

Kailash-Mansarovar: What Is the Ecological Footprint of Isha Foundation's 'Sacred Walk'?

By commercialising the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, the foundation risks causing damage to the eco-sensitive Limi valley in Nepal.



Isha foundation clients in Limi lapcha. Photo: Naresh Kusi



Naresh Kusi



ENVIRONMENT SOUTH ASIA 12/FEB/2023

A pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China is revered by many as the journey of a lifetime. Tourism entrepreneurs portray Humla district in north-western Nepal as the “gateway” to this spiritual adventure. Every year during the summer months of July and August, thousands of pilgrims,

mostly from India, swarm into Simkot, the district headquarter of Humla, after a 55 minutes flight from Nepalgunj, for a sojourn to the holy mountain. From Simkot, they mostly travel directly to the border village of Hilsa by helicopter and from there, ride on jeeps to the TAR.



In January 2020, China closed its border with Nepal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With travel restrictions in place in Nepal itself, pilgrimage tourism came to a complete halt in 2020. While Nepal prepared to lift the nationwide lockdown around July 2021, China continued to keep its border closed. Desperate to revive the lucrative pilgrimage tourism, travel companies started to look for an alternative. Unsurprisingly, the spotlight fell on *Limi lapcha* near the Nepal-China border in Upper Humla. At 5,050 metres above sea level, *Limi lapcha* offers a close-up view of Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar from Nepal without having to cross the border into TAR.

Isha Foundation enters the scene

Isha Foundation stepped into the scene in August 2021. Between August and September of that year, the foundation brought in 70 international visitors (clients) to *Limi lapcha* for the **Kailash Mansarovar *darshan*** (Hindi and Nepali for

observation). The team led by Jagdish (Jaggi) Vasudev (aka Sadhguru) hiked up to Lek dHINGA and from there rode on jeeps to Limi *lapcha*. While the travel industry showered praises on the Isha Foundation and Vasudev for “promoting Limi *lapcha*” as a Kailash-Mansarovar viewpoint in Nepal, my mind was struck by a strange fear. “What if mass tourism takes over in this pristine landscape?” Having witnessed the devastations mass tourism has done to the natural heritages elsewhere in Nepal, the conservation biologist in me felt nervous. I felt emotional recalling the days I had spent among the many wondrous wildlife in Limi Valley since 2014.

Limi Valley lies in the northernmost corner of Humla district. The upper reaches of this trans-Himalayan Valley constitute part of the western end of the Tibetan Plateau, making it home to species like wild yaks (Limi Valley is the last refuge to this species in Nepal), Tibetan wild ass or Kiang (Limi Valley hosts the largest population of the species in Nepal) and Black-necked crane (the species has been observed only in Limi Valley within Nepal). Of the 27 protected priority species of wild mammals in Nepal, six species – namely Himalayan wolf (mentioned as grey wolf), snow leopard, Eurasian lynx, Tibetan argali, musk deer, and brown bear – are found in Limi Valley. Many species of birds previously thought to be winter visitors to Nepal have been found breeding in Limi Valley and new species of wild mammals continue to be recorded in the area. The fascinating diversity of wildlife found in Limi Valley has led Birdlife International to consider the place as a new Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) in Nepal. Limi *lapcha*, where the event is centred, is situated within the Chyakpalung Plateau. As such, wild mammals characteristic of the Tibetan Plateau – including Tibetan argali, Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan fox, Plateau pika and Steppe polecat – are

found only in Chyakpalung. This brief account of the wildlife wealth of Limi Valley is enough to realise the sensitivity of promoting mass tourism in the area.



A Himalayan wolf in Nepal. Photo: Madhu Chetri/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

During the first week of August 2022, I was preparing to go to Limi Valley to conduct conservation workshops and wildlife monitoring training as part of a project we are implementing there. In the meantime, my friends from Limi Valley informed me that Isha Foundation was all set to bring more than 1,000 clients to Limi *lapcha* for the ‘Kailash Mansarovar Darshan 2022’. My fear from the previous year was turning into a sad reality and I vividly recalled the prologue of our book *Humla: Journey into the Hidden Shangri-la*, published in 2016, that reads:

“Initiatives promoting wildlife and nature-based tourism in Limi may be a promising future strategy to preserve the culture and wildlife of Limi. To realise this vision sustainably, only a limited number of tourists should explore the region each year with strict

enforcement.”

In the days that followed, news of ‘Kailash Mansarovar Darshan 2022’ started to appear in the Nepali media. I grew increasingly concerned about the effects that the overwhelming number of visitors would have on the local ecology. Anxious to convey this important message to Isha Foundation, I, together with my co-author and colleague Geraldine Werhahn, wrote an email to the foundation, requesting them to respect the local ecology and to consider minimising the negative impacts on all living beings around Limi *lapcha* during the event. We also provided them with some suggestions that could be applied to minimise the ecological impacts of the programme. On top of it all, we stressed that they should limit the number of clients who can join such a trip in the future, citing that ‘doing so would mean a proper respect to the land and its life forms’. Sadly, we did not get a reply.

A few days passed before a friend informed me that a travel company named ‘The Trekkers’ Society Private Limited’ was managing the event in Nepal. We wasted no time and wrote the same email to The Trekkers’ Society (TTS). TTS responded to our email and wrote that they were promoting Limi *lapcha* (and Limi Valley) in association with the local people of Limi. They confirmed that around 1,200 clients would go to Limi *lapcha* on different dates and in groups in a span of 25 days. They also informed us that the main camp in Tagtsi would house 150 clients at a time. “Because the clients would go to Limi *lapcha* on jeeps and return in the same vehicles there is a negligible chance of them interacting with the wild animals of the area,” they said. Likewise, they told us that all of their clients were yoga practitioners and vegetarians and indicated that there would be no possibility of them getting involved in any activities

that would disturb the wildlife of the area. They also wrote that they had taken our concern seriously and that they would instruct the clients accordingly.

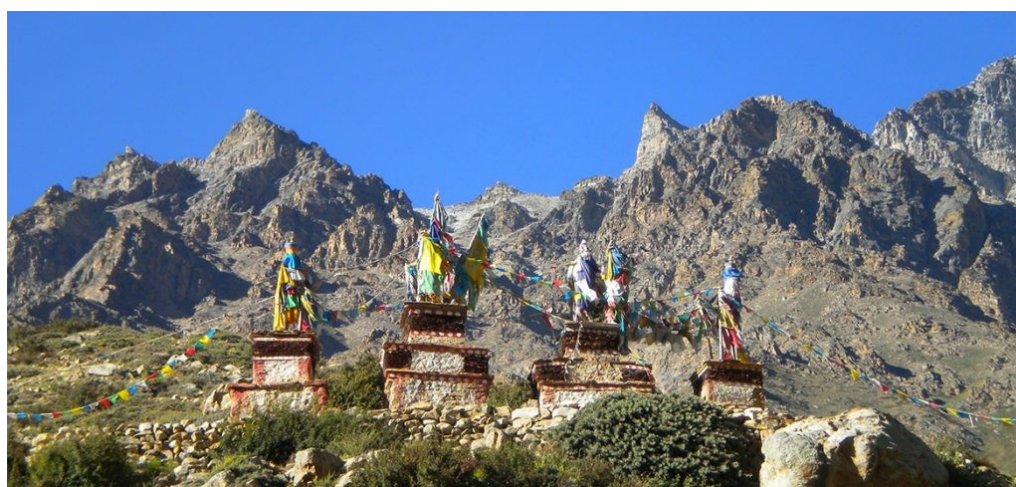
Also Read: 'Isha Foundation Exempted from Environmental Clearance': Centre Tells Madras HC

Easier said than done

I reached Tagtsi on September 17. At around 4200 metres above sea level, it is situated close to the Tagtsi river and contains a good camping ground as its flat surface sits slightly elevated from the river bed. The ruins of an ancient village can be seen above Tagtsi. It's believed that Limi received its name from the people of this village situated at the confluence of the Tagtsi river and Talung river as 'Limi' means 'people of the confluence' in the Tibetan language. An unexpected snowfall from a few days ago had painted the landscape white. The last batch of clients had been dropped there the same day by a helicopter, accommodated in 106 tents pitched for them. Two big tents (one dining and one kitchen) stood nearby. TTS had hired 55 staff, all of them people from outside Limi Valley (mostly from eastern Nepal), for camp management and cooking. Because TTS had written to us that they were working together with the local people of Limi, I felt strange about this staffing. I wondered what prevented them from hiring a few *Limiwas* (people of Limi) to assist in camp management. This was especially plausible because the Limiwas had been confined to their villages since the border with TAR had closed. When I discussed this issue with a *Zangba* (people from Zang village in Limi) living in Kathmandu, he gave me an interesting reply, "That is a good point. But it's difficult to implement as the Limiwas will compare the wages with what they get in Tibet (they are paid Nepali Rs 3,000-4,000

per day in Tibet).” Looking at the scale in which the event was operated, I am certain that there is enough room to hire at least a few Limiwas by paying wages equivalent to what they get in TAR.

Like most people, I had expected that the camp in Tagtsi would be littered with trashes given the very large number of people that had camped there for the last three weeks. But it was a pleasant surprise to see that the camp appeared relatively clean. After a few minutes of exploring the area, I found heaps of trash accumulated behind a mud and stone hut seasonally used by livestock herders (TTS managed 80% of waste either by burning or dumping it into pits while 20% was managed by the local villagers after the camp was emptied). The hut had been temporarily turned into a tea house. Curious to see how they had managed the toilets, I visited a few tents. They had accommodated commode chairs (with a pit dug underneath) within the tents and a few toilet tents were put up separately. I learnt later that initially, the waste from the toilet tents was discharged directly into the Tagtsi River – which forced the Namkha Rural Municipality to intervene. A few days later, they brought in more commode chairs to put inside the toilet tents.



Limi Valley. Photo: Wangdue/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

Soon after reaching Tagtsi, I caught sight of a few local villagers who were adorned in traditional attires. Around mid-day, they were invited for a cultural performance to entertain the clients. I could see, from the faces of the clients, that they had enjoyed the traditional dance. However, it gave me a bad feeling to learn that the performers were provided with a mere Nepali Rs 4,000 (~\$31) in return. For a similar performance in 2021, they were paid Nepali Rs 50,000 (~\$383). Apparently, TTS had failed to make a respectful agreement with the local villagers this year.

For the night, we went to the Limi resort situated about a 10-15 minute walk from Tagtsi. The resort had been brought into operation only recently, mostly targeting pilgrim-tourists. It was obvious that the resort had been opened with anticipation of reaping some benefits from the 'Kailash Mansarovar Darshan'. However, it was evident that the only visitors that the resort received were a handful of Nepali travellers like us, that too, only occasionally. The resort currently has 24 beds and planned to expand its capacity to 50 beds by next year. As my eyes soaked in the serenity of the Talung river the next morning, video footage shared with me in Simkot flashed in my mind's eye. The footage, taken in April 2021 during a reconnaissance survey for the 'Kailash-Mansarovar Darshan', showed the survey team chasing a Himalayan wolf along the Talung river from their helicopter. I silently wished that such reckless human behaviour does not repeat.

As we prepared to head to Limi *lapcha*, I noticed the team of drivers burning juniper shrubs to warm up their bodies. A huge pile of shrubs lay outside a herders' camp, on the other side of Tagtsi river, where the motor vehicles were parked. It is anyone's guess how many shrubs were burnt in the

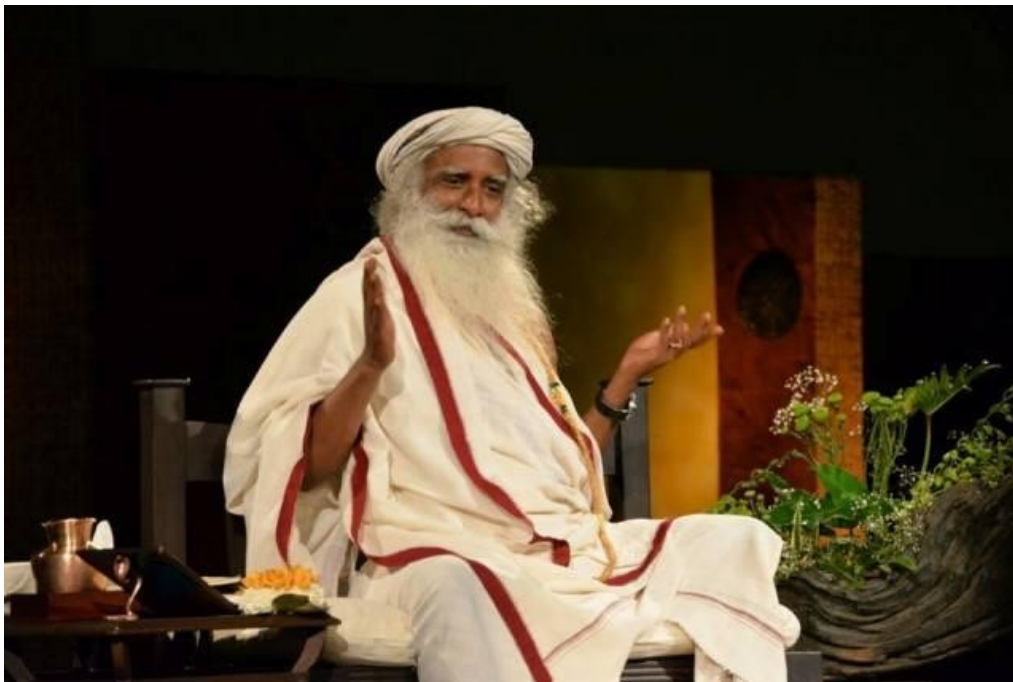
previous three weeks. Tagtsi is located above the tree line, where these shrubs act as ecological substitutes for the trees in lower elevations. Needless to say, herbivores (both wild and domestic) feed on the shrubs and the plants also sequester atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂). The clients were taken to *Limi lapcha* early in the morning in 10 Bolero jeeps and two tractors. All of these jeeps and tractors also belonged to people from outside Limi Valley. From our regular visits to the area, we are aware that the Limiwas own a few trucks and jeeps. TTS could have negotiated with the Limiwas to hire those motor vehicles. Here too, they had failed to strike a balance – reflecting an apparent lack of benefit sharing.

There was a makeshift camp in *Limi lapcha* attended by a few TTS staff. Like in Tagtsi, waste was properly managed and I could see commode chairs. A newly constructed stone hut was being used to serve tea and snacks to the clients. Having watched the clients (for a short while) who were seated cross-legged facing Mount Kailash to the north, my eyes fell on a flex board hung outside the stone hut. The board read, ‘Isha Sacred Walks: Kailash Mansarovar Darshan’. My mind struggled to accept the relevance of the word ‘walk’ on that board, because the clients were flown to Tagtsi from Simkot in helicopters and then driven on jeeps and tractors to *Limi lapcha* – meaning there was no walking at all. It’s true that they had incorporated some walking in 2021 by arranging a hike from Simkot up to Lek dHINGA. From the news reports published before the event in 2022, it is clear that they had planned the same. But they removed the Lek dHINGA camp after a few days. This observation clearly hints that with fewer people, they have more room to operate the event with lesser ecological impact.

Also Read: [But Why Is the Cauvery Calling?](#)

The carbon footprint of the ‘walk’

The carbon footprint of the event is by far the most serious of all the environmental impacts. The single-engine helicopter flying from Simkot to Tagtsi and back carried five passengers in a trip (one round trip took about 24 to 36 minutes, depending on the route taken). According to my estimation, this means the helicopters made at least 240 trips and emitted about 15 tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Add to this the CO₂ emissions from the motor vehicles and we will get a clearer picture of the actual footprint.



Sadhguru. Photo: Facebook

A few weeks after the trip, I read the news that Namkha Rural Municipality and Simkot Rural Municipality collected Nepali Rs 1,527,000 (~\$11,720) as tourism tax from the event. Namkha Rural Municipality would also collect Nepali Rs 120,000 (~\$921) from helicopter landings and Nepali Rs 731,400 (~\$5,613) from camping charges. Adding this up, the administrations would have made Nepali Rs 2,378,400 (~\$18,254) – which looks good until we turn our attention to the amount that the Isha Foundation collects from its clients.

At Indian Rs 400,000 (~\$4,912) per client, they collected Indian Rs 470,000,000 (~\$5,771,740) from 1,175 clients this year. All the figures above are conservative estimates. Apparently, the amount that went to the local authorities is merely 0.3% of what they had collected from their clients.

I am aware that there is enough scope to argue that a significant amount would have gone to the helicopter companies, owners of the motor vehicles, a few hotels (that managed accommodation) in Simkot, and to TTS and its staff. But it's important to speculate that the margin is still very huge. So far, the local people of Humla have been unable to reap many benefits from the sophisticated pilgrimage tourism on the Simkot-Hilsa route because much of the earnings go to the helicopter companies and a handful of hotel operators in Simkot and Hilsa. If a 'Kailash-Mansarovar Darshan' operated within the border of Nepal does not bear any fruit for the local majority, sensitive people will question the virtue of the Isha Foundation. In such a case, the walk dubbed 'sacred' would be no different than any other business operation that has prevailed in the area since 1993, following the opening of the route from Simkot to Hilsa by the Government of Nepal.

It's very likely that the Isha Foundation will continue to operate the Kailash Mansarovar Darshan in Limi *lapcha* in the coming years too, because they proudly advertise it on their website. While we appreciate the fact that it is helping in the promotion of Limi *lapcha* among international tourists, we urge the foundation to consider the ecological costs of the event. Most importantly, they need to limit the number of clients. The foundation should consider leaving out the helicopters and opt for jeeps (or trekking) should they want to contribute less to disrupting the natural world. Likewise, they need to look for ways to increase economic

benefits for the local communities. In a nutshell, shouldn't it be expected that the Isha Foundation, which undertakes the 'save soil' movement, would be mindful of the ecological impacts and operate their upcoming events in a more responsible and sustainable way?

Naresh Kusi is a biologist and country director for the Himalayan Wolves Project.

Edited by Amrit B.L.S.

1 Support The Wire

₹2400 once

The founding premise of The Wire is this: if good journalism is to survive and thrive, it can only do so by being both editorially and financially independent. This means relying principally on contributions from readers and concerned citizens who have no interest other than to sustain a space for quality journalism. For any query or help write to us at support@thewire.in

I would like to contribute

Once

Monthly

Yearly

Select amount

₹200

₹1000

₹2400

Type an amount

Continue

2 Add contact details

3 Review & Pay

[ABOUT US](#) | [TERMS & CONDITIONS](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [REFUND POLICY](#)
