

Tourism for Tomorrow Awards Innovation Winner 2014



Ecosphere

If ever there was a big ask, it's Ecosphere's. Because the big picture for the founders of this mountain travel company is for "the great legacy of the Himalayas to thrive so that future generations can equally savour its beauty and bounties". Ecosphere's approach is truly holistic. A social enterprise located in the Spiti Valley, they are right up there at 4000 metres in the trans-Himalayas region of India. As a high altitude cold desert region the tourist season is short. However, steeped in cultural traditions and surrounded by natural heritage that informs everything they do, they have turned their everyday assets into innovative, extraordinary tourism products.

Ecosphere has been developing tourism as a serious, alternative and sustainable source of income for the local community since it was founded in 2002. Buddhism is at the heart of the culture here, and so it was important to the community and, therefore, for Ecosphere, that an economic solution must also offer protection to nature and the environment.

With the design of unique nature led products, Ecosphere has proven that this is possible. For example, they have revived the ancient art of mud pottery, an indigenous skill that had, until recently, died out. By training five potters and building necessary facilities where both local people and visitors can practise the craft, they have not only revived an art form, but also created an additional income. Spiti is also famous for its fossils. However, due to a depletion of these by tourists taking them as souvenirs, the potters are creating replicas for sale, while Ecosphere seeks to set up a Fossil Museum to preserve the remaining geological wealth.

Natural medicine has also played a vital role in Himalayan history, although less so in recent times. Ecosphere has shown that there is a demand from tourists who want to understand these practices. This has given the practitioners, or Amchis, an incentive to continue practising which, in Buddhist terms, has allowed an 'awakening' for guests, but a 'reawakening' for hosts also. In addition, Ecosphere offers Monastic visits, thereby strengthening this link between Buddhism and tourism in Spiti.

Homestays are also at the centre of their sphere, being offered to guests on a rotation basis to ensure equitable distribution of funds. There are eighty homestays in six villages generating between 20 to 25 per cent of the average family income. And because conservation and economics must marry, ten per cent of this is reinvested, matched by Ecosphere, in conservation and sustainable farming projects, as nominated by the villagers. The building of green houses for vegetable growing and renewable energy plants are examples of such projects.

Because Ecosphere is about creating a conscious culture for visitors, one of their most innovative steps has been a 'sensitisation' video which reminds tourists how to travel responsibly. In the meantime, this myriad of Himalayan life that has become part of the Ecosphere offer is not only creating value for visitors, but also showing villagers that they too can appreciate what they have on their doorstep. And that is one big doorstep.