

Homestays can help with Himalayan sustainability

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Opinion

Homestay in the Himalayas is a rapidly emerging concept that goes beyond sightseeing. It focuses on making real connections with people, culture, and nature as part of the travel experience.

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Home stay

Homestay in the Himalayas is a rapidly emerging concept that goes beyond sightseeing. It focuses on making real connections with people, culture, and nature as part of the travel experience. A homestay is a form of community-based tourism where travellers stay with local hosts in their homes. This offers a unique cultural experience for the

traveller and directly contributes to the local economy. In addition, homestays contribute significantly to environmental protection by using existing resources and minimizing the ecological footprint of the traveller.

These attributes make Himalayan homestays an excellent example of sustainable tourism, much needed for protecting the fragile ecology of the region from overtourism. Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and a powerful driver of economic growth. According to one estimate, the tourism sector's contribution to global GDP is around 10 per cent. There is no doubt that the economy of many Himalayan states has benefitted immensely from tourism. However, over-tourism in recent years has started showing devastating impacts and is threatening regional sustainability.

According to the Environmental Assessment of Tourism in the Indian Himalayan Region 2024 report of the Environmental Ministry, increasing trend of air pollution in states like Himachal Pradesh corresponds to the peak tourist season. Impact on other aspects such as water quality cannot be fully determined due to lack of data. Two interesting insights are brought forward by this Report. One, that tourism related activities are "much more pervasive in the northwestern compared to the north-eastern region" in the Indian Himalayas. And, two, that many of the Himalayan states and UTs "have undertaken initiatives in view of waste management, air and water quality as well as forest and biodiversity management" which have not been sufficient.

More needs to be done to mitigate the adverse impacts of ever-increasing tourism in the Himalayas. The Report recommends conducting carrying capacity studies, promoting locally available resources and strengthening community-based village tourism. Much of this can be ensured by encouraging homestays in the Himalayas through incentivebased policies and planned outreach. Himalayan homestays offer benefits to the traveller and to the host, and help preserve the pristine ecology of the Himalayan landscape. The peace and quiet for which most travellers visit the Himalayas is experienced more readily in a homely environment than in commercial settings.

Staying in a homestay takes the traveller away from the hassles of traffic jams, parking and increasing pollution that are becoming common problems in most hill stations. For the host, the multiple benefits include economic gains through diversifying income sources, intercultural exchanges, and creation of a market for local produce. Homestays also boost local business by increasing demand for guides, porters, taxi services, local handicrafts and folk arts. The greatest benefit of Himalayan homestays is the role they play in environmental protection. The Himalayas are an ecologically sensitive region with limited availability of land, water, building material and other resources. Rapid growth in tourism has resulted in large-scale construction activities that often do not respect sloping mountains, river floodplains and water channels.

Water security in the Himalayan region is already threatened; the Shimla water crisis of 2018 had left many residents without water; they had then blamed tourists for worsening the situation. Homestays can help by decentralizing tourism pressure and reducing the traveller's ecological footprint. Encouraging homestays means providing for tourists from

existing infrastructure rather than creating new buildings and pipelines. The Government of India has already developed a National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays (2022) which urges states to support such initiatives.

A National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022) also exists, and encourages homestays and community lodges. However, the success of homestays depends on the readiness of travellers to choose them over conventional hotels. This requires rigorous implementation of top-down policies, bottom-up support from state and local administrations and effective collaboration among all stakeholders. Homestays must be regulated through licensing, and the licensing process should not be overly complicated. Training programmes and financial incentives must be provided to locals to balance guest expectations with community well-being. To promote and support homestays, state governments must maintain authentic websites which go beyond just listing registered homestays. Such websites should enable feedback along with serving as a live helpdesk, with support from the local administration.

Safety is always a concern with hosts and travellers; active participation of the local administration along with community participation can help overcome this concern. Community participation in the Himalayas is more doable since Himalayan communities have always been close-knit where individuals rely heavily on each other for support due to difficult mountain conditions and shared traditions.

Homestays are a vocal-for-local initiative that promote Make in India and can help reverse rural migration. They also play a role in preserving local cultures and their greatest contribution is the protection and preservation of fragile Himalayan ecosystem, for which they must be encouraged.

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