

## The Rufford Foundation

### Final Report

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Congratulations on the completion of your project that was supported by The Rufford 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](mailto:jane@rufford.org).

Thank you for your help.

**Josh Cole, Grants Director**

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| Grant Recipient Details |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Your name               | Sunita Pradhan  |
| Project title           | Tourism in the Red panda habitats of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas: assessing and implementing appropriate strategies |
| RSG reference           | 18039-B   |
| Reporting period        | 18 months from October 2015   |
| Amount of grant         | £10000  |
| Your email address      | Sunita.pradhan@atree.org  |
| Date of this report     | 26/10/2017  |

**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. Assessing challenges to sustainable nature tourism in two other Red Panda habitats of Barsey Sanctuary in Sikkim Himalayas and Neora Valley in Darjeeling Himalaya and                 |              |                    |                | Couldn't strictly follow the timeline due to various logistic problems in the field. In Darjeeling a political agitation started which hindered holding the last consultation meeting in Neora Valley. |
| 2. Strengthening interpretation and education activities of Singhalila to enhance visitor experience, and positively influence their knowledge about the conservation value of Singhalila |              |                    |                | Achieved in scheduled time. The Interpretation materials produced were handed over to the Forest Department, Singhalila National Park.   |

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

Tourism in the study region is a booming business and it was always difficult to get people for meetings when we wanted. It took time to good mutually agreeable dates for the meetings. This brought about changes in the following the timeline of the project.

There was an instance when the roads got blocked due to landslides following heavy rain which resulted in an extended stay in the field.

A political agitation started in Darjeeling from 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017, leading to unrest, firing, arsons, strikes, armed forces patrolling. This was completely unforeseen and this led to cancellation of the last consultation meeting in Lava – Neora Valley, scheduled on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017. We had however completed our field surveys, data collection and meetings with key informants. The strikes and unrest still continues which has not made the meetings possible – leading to the delay in reporting and incompleteness of one of our goals of drafting a participatory local action plan for tourism in Neora.

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

1. Outcome 1: Strengthening Interpretation, and awareness to enhance visitor experience, influence their knowledge about the conservation value of Singhalila and its iconic species – Red Panda, something which had not received attention.

Activities undertaken:

Developed Interpretation Materials

12 interpretation posters were developed for Singhalila (Figure 1), for which a substantial amount of research, expert consultations and networking for good photographs and information was done. These posters were then designed, printed, mounted and framed. Apart from the main objective of educating the visitors, the team working on developing the posters had many lessons and experiences to learn.

11 posters on various facets of Singhalila such as the history, people, fauna (red panda and birds, flora (*Rhododendron* and ground flora), Mountain peaks and destinations along with a poster on acknowledgements were made.

#### **Handing over of the Interpretation Poster Boards**

The posters were mounted. The poster boards were handed over to the Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal in a function on the 8th September 2016 (Figure 1). The function was attended by 45 people representing various stakeholders viz. Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal, Gorkha Territorial Administration Tourism Department, Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Guides Associations, Hotelier Association, NGOs and local community representatives. Dr Sunita Pradhan, ATREE delivered a presentation on 'Revisiting Singalila for Tourism opportunities', a talk which highlighted the ecological and cultural importance of the Singhalila landscape and how this landscape had witnessed an exponential growth of tourists, and highlighted some of the key challenges to sustainable and responsible tourism in Singhalila.

The highlight of the programme was the handing over of 12 poster boards to Mr A. K. Pradhan, Addl. DFO, Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal for the Nature Interpretation Center of the Forest Department at Manebhanjyang. The unveiling of the boards was done by the Addl. DFO and Mr. Gopal Lama, Secretary, Gorkha Territorial Administration, Department of Tourism. The communication materials comprise of information on the Singalila's history, people, flora, fauna (red panda and birds) mountain ranges and destinations.



Figure 1. The Additional Division Forest Officer, Forest Dept. unveiling the Poster Boards

#### Local Press and Media Coverage:

The event was covered by local media posted in ATREE Facebook and Darjeeling Times.

<http://darjeelintimes.com/strengthening-interpretation-of-singalilanational-park/>

Atree Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ATREE.org/posts/1267990069891602>

2. Outcome 2: A better understanding of the practices, contributions and challenges of tourism across red panda landscape in states of West Bengal and Sikkim. While our experiences of tourism across PAs holding red panda has shown very site specific challenges, issues that emerge as common across the PAs assessed so far are inadequate human resource development, strong need for strengthening regulations, interpretation and awareness.

#### Activities undertaken

i). Field work: household surveys - Information on the current status of tourism in Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary and Neora Valley National Park and Singhalila National Park in West Bengal (Figure 2) was done. As many 12 surrounding villages in Barsey and two villages in Neora Valley and 22 villages in Singhalila National Park (previous Rufford Grant) were surveyed. The basis of these surveys were to understand the contribution of tourism to the local community, conservation, understand tourism regulations in place and practice along with an assessment of visitor experience to these Protected Areas. Key informants like forest personnel, local guides, hotel owners and knowledgeable community representatives were

interviewed. Local business like shops, restaurants, homestays and hotels were also included in the survey. All the three protected areas are mainstay habitats of red panda.



Figure 2. Map showing Project sites: Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, Sikkim, Singalila National Park and Neora Valley National Park, West Bengal

ii.) Transboundary treks: All the protected areas under study are transboundary in nature sharing borders with either Nepal or Bhutan. Most of these areas are being promoted for tourism. Hence for better understanding of transboundary tourism in these areas holding significant red panda habitat, two treks along the Indo-Nepal border in Barsey (Figure 3) and another across Upper Neora which shares borders with Sikkim and Bhutan (Figure4) were done during this project period and along the Indo-Nepal border in the Singhila National Park during the previous project period.

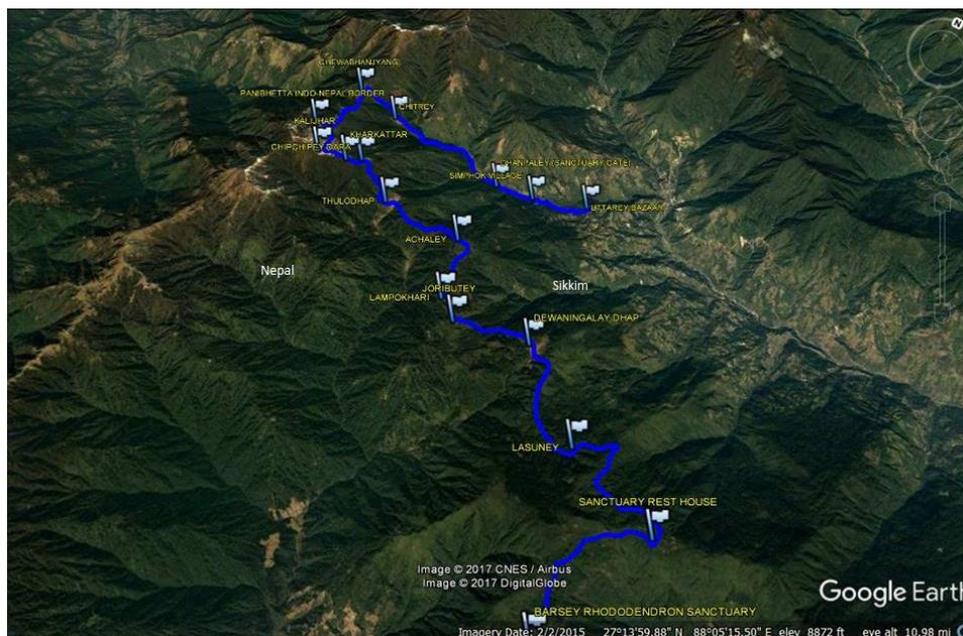


Figure 4. Trek route along Indo-Nepal border in the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary (Red Panda habitat)

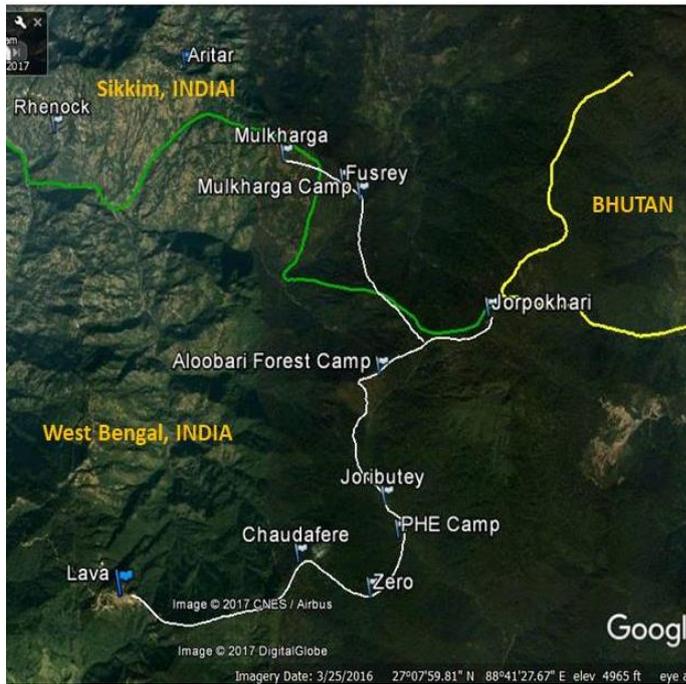


Figure 5. Trek along West Bengal – Sikkim and Bhutan border in the Neora Valley National Park (Red Panda habitat)

3. Outcome 3: Engagement of key stakeholders to understand challenges and opportunities of eco-tourism in Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, Sikkim – to draft a local participatory tourism plan for Barsey.

i). Consultation meetings: Sikkim also has a very keen state policy for tourism which supports the required atmosphere for tourism growth. A community consultation meeting on tourism in Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary was held in Okhrey in May 2017 to discuss emerging issues challenging the development of sustainable nature in tourism in Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary (Figure 6).



Fig 5. Consultation in Okhrey, Barsey

ATREE Facebook post on the Consultation meeting (June 6<sup>th</sup> 2017):

<https://www.facebook.com/ATREE.org/photos/a.980256835331595.1073741828.191805677510052/1541582415865698/>

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

The local communities got involved in many stages of the project. The Research Associate Uden Lahmu Bhutia, who worked for the project is a local student from Sikkim whose understanding about the socio-ecological systems in her region has been enhanced, she has also been trained in GIS application during the project period. She attended a Training Program on Application of Remote Sensing, GIS & GPS in various fields was held from 25<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> July 2016 at GTAD laboratory based in Aaranyak, Guwahati, Assam, India. She has been trained in research methodologies, data entry and preliminary analysis and presentation. She also gained financially from her remuneration from the project. She is proving to a promising local conservationist.

Other team members - Roshan Pradhan, another Research Associate from the previous Project in Singhalila is a local from Singhalila National Park and his skills and understanding of local conservation issues have been sharpened. He was engaged in the Project to guide Euden in her work also for him to gain a comparative experience between the Protected Areas in Singhalila and Neora in West Bengal and Barsey in Sikkim, so that it widens his knowledge and perspectives. Roshan was made of a part of the team doing the transboundary trek in Barsey Sanctuary in Sikkim.

All the field assistants used were educated youths from the local community who gained new perspectives and awareness about "ecotourism" being currently practiced in the region.

The project has a strong inbuilt component of consultation with the local community members. The project held consultation meetings where we presented our findings, held in-depth discussions to better understand issues pertaining to development of sustainable tourism in the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary and draft a participatory Tourism Plan for Barsey. We have done this extensively in our previous projects in Singhalila National Park.

We followed up on the findings of our work on tourism in Singhalila National Park supported by Rufford Foundation, and having identified the need to strengthen local human resource capacity, we conducted a yearlong capacity building training program for the local nature guides in Singhalila National Park with support from Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) through a Train the Trainers (TOT) model (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Local nature guides trained in Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling

During this Project, we gave of the trained guides – Mongia Kambache the opportunity to visit Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary in Sikkim and the Indo-Nepal trek from there as an exposure visit.

## 5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Yes there are plans to continue the work. Our work so far has generated the much needed sociological information on tourism. It is being realised that corresponding ecological information on the icon species – red panda and its habitat would now be required for a holistic socio-ecological evidence to allow detection of trends and measurement of ecological changes brought about by tourism in the area. Hence, the work that would be taken up would be ecological assessment of red panda distribution and habitat status, using field survey methods and geospatial mapping and thus get holistic picture of the socio-ecological contribution of tourism in Singhalila National Park, keeping Red Panda as the conservation target.

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

1. By communicating the work through local and social media.
2. By sharing the findings with local community and stakeholders through reports, presentations and meetings.
3. By writing popular articles.
4. By writing scientific paper in peer reviewed journals.
5. By presenting our findings in local, regional and international conferences.

## 7. Timescale: Over what period was The Rufford Foundation grant used? How does this compare to the anticipated or actual length of the project?

This was an 18 months project and was supposed to end on March 2017. The project finally ended in June 2017 which is an extension of 3 months. 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017 was the date given by the community for a consultation meeting in Lava, Darjeeling but on the very day a political agitation started which held us back from holding the meeting. The situation in Darjeeling till date is still not conducive with an ongoing political strike and a total close down of everything which has been almost 100 days when this report is being written.

## 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   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|--|
| Research Associate                 | 2718            | 2718          | 0          |  |
| Accommodation for RA               | 726             | 726           | 0          |  |
| Field Hospitality-Food and Lodging | 3220            | 3425          | -205       | Supported Uden for her GIS training from this head |
| Travel                             | 2422            | 2155          | 267        | Supported Uden for her GIS training from this head |

|                         |     |     |     |   |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|---|
| Workshop and Meeting    | 591 | 450 | 141 |   |
| Interpretation material | 591 | 591 | 0   | Left with 203£ which we would like to use for the pending meeting in Lava, Neora Valley, Darjeeling |

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

1. Publication of all our findings and work so far supported by Rufford Foundation. We have data and information from three high altitude Pas in Darjeeling- Sikkim Himalaya.
2. Look forward to holding the consultation meeting in Lava, Neora Valley once the political situation in Darjeeling normalises.
3. Networking with the managers and other relevant stakeholders for taking up action on action points in the local Participatory plans that were drafted.
4. Ecological assessment of red panda distribution, habitat and their status in Singhalila National Park.
5. Continue with implementation of appropriate strategies such as human resource development, capacity building, strengthening interpretation and awareness – which are some of the crucial challenges in developing sustainable tourism in the red panda landscape of Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya.

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

Yes. We used it in all the posters we made and handed over to the Forest Department for their interpretation Centre in Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling. We used it in all our presentations and banners.

**11. Please provide a full list of all the members of your team and briefly what was their role in the project.**

Dr. Sunita Pradhan: team leader conceptualised the project, formulated the methodologies, trained and guided the field personnel, visited field sites, met volunteers and local community members, conducted the meetings, data analysis and report writing. Was involved in all the activities related to strengthening of Interpretation in Singhalila which included research for the posters, collection of the photographs, visiting experts, communicating with the designers, communicating with and inviting Govt. officials, media and looking into logistics. She was also guiding project staff and resource persons on the training of the local guides in Singhalila. She is also responsible for fund raising to sustain the effort initiated for promoting sustainable and responsible tourism in the Red Panda Landscape of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya.

Dr. Sarala Khaling: Director of ATREE – Eastern Himalaya, facilitated all the efforts in strengthening factors needed for sustainable and responsible nature tourism in the Red Panda landscape of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya. She attended community meetings, guide trainings as a resource person, researched for the posters and facilitated the entire process of constructing them to handing over the poster boards to the Wildlife Division, Forest Department, Government of West Bengal. She is a crucial guiding team member.

Ms. Euden Lahmu Bhutia (MSc): Research associate was involved in all the field work, household surveys, interviews, coordinate for meetings, went for the transboundary treks, data entry, preliminary analysis, report writing and presentations.

Mr. Roshan Pradhan: A local with a Master degree, from Singhalila National Park, was the research associate from the previous project supported by Rufford Foundation. He helped and guided Euden in this project. He made the Barsey Indo-Nepal transboundary trek and helped in giving a comparative perspective of this trek with Singhalila. He was accompanied by one of the promising local guide trained by our Guide Training Program, to the Barsey Indo-Nepal trek as an exposure visit to help his develop his views tourism and conservation.

Mr. Rohit George: He travelled to Singhalila to take photographs for the posters and also designed the posters.

Mr. Saibal Sengupta: He is an integral part of our local guide training program. He as a Resource person trains the local guides of Singhalila National Park on birding, flower and other fauna identification.

Mr. Deependra Sunwar from WWF India is a volunteering resource person who helps us and the local guides in identification of Rhododendron species.

Mr Mongia Kambache: is a very diligent local guide who was trained during our Guide training program in Singhalila National Park. He was part of the team who trekked the Indo-Nepal trek route in Barsey. He brought in his perspective on transboundary tourism in Barsey, while it was also our intension to expose him to tourism and conservation in other National Parks.

Mr. Sandhi Mitra a conservation biologist volunteered to help us in data collection during the transboundary trek in Neora Valley.

Community Members who closely worked with us:

Mr. Phipraj Subba – Home Stay Owner at Okhrey. He was the key contact who helped us voluntarily and was involved in coordinating our meetings, interviews, treks and stays. Mr. Chosang Sherpa, Mr. Sangay Sherpa, Mr. Phinjo Sherpa, Mr. Dawa Sherpa worked with us as field assistants in various villages of Bharsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. Amos Lepcha, Forest Employee was a key person in Lava who helped us

voluntarily to coordinate our meetings, interviews and surveys, treks and stays. They got us in contact with various important community members.

Karma Namgyal Bhutia (B.A Hons.), Karma Choda Bhutia (B.A Hons.) were students from Sikkim University who volunteered to help us in our field survey. We looked into their food and stay during the volunteering period.

There are a number of Forest Department officers who helped us by sharing their data, information and management plans. Mr. Dorjee Lhatoo, the famous mountaineer helped us in writing the history of Singhalila and mountains viewed from Singhalila for the posters we made for the National Park.

## **12. Any other comments?**

We were not able to draft a participatory tourism plan in Neora because of a political agitation which started in Darjeeling. We will however hold the meeting once situation normalises. I am sure we will get very interesting inputs on the impacts of such political unrests on conservation, tourism and livelihood of people in these remote areas holding rich biodiversity and icon species like the red panda.