

WORKSHOP ON 'PRACTISING RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN LEH (LADAKH, J&K)

Ecotourism Society of India (ESOI), J&K Tourism, India Tourism and WWF-India continued their robust partnership to hold a two-day Workshop on 'Practising Responsible Tourism' in Leh (Ladakh, J&K) during 30 September and 1 October 2011. This was the eighth in the series of ESOI workshops, principally targeting small and medium sized tourism service providers for dissemination of responsible tourism practices.

The Leh Workshop was attended by over 65 local participants representing the tourism related spectrum and including Ladakh Travel Trade Alliance, All Ladakh Tour Operators Association, hotel and stay facility owners, transporters, NGOs, heritage specialists, Regional Wildlife Warden, WWF-India, mountain medicine & physiology, environmental law, and eco-sensitive architecture

Inaugurating the Workshop, Mr Nawang Rigzin Jora, J&K Minister for Tourism & Culture lauded this initiative which was the third in the State, having been preceded by similar workshops in Jammu and Srinagar.

The Minister emphasized that sustainability is the pivot, especially for tourism in Ladakh. The lengthy off-season, marked by the Ladakh winter, is a built-in safeguard that lowers tourism impact and allows rejuvenation. Hence Carrying Capacity is not a problem in physical terms but requires caution in the socio-cultural context. In this regard, the expectation is that local residents of Ladakh would handle tourism activities in the district, whereby initiatives such as home-stays spread to rural areas while also adapting the 'teahouse trekking' model to further sustainably benefit local communities along such routes.

The Minister exhorted all present to recognize that the time was right to take a major step for sustainable tourism in Ladakh, underscored by the notion of 'Gross National Happiness'. Equally, it was important to preserve the image of Ladakh that enables the visitor to go back happy, with cleansing experiences and, on the other hand, also creating a mechanism that would facilitate tourism revenues to be ploughed back into the tourism product.

The current season in Ladakh witnessed an unprecedented number of approximately 1,80,000 tourists including almost 30,000 foreigners, thereby contributing to the local economy of Ladakh. This also underlined the vigorous Ladakhi determination to plan for sustainable tourism experiences, backed by vernacular infrastructure, waste management and capacity building.

Mr Rigzin Spalbar, Chairman & Chief Executive Councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, drew attention to the fact that the Workshop was being held at an opportune juncture to accelerate the Ladakh 2025 goals and vision. It was hence necessary to connect tourists to

cultural heritage, focus on human and natural resources, and increase the sustainable livelihoods impact of tourism on rural communities.

Theme presentations were made by a number of noted specialists in the interactive Inaugural and Technical Sessions of the Workshop, featuring.

- 1. Sharing Best Practices.**
- 2. Conserving Cultural and Natural Heritage.**
- 3. Raising the Responsible tourism Bar.**
- 4. Environment & Wildlife Law in Tourism.**
- 5. Restoration of Monastries & Local Cultural Heritage**
- 6. Panel Discussion on Tourism Issues in Ladakh.**

Some of the key speakers were Rakesh Mathur, Former President WelcomHeritage & Vice President ESOI, Sudhir Sahi, Honorary Secretary ESOI , Jose Dominic of CGH Earth Hotels, Jigmed Wangchuk Namgyal, Leh, igmet Takpa IFS, Regional Wildlife Warden Leh, Radhika Kothari, Dy. Director, Snowleopard Conservancy, Ritwick Duta, Environmental Lawyer Supreme Court, Mr.Pankaj Chandan, WWF India, etc.

Mr Nawang Rigzin Jora, J&K Minister for Tourism & Culture delivered the Valedictory Address. The Minister further stressed the importance of preserving intangible heritage and the facilitative support from Ecotourism Society of India to chalk out action plans for sustainable tourism in Ladakh.