The present project followed up on the action point of the then developed Strategy Plan for Conservation of Red panda in the Darjeeling Himalayas.

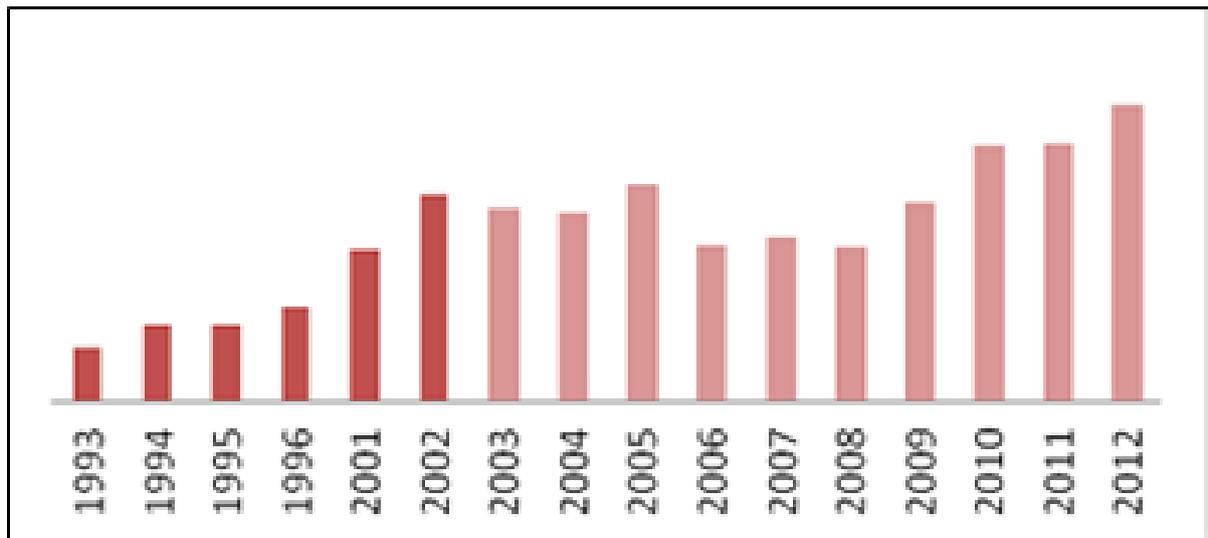


Figure 1. Tourism growth trend in Singhalila

It is also worth mentioning here that the present project is a pioneering effort towards understanding and analysing an identified threat “Tourism “in the Red panda habitats of Singhalila and Neora in Darjeeling Himalayas. This will in future help to develop clear and explicit linkages between community development programs and threat reduction (Alers *et al* 2007).

The most important question the present project sought to answer was about the challenges in developing a responsible and sustainable nature tourism strategy in Singhalila, which contributed to conservation, local livelihood and local economy.

It was found that tourism in Singhalila was growing at a decadal growth rate of 54% (Figure 1). Tourism in Singhalila had several challenges in developing a responsible and sustainable nature tourism, amongst which were very basic and obvious issues, but were actual root causes and impediments which needed first line interventions.

The issues which are briefly discussed below, came up very strongly across all consultations we held, survey results and visitor feed backs.

3.1.1 Local Tour Guide capacity building

There were around 100 local guides and porters from the region, some of them registered with the Forest Department and others with the Guide Association. Despite the local tour guides and porters being mandatory and important components of tourism in Singhalila, the the highly undermined role of nature guides in promoting responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila, was no less than a root cause to tourism being a threat to the conservation value of Singhalila.

This had been hampering the delivery of quality service and information to tourists, which were reflected in the visitor feed backs, we got during the present study. This issue also strongly came up during all the community consultations and was also seconded by the Travel entrepreneurs during the meetings and interviews. The inadequate service quality of the local guides was grossly hampering business of the travel entrepreneurs, rendering tourism to Singhalila unsustainable.

3.1.2 Inadequate Welfare of the local tour guides

The local guides had been operating in Singhalila for the last 15 years. The guides and porters operating was an unorganised sector and did not have any personal safety coverage, incentives and logistic facilities like basic accommodation during their trips to Singhalila, in place. Proper welfare and adequate incentives was important also to encourage them to improve their skill and increase their livelihood opportunities.

It was found that local guides who were educated and self trained got the same pay packet, which an untrained indifferent guide got. Hence this issue of incentives was an opportunity to encourage the guides to be trained for their profession, where the pay packets to better trained guides would be better than for the ones not trained.

3.1.3 Garbage Management

Garbage accumulation and littering due to tourism in all destinations, trekking trails and some wilderness areas in Singhalila came up as a pertinent issue (Figure 2). Visitors showed the greatest dissatisfaction in garbage management of Singhalila, with as much as 89 percent of the visitors thinking that the garbage management in the Singhalila Trekking Route was 'Very Bad'. As much as 78 percent and 62 percent were 'Willing to Pay' more for a garbage management system in place and for better guide services respectively in Singhalila. This indicated an urgency to respond to the visitor feed backs for sustenance of tourism to the Singhalila, where the livelihood dependence of the local communities was as high as 70 percent. Currently no system was in place to address **these** issues, albeit oft and on cleaning efforts by local NGOs.



Figure 2. Waste dumped in the habitat of the rare *Primula rotundifolia* in *Rhododendron campanulatum* forest at Sandakphu (Photo and information credit: Upakar Rai, Darjeeling).

3.1.4 Regulations required

Regulation of Food Prices along the entire Singhalila Trek Route was expressed as a major need. This was an issue with the local hoteliers of different destinations and also with the tourists, that food prices varied from destination to destination and also from hotels in the same destinations, bringing about unhealthy competition and conflict in the community. High food prices in some of destinations were one of the major complaints of visitors visiting Singhalila.

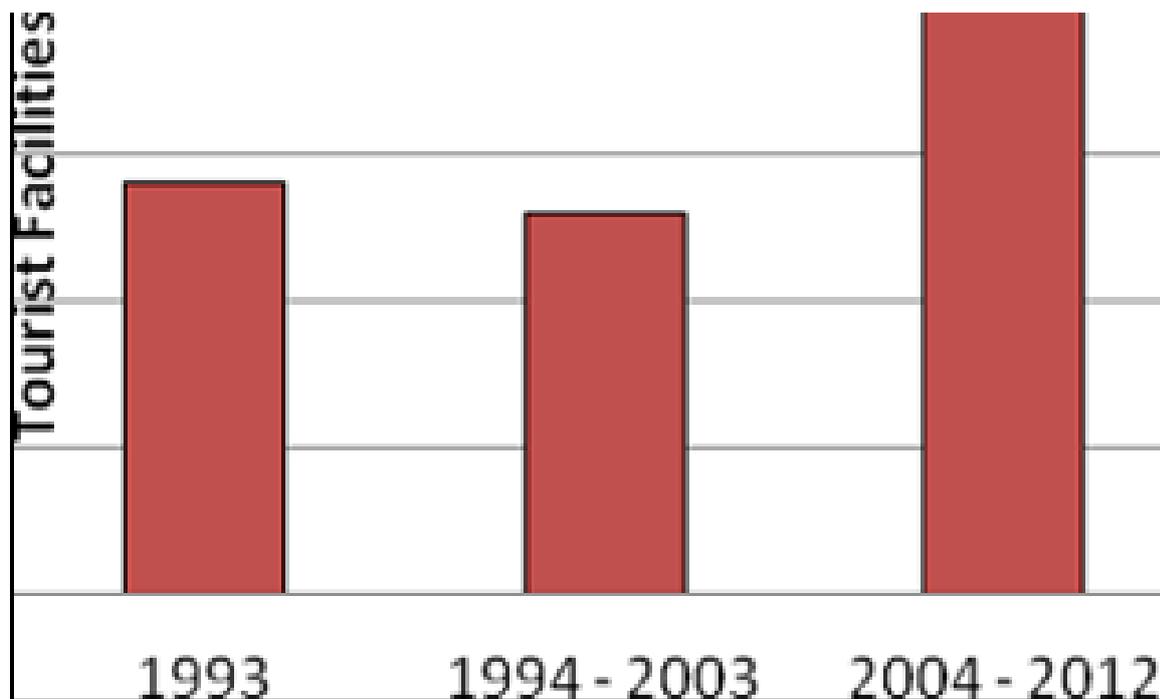


Figure 3. Tourist's facilities in Singhalila(1993- 2012)

Singhalila Trek Route has couple of circuits. However, there was little organisation or regulation as to how these are informed to the tourists who can choose circuits and have an itinerary. In such cases, the entire trek depended on the whims and convenience of the local guides as to where the tourists are taken, and which destinations can become the stopovers.

This was impacting local business in the destinations, and becoming a major concern, even leading to conflicts within the community of destinations.

3.1.5 Resource extraction and Firewood use

Firewood was still the predominantly used source of energy along this Singhalila Trek route, an important issue which was thought to be looked into. Most of the high-altitude extraction happened from Red panda habitat, either it be on the Nepal side of the border or on the Indian side.

3.1.6 Change in tourists' profile and concerns:

A change in the profile of the tourists over the years was noticed in Singhalila. The present tourists were more Leisure Seeking with greater demands for vehicles, rooms with attached bathrooms, geyser, hot water bags, and other modern facilities as compared to the minimal trekkers of the early 1990s. This could have an implication on the conservation and environment of Singhalila and would require further research and monitoring.

And the hoteliers had already started responding to the demands of the tourists with plans to expand, construct attached bathrooms, and install geysers, heaters as demand. Keeping in view the culture and fragile environment of the region, the type of infrastructure being developed was a matter of concern.

3.1.7 Development of tourism induced infrastructure

Development of tourism induced infrastructures such as hotels, and lodges had increased over the years in Singhalila (Figure 3). It has been seen that 46 percent of these infrastructure came up between 2004-2012, with as much as 50 percent established in the last 2-3 years (2010-2012), with expansion of tourism to new locations (Pradhan 2013).

3.1.8 Forest Department /Tourism Department /other stakeholder - Community relationship: need for better communication and interactions

The community strongly felt a disconnect with other stakeholders such as the Forest Department, Tourism Departments and the travel agents and perceived that their contribution to tourism in Singhalila was minimal.

3.1.9 Inadequate interpretation and conservation education of the icon species –“Red panda”

This was yet another aspect of Ecotourism which got strong negative feed backs from the visitors of Singhalila. The mechanism as to how the visitors to Singhalila would be conveyed

The conservation value of the place was inadequate, albeit the interpretation centre of the Forest Department. In this regard, visitor surveys showed that 48% of the visitors did not know or were not informed that Singhalila had Red panda – the icon species of the Landscape – which speaks about the conservation message being imparted to the visitors. Further, it was also found that only 34% of visitors were willing to pay more Conservation of the Red panda, which spoke about the contribution of tourism to conservation of Singhalila. Hence, these were issue which needed to be looked into for tourism to make its contribution to conservation of the Singhalila Landscape.

3.2 Engagement and knowledge mobilization: Awareness building of local communities for development and promotion of responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila

Engagement of the project was a key priority to make the research and its outcome as relevant and useful to the society as possible. We engaged the local communities at all stages of the research project (Figures 4-13).



Figure 4. Local community being interviewed. Figure 5. Tourists providing their feedbacks



Figure 6. Consultation at Dhotrey and Rimbick before implementation of the research project



Figure 7. Participants in Rimbick. Figure 8. Consultation in Progress in Rimbick



Figure 9. Participants of Consultation Meeting. Figure 10. Meeting in progress in Dhotrey



Figure 11. Participants at the Manbhanjyang. Figure 12. District level Meeting in progress in Darjeeling meeting



We shared the findings of the yearlong study to the communities. The purpose was to share the findings and validate our findings, but the meetings served more as an awareness building exercise, by positively influencing communities' knowledge of their own resources, livelihood, and place. As the research findings was able to provide leads, the communities were better able to share their insights on issues which strongly stood as challenges to developing responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila.

These issues along with our own research findings were then shared with other stakeholders such as Department of Forests, Department of Tourism, Gorkha Territorial Administration, prominent Travel houses, Guides Associations, Transport Associations, Hotel Associations of Singhalila and local NGOs.

The findings would also soon be shared with greater audience through publication in scientific journal.

3.3 Engagement and commitment to Action: Short Term Action Plan drawn up – as a start to address the challenges to developing a responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila.

During our district level meeting and engagement with governmental organisations such as Department of Forests, Department of Tourism, Gorkha Territorial Administration, Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, prominent Travel houses, Guides Associations, Transport Associations, Hotel Associations of Singhalila and local NGOs, the challenges issues to tourism in Singhalila, along

with the findings of the yearlong research in Singhalila were shared to illicit discussions, to inform and enhance informed decision-making.

The stakeholders were supportive and committed, which led to drawing up a Short Term Action Plan for development of responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila. As a follow up of the action points, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute is already in talks with ATREE to kick start the capacity building program for nature guides.

This engagement and collaboration garnered during the project, is also a significant outcome of the project. This will ensure sustenance of the initiatives taken by ATREE, through this project.

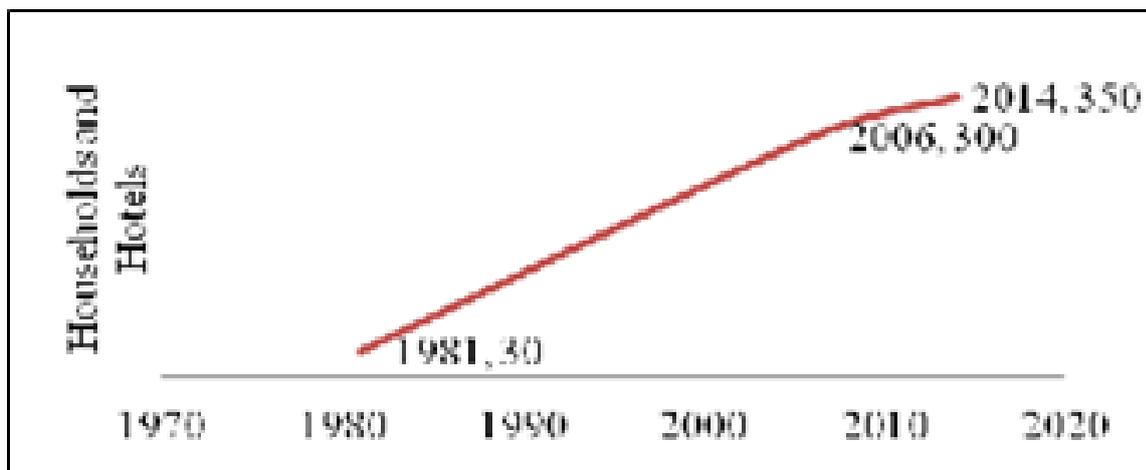


Figure 14. Development (houses, hotels and restaurants) of Lava

3.4 Tourism in Neora

Upper Neora Valley which consists of 45% of the total Neora Valley National Park, range from 2200 – 3100 m and supports two broad vegetation types namely the Lower temperate evergreen forest (2200 - 2800 m) and the Upper temperate Broad-leafed deciduous forest (>2800 – 3100). The lower temperate forest is, dominated by Oak species such as *Quercus lineata*, *Q. lamellosa* and *Q. pacyphylla* while the Upper temperate forest is dominated by deciduous tree species like the Birch (*Ulnus utilis*), *Sorbus* sp. *Acer* and *Rhododendron* spp. And these forests in Upper Neora forms one the most pristine habitat of Red panda.

Tourism in Upper Neora is at a scale much lower than in Singhalila (Table 1). However, the likelihood of growth in tourism to Upper Neora Valley is suspected to be possible with the nearest town of Lava (14 kms away) being the hub of tourism in the area.

Hence, a scoping of the current scenario of tourism in Neora was done. It was seen that there has been substantive growth and development of Lava over the last 20 years (Figure 14). Household numbers in 2006 and 2014, includes as many as 34 hotels, and 19 restaurants catering to tourists. Increase in tourist flow was also seen in Lava (Table 1). However, it was also seen that only about 1.14 percent of the tourists visiting Lava were actually going to Upper Neora for their day trips and treks.

Table 1. Tourism growth in Lava, Neora and Singhalila, Darjeeling

	1996	2006	2013
Lava	No data	204009(approx.)	28500 (approx)
Neora	No data	349	1326
Singhalila	2700	4419	8415

The low visitation to Upper Neora which supports a pristine red panda habitat, is mainly due very little infrastructure development as proper roads, accommodation facilities, shops etc. The visitors visiting Neora has to make do in the Forest camps within the Park. International visitors are not given permits from the Lava Wild Life range office. Permits for trekking in Upper Neora is issued from the office of the Divisional Forest Officer, in Jalpaiguri. This has largely checked international trekkers to Upper Neora. Despite this, as can be seen in Table 1. there has been an increasing trend in day visitors, whole day trekkers and halting trekkers to Upper Neora (Figure 15).

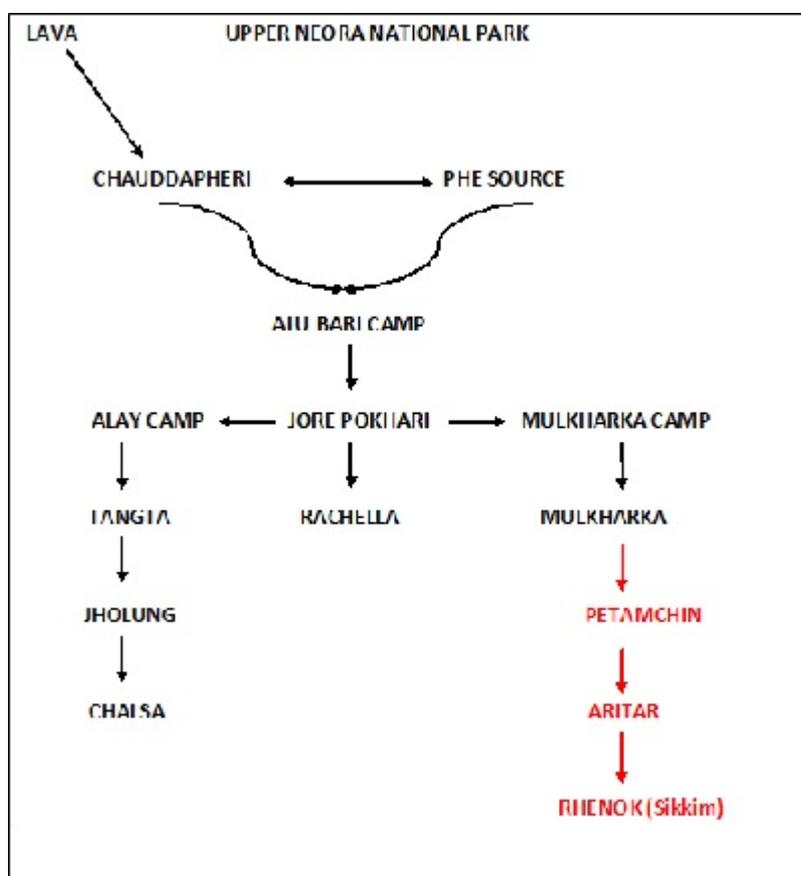


Figure 15. Schematic trekking map of Upper Neora

Local community perception indicate that they see a huge potential in tourism and as much as 77 percent would opt for tourism as livelihood if given a chance. Tourism as livelihood stood as a second choice only after Government Service, which was secure.

The Tourism entrepreneurs saw opportunities in having and increasing new products and attractions for tourists, out of which one of them was opening up the Neora Valley Trekking path and make Rachella – one of the highest points within Upper Neora at 3100 m.

Rachella is the trijunction between Sikkim, West Bengal and Bhutan and can be a huge attraction to tourists. On the other side, Rachella and its adjoining areas are also important red panda habitats (Pradhan 2012 a).

There was a huge demand and pressure on the Forest Department in this matter from the communities which had the chances of creating conflicts. The livelihood demand of the communities came with a huge risk of damaging the habitats in Upper Neora with the flow of tourists and associated infrastructure growth.

With no adequate regulations in place for responsible and sustainable nature tourism in place for Neora, currently, the restrictive measure taken so far by the Forest Department seems appropriate for now. It would be premature to open the Upper Neora Trek without prior preparatory measures for responsible and sustainable nature tourism.

3.5 Conclusion

The main objective of the present project was to understand patterns of tourism-induced contribution to the conservation and local livelihood along with the challenges of developing a responsible and sustainable nature tourism in Singhalila and Neora Valley National Parks, both significant habitats of Red panda. Singhalila was studied in detail while a scoping of issues in Neora was done.

As the present project fulfills one of the enlisted action points of the Conservation Strategy of Red panda in Darjeeling Himalayas, and the information that has been generated was required to support location-specific mitigation interventions, as well as provide inputs for development of suitable tourism policies in the region. Some of the pertinent root causes as challenges to development of responsible and sustainable nature tourism in the region has been discussed above. As a way forward, some of these location-specific issues would now be targeted as follow ups, to mitigate the threats from tourism in Singhalila and its Red panda habitats.

4. Briefly describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefitted from the project (if relevant).

Engagement of the local communities was a key priority to make the research and its outcome as relevant and useful to the society as possible. We engaged the local communities at all stages of the research project (Figures 4-13). The Research Associate who was involved in the project was a local boy who got to build his capacity and knowledge through his involvement in the project.

We shared the findings of the yearlong study to the communities, through a number of consultation meetings and focal group meetings during and before the project.

Benefits to Local communities:

1. Sharing the findings of the project served as an Awareness for the local communities about tourism and its current status in the region.
2. Our meetings with the local Authorities provided a platform to the local communities where they were able to share their issues with the concerned Authorities during the meetings organised during the project.
3. The first few follow up of this project on the ground would be to Train Local Guides and have a Singhalila Garbage Management Committee in place to initiate garbage management in

the Singhalila at the earliest. These were the obvious and the most overarching challenges to developing a sustainable and responsible tourism in Singhalila, where approximately 70 % of the local communities depended on tourism as livelihood.

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Certainly yes. The present project which was a pioneering study on tourism in the Singhalila Landscape and Upper Neora, for the time was able to come up with a plethora of information through which we were able to evaluate the challenges to building and practicing “Ecotourism” in the true sense in these remote mountain areas. We found tourism in Singhalila had not yet been able to fulfil the envisioned objective of an effective conservation tool, thereby contributing very little to the conservation of the Red panda, the icon species of the Landscape and region.

With these finds, we would want to follow up on some of the urgent interventions needed in Singhalila. While we do this, we would also like to further investigate the contribution of “Ecotourism” in some of the other Protected Areas in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. Hence, we would like to scale up the work, for policy recommendations, keeping in view Mountain tourism in these fragile Mountain Protected Areas.

6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?

We have been sharing the results of the work through meetings, reports and communications to the concerned stakeholders and authorities. We will write popular articles and scientific papers in peer reviewed journals.

7. Timescale: Over what period was the RSG used? How does this compare to the anticipated or actual length of the project?

The fund was received in Jan - February 2013. We started work in the field from April 2013, after getting an appropriate local Research Associate. We completed our work and Reporting by end of July 2014. Hence RSG was used over a period of 15 – 16 working months. The length and reporting of the project fall within the stipulated project period of 15 months (April 2013 – July 2014).

8. Budget: Please provide a breakdown of budgeted versus actual expenditure and the reasons for any differences. All figures should be in £ sterling, indicating the local exchange rate used.

Item	Budgeted Amount	Actual Amount	Difference	Comments
Field equipment (1gps unit) Computer	173.00	191.07	-18.08 - 630.84	1 Computer on permission and approval from RSG.
Field assistant (2) Honarium @50 x 15 months	1500.00	1746.94	- 246.94	We hired on good Research Associate at 145.6/month for 12 months
Food and Accommodation @8/day x 200 days	1600.00	931.89	668.11	
Travel@70/months x 15	1,050.00	967.91	81.11	
Communication@17/month	255.00	171.48	83.53	

Stationery	270.00	171.48	123.96	
Workshops, meetings and information sharing	1.152.00	1212.83	-60.83	
Total Rate/ GBP= 83.43	6000	5998.99	1.01	

9. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

1. While some of the most urgent issues are to be tackled in the field as appropriate interventions,
2. There is also a need for scaling up the project to other Mountain Protected Areas in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas so that we are able to make policy recommendations at the local, regional and National level.

10. Did you use the RSGF logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the RSGF receive any publicity during the course of your work?

Yes. We used the RSGF logos in all the banners of our meetings, all communications to the stakeholders and Reports.

11. Any other comments?

The involvement in this project has been an enlightening experience. It has been eye opening in terms of getting to know the various nuances of tourism labelled as Ecotourism, along with the tourism policies, tourism management and governance in these fragile natural area, where some of the icon species such as the Red panda, Hornbills and lesser cats are struggling to survive. We would surely like to continue the work by contributing to the mitigation to the root causes of the challenges in developing sustainable and responsible nature tourism in Singhalila. While at the same time we would also like to scale up the work to other Protected Areas in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas.