

Tourism in the Red Panda Habitats of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya: assessing and implementing appropriate strategies (18039-B)



REPORT ON STRENGTHENING INTERPRETATION IN SINGHALILA NATIONAL PARK, DARJEELING

Submitted to Rufford Foundation, UK

Sunita Pradhan
Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment
Gangtok, Sikkim, September 2016



1. Background

Singhalila National Park (87° 59′ – 88° 53′ E and 26° 31′ – 27° 31′ N) in Darjeeling Himalaya, a high altitude Park in the Eastern Himalaya, India, officially promotes nature tourism since 1993. The fragile, biologically rich and aesthetically beautiful landscape of Singhalila National Park is important being home to the Endangered Red panda, *Ailurus fulgens*, threatened birds, and very high diversity of plant life. The Park supports Broadleaf temperate and Subalpine conifer forests and provides view of world's highest Himalayan mountain peaks. Singhalila saw an exponential growth of as much as 250 percent in its visitation rate, within the first 10 years (1993 -2004). The Park currently receives more than 8000 international and domestic visitors annually (Pradhan et al 2013), while supporting livelihoods of as much as 70 % of the local community.

An assessment of tourism in Singhalila by ATREE during the period of 2012-2014, identified many key challenges to sustainable and responsible tourism to Singhalila amongst which was inadequate interpretation of the National Park aggravated by very low capacity of the local nature guides to impart pertinent information of conservation and educational value to the visitors of Singhalila. Feedbacks received during the period from tourists, indicated visitor dissatisfaction among the group of visitors (52 %) seeking experiences of nature tourism, whereas the other 48 % of the visitors did not even know that Singhalila was a Red Panda (icon species of Singhalila) habitat. This was a strong indication of an absence of mechanisms to educate, build awareness and inform visitors on the natural resources and conservation value of Singhalila.

Hence a Booster Grant from Rufford, supported the Project “**Tourism in the Red Panda Habitats of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya: assessing and implementing appropriate strategies**”. The present project seeks to build the challenges to tourism in Red Panda habitats into responsible and sustainable nature tourism and preserve the conservation value of the region. For this, the project has two main objectives:-

- i) Assess challenges to sustainable nature tourism in two other Red Panda habitats of Barsey Sanctuary in Sikkim Himalayas and Neora Valley in Darjeeling Himalaya and
- ii) Strengthen interpretation and education activities of Singhalila to enhance visitor experience, and positively influence their knowledge about the conservation value of Singhalila

The present report covers the second objective of the Project, which seeks to strengthen Interpretation in the Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling, India.

2. Developing the Interpretation Materials

Here, the process of the building the Interpretation materials has been documented, from which the entire team of the Project had many lessons and experiences to gain.

2.1 Frames and boards

The 12 interpretation posters developed for Singhalila, came about with a lot of research, expert consultations and networking extensively for good photographs. These posters were then mounted and framed. Pictures 1 to 6 depict the process of developing the poster boards.

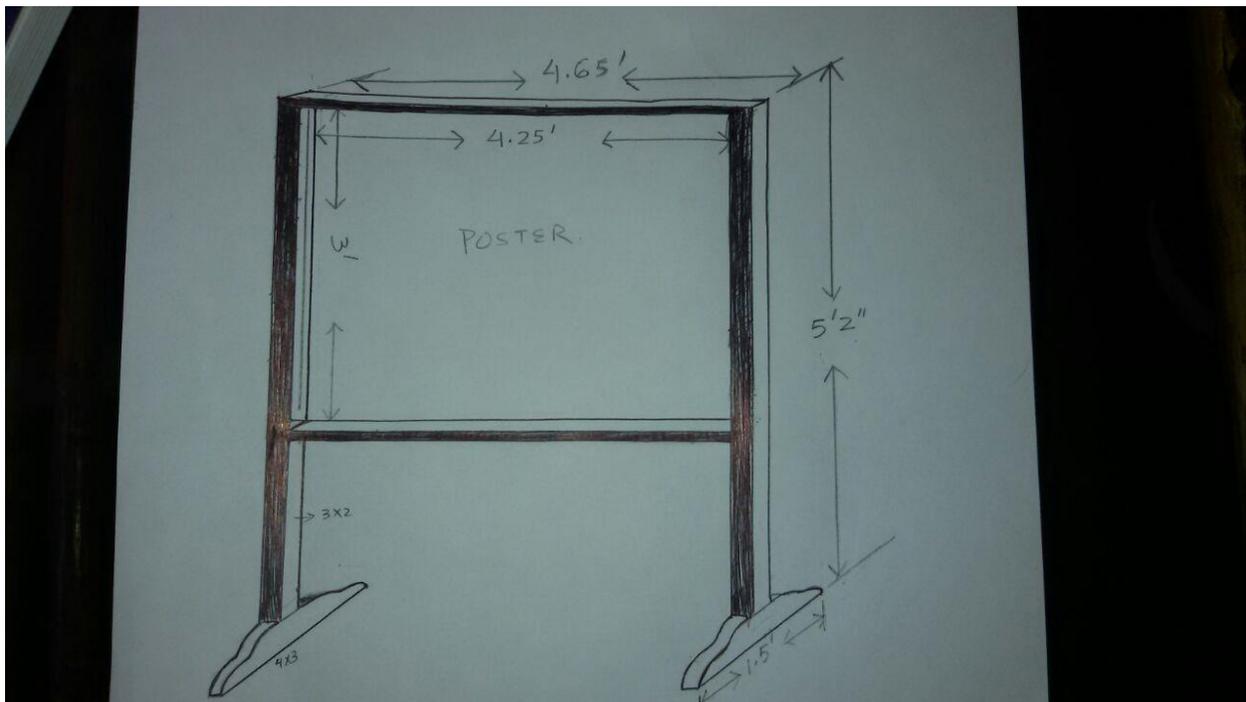


Figure 1 Initial sketches of the Poster Boards



Figure 2 Work on the frames in progress



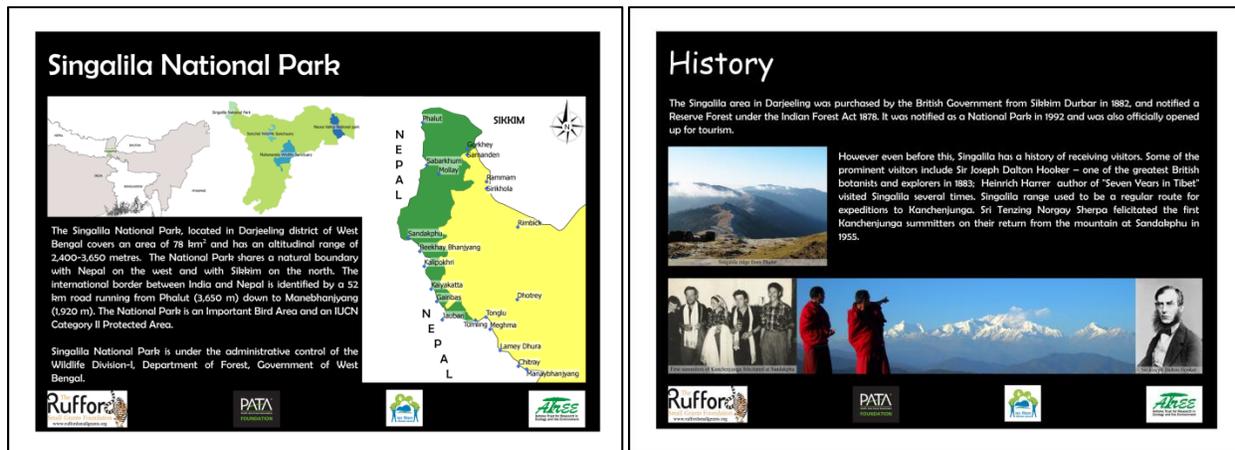
Figure 3 A completed frame



Figure 4 Frames of the Poster Boards receiving the final touches

2.2 Developing the posters

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 were made.

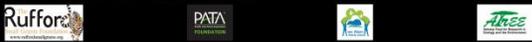


People

Sherpa, Tibetans, Rai, Tamang, Newar, Lepcha, Chhetri, Bahun, Sunwar, Limbu, Gurung and Bhuiel are the key ethnic groups in the landscape.



Agriculture, animal husbandry and tourism are the main livelihoods.

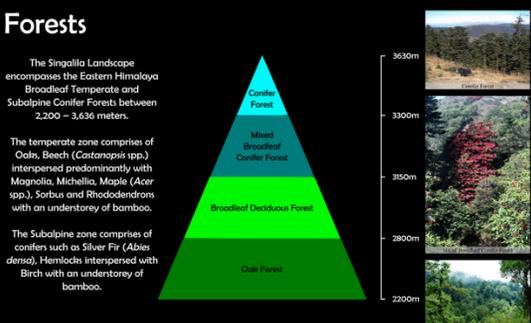
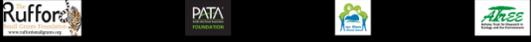


Forests

The Singalila Landscape encompasses the Eastern Himalaya Broadleaf Temperate and Subalpine Conifer Forests between 2,200 – 3,636 meters.

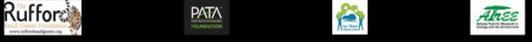
The temperate zone comprises of Oak, Beech (*Castanopsis* spp.) interspersed predominantly with Magnolia, Michelia, Maple (*Acer* spp.), Sorbus and Rhododendrons with an understory of bamboo.

The Subalpine zone comprises of conifers such as Silver Fir (*Abies densa*), Hemlocks interspersed with Birch with an understory of bamboo.

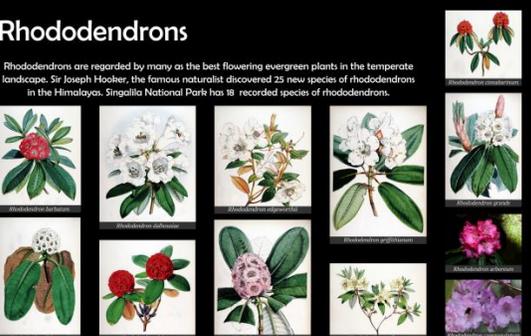
Ground Flora

Darjeeling Himalaya is very rich in plant life and is estimated to have about 2,900 species of angiosperms (Das 2011). Singalila National Park has a large number of flowering ground flora of which the Primulas, Aconites, Asters, Arisaema, Meconopsis, Cotoneasters, Geraniums are predominant.

Rhododendrons

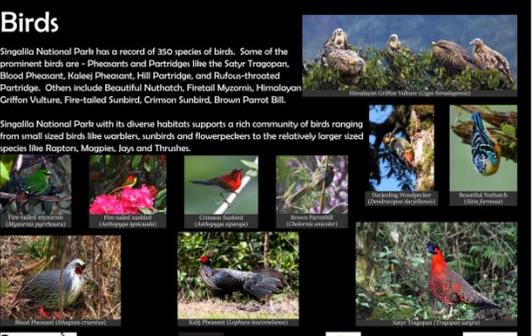
Rhododendrons are regarded by many as the best flowering evergreen plants in the temperate landscape. Sir Joseph Hooker, the famous naturalist discovered 25 new species of rhododendrons in the Himalayas. Singalila National Park has 18 recorded species of rhododendrons.




Birds

Singalila National Park has a record of 350 species of birds. Some of the prominent birds are - Pheasants and Partridges like the Satyr, Tragopan, Blood Pheasant, Kailash Pheasant, Hill Partridge, and Rufous-throated Partridge. Others include Beautiful Nuthatch, Pivotal Myzomela, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Fire-tailed Sunbird, Crimson Sunbird, Brown Parrot Bill.

Singalila National Park with its diverse habitats supports a rich community of birds ranging from small sized birds like warblers, sunbirds and flowerpeckers to the relatively larger sized species like Raptors, Magpies, Jays and Thrushes.




Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens*)

Red Panda is an Endangered mammal. Red Panda subsists on an extremely specialized herbivorous diet of bamboo leaves, while still retaining its morphological features of a carnivore. Red Panda is distributed across Eastern Himalayas in Nepal, India (Bhim, Darjeeling and Anarath Pradesh), Bhutan, extending into Myanmar and China. Red Panda numbers may be as low as 10,000 in its entire distribution range with rapid declines reported. Red Panda is threatened due to loss and fragmentation of its habitat and direct harvest, and trade.

Singalila National Park is an important Red Panda habitat.





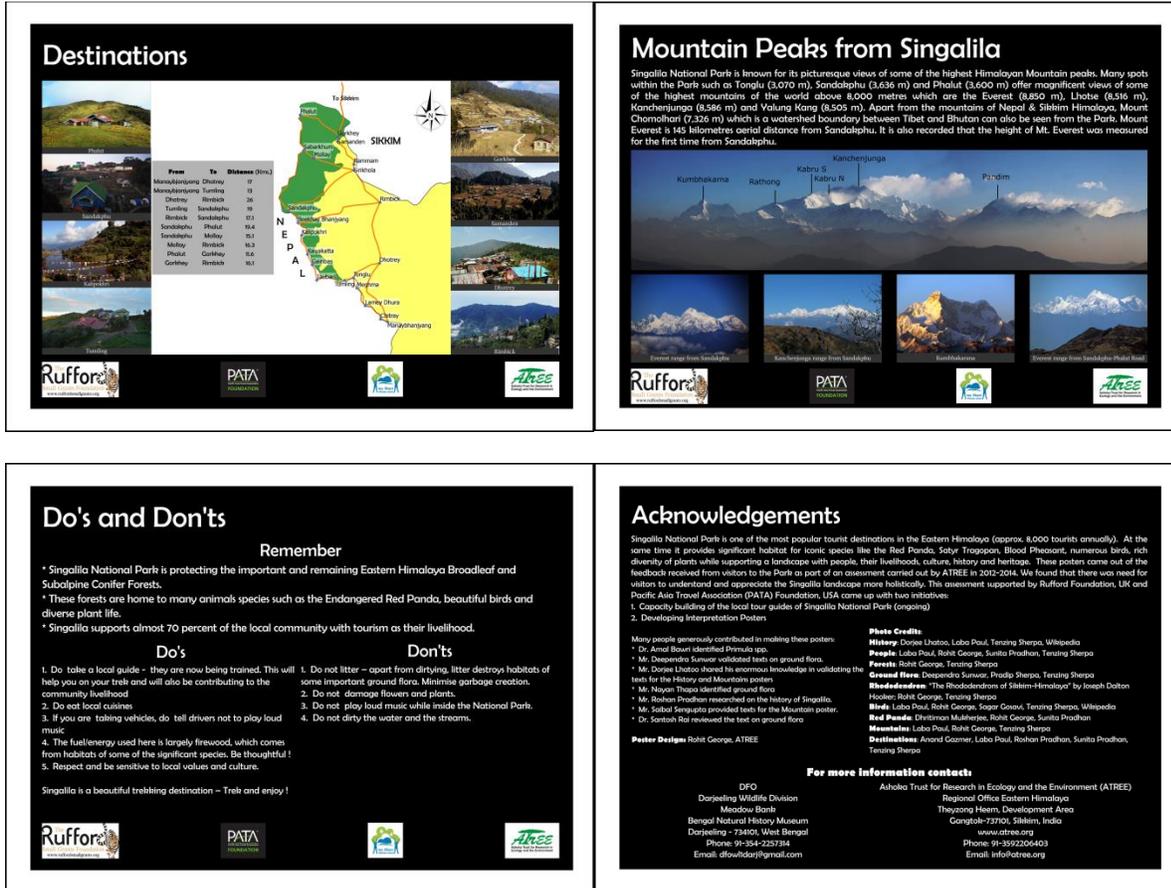



Figure 5 Twelve posters for Singhalila National Park Interpretation

2.3 Final Poster Boards

The posters were mounted and framed.



Figure 6 Final Interpretation Poster Boards for Singhalila National Park, Darjeeling

3. Handing over of the Interpretation Poster Boards

The poster boards were handed over to the Darjeeling Wildlife Division, Department of Forests, Government of West Bengal in a function on the 8th of September 2016. The function was attended by 45 people from 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, Govt. 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 7 The Additional Division Forest Officer unveiling the Poster Boards



Figure 8 Posters being viewed by the Participants



Figure 9 Posters being viewed by the Participants



Figure 10. Interpretation Boards for Nature Interpretation Center of the Forest Dept., Manebhanjyang, Darjeeling.

4. Local Press and Media Coverage

The event was covered by local media, posted in ATREE Facebook.



Figure 11. Local media coverage of Handing over of the Interpretation Boards to Forest Department

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

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