

## A RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

# GUIDING TOURS ON THE KAAS PLATEAU



Photo by Rujta Vinod

“It is an inevitable destiny: the very reasons why a property is chosen for inscription on the World Heritage List are also the reasons why millions of tourists flock to those sites year after year.” These words of Francesco Bandarin (UNESCO) reminded me of my present study site, Kaas Plateau, located in Satara district, Maharashtra which was recently declared a World Natural Heritage Site for its exceptional beauty.

Come monsoons, and the plateau springs to life with over 200 different species of flowering plant species that bloom in their millions. Due to wide media coverage of this mass blooming, visiting numbers rose from a few thousands in 2005-2006 to an astonishing 3,50,000 in 2011. The challenges this poses to the rich diversity of highly specialized flora and fauna is evident.

When I started my eco tourism based research project here in June 2012, guided walks led by well-trained locals along pre-designated paths seemed to be the obvious solution in tackling the problem of extensive trampling at Kaas.

A month later the Satara forest department (FD) conducted a workshop, where we trained around 25 local men as nature guides. However, very few of those who had been trained turned up when the tourist season started. What came to light was that in these job-deprived villages, the majority of youth migrate to Mumbai for a better livelihood. When asked they noted that this would only be seasonal

employment and they needed to think of something for the remaining eight months.

Interviews with tourists, on the other hand, revealed that they were genuinely interested but also clueless about where to go, what to look at and how to identify what they saw – having a local nature guide would be the best solution, they said. This helped me realize that often, tourists are insensitive not by choice, but simply because they are unaware, and this is because the right kind of information has not been conveyed to them. Well-planned nature walks could, in fact, be a win-win situation for both, the locals and the visitors.

What initially seemed a very easy option to implement, however, unfolded into unanticipated and unplanned challenges. The next step now is to identify the unemployed locals who have chosen to stay back and train them...people who will not only function as nature guides but also become the future guards of this fragile habitat. And convey the right message of conservation and the heritage value of Kaas to develop responsible and sensitive tourism.

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