

Doon Watch Nature Series for HT City, Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 21 June 2013

Jabberkhet-a new story unfolds

Have any of you visited Mussoorie lately? What is the abiding memory of your visit? I can guess-traffic jams, vehicular fumes, lack of parking space, crowds of people shopping (why do you need to visit Mussoorie to shop?), and a few other not-so-pleasant experiences that all tourists to Mussoorie can relate to. Moreover, many people that I know who have visited Mussoorie complain “There is not enough to do in the Queen of the Hills?”

Last week, we were part of an initiative that hopes to provide you the option of a positive experience at Mussoorie. At the Jabberkhet Estate, one of the old estates of Mussoorie, an interesting initiative is unfolding. Jabberkhet Ecodevelopment, started by Sejal Worah (from WWF) is looking to restore close to 30 acres of the Jabberkhet Estate. The eco-restoration of this forest tract seeks to bring back some of the local flora (and associated fauna) that has disappeared or reduced from the area and conserve the area’s water sources.

Along with the eco-restoration effort, a livelihood program is being unfolded. Last week, we gathered 12 youths from the villages around Mussoorie, and conducted a local nature guide training program. At first, the youth were perplexed “What on earth are these people planning to do?” Most attended the training program only out of curiosity. However, during the training program, we explained to the youth that we intended to develop nature trails around the Estate. These nature trails would be conducted by the local youth for tourists who visit Mussoorie, providing them an alternative experience to pollution and traffic jams!

The training program itself was an eye-opener for the local youth. They were enthused by the engagement, and enjoyed the training sessions on birdwatching and local flowers and trees. Interestingly, the youth discovered, that they already had a wealth of local knowledge that they could share with tourists! In fact, many of the tidbits they shared was new information to us as well. For example, they told us that the leaves of Chir Pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) were used for cooling. When the green leaves of Chir Pine are pressed to your forehead on a hot summer’s day, they help cool us down. The youth also told us that the leaves of Chir Pine can be used to make tea. Take the green leaves, add sugar and water and boil the mixture to get a locally made beverage. It was a different matter that after relating this to us, we were informed that they learnt this on Discovery Channel! We are yet to try out this concoction to figure out whether it at all tastes any good. So if you do try this, let us know how it tastes!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi@gmail.com



Photo caption: Chir pine leaves.

Making a difference: The Jabberkhet story is only just unfolding. It is an initiative where we are trying to make a difference. Along with restoring some of Mussoorie's forests, it will provide tourists with a "natural" experience, and a livelihood to the local community, and with it, an incentive to conserve. More on this story as it unfolds....

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