

Project Update: January 2012

The potential of eco and village tourism has been considered of immense potential in the mountain region of Uttarakhand state. The integration of rural livelihood with management of natural resources in the Himalayan region is being attempted and creates ample scope for environment educational tourism in association with the village communities. Accordingly a project with support from Rufford Small Grant Foundation was envisaged was initiated in 2010. The objective of the project is to facilitate the communities to convert challenges as well as constraint for the management of community forests in the Himalayas into the opportunities to improve rural livelihood.

Two Van Panchayat (VP- community forest council) namely Ashota and Thaat in Almora district of Uttarakhand, India were identified under the project to launch pilot of environmental education tourism by involving school children as well as the village communities. In accordance with the project plan the route map of tour and an environment educational tourism manual were developed. Afterwards various schools of Almora, the nearest town of the Van Panchayats, were approached to be a part of one day tour in these Van Panchayats (VPs). Two schools i.e. Sharda Public School and Maharshi Vidya Mandir, Almora were selected to conduct the tour considering their positive response and willingness towards programme concept. The description of the study tours are given as under:

Tour 1:

First tour was organised to Ashota VP and the students of Sharada Public School, Almora along with teachers were the visitors to have a bird's eye view of the VP and village. In all, 37 members from school participated in the day long tour. VP council and women Self Help Group members briefed the students about the Van Panchayat, its council and importance of VP in context of village. The protection and conservation practices undertaken by the community for restoring natural resources was also shared in a participatory manner. The life style in the village, culture and various livelihood activities undertaken by the community were also expressed by the SHGs and veteran community members during course of the visit.

Tour 2:

The second tour was organised to Thaat VP, one of the emerging VP in terms of innovations and conservation practices. The students of Maharshi Vidya Mandir, Almora visited the VP area as well as observed the village life along with their teachers. In all, 31 students along with school teachers participated in above study tour. Head (*Sarpanch* in Hindi) of the VP council lead the programme from front and briefed students about the concept of VP, its history and role in facilitating the villagers. The activities carried out in VP for its improvement through ongoing projects were also discussed in detail which focused on medicinal and aromatic plants. In addition the biodiversity of VP was also shared by other council members along with approach of water conservation adopted in the village and VP. Veteran villagers accompanied the organising team and told about the history of the village and key mythological facts related to environment protection and conservation. The stories related to temples and traditional practices of conserving environment. The students also

interacted with the members of women Self Help Groups during the meeting and were well versed with the culture and tradition of the village.



