**How to respect the mountains**

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As temperatures in the densely populated urban cities increase, many people from these areas wish to spend a few days away from the hustle and bustle of the city and extreme heatwaves.

For a majority of them, areas in northern Pakistan are a prime destination. Those who can afford to travel for a few nights visit various tourist spots in northern areas. It is also interesting to note that most elite Pakistanis go to Europe or North America to spend their summer while others (including budget travellers) visit tourist spots in north Pakistan – areas in upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, including valleys in the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Himalayas.

While non-locals visit these famous tourist destinations, many of the locals make trips to the highland pastures, lakes, passes and meadows. Pastures and meadows which would have been visited by only shepherds and herders just a few years back are now frequently being visited by many people from the down valleys.

Pakistani authorities have also been holding several festivals in some well-known spots in the north for several years now. Recently they held the Shandur Festival. Such small-scale festivals have also been held in Kalam, Kumrat, Malam Jabba, Madakhlast, Kaklasht, among others.

A few tourists and locals prefer to hike across passes to districts and provinces. In Gilgit-Baltistan, trekking, hiking and summiting high peaks is a famous sport whereas in areas like Swat, Chitral, Dir, and, to a lesser extent, Kohistan, trekking and hiking is not that common yet many people usually trek to areas above the alpine lines and to the pasturelands to see lakes, pastures, glaciers and small peaks.

Several issues have been noticed with this increased influx of road tourists, trekkers and hikers. Perhaps the major issue is environmental destruction. Fifteen years back, Mahudand in Kalam Swat used to be pristine. The same was the case with the Kumrat valley in upper Dir and was true for Shandur on the border of Chitral and Ghizer.

With an increased flow of tourists and, of course, with the frequency of festivals, these places have now been turned into large dustbins. Mahudand Lake presents a sad picture. The same is true for the white foamy water streams and forests in Kumrat. Shandur is full of trash now as well.

Chugail Pasture, which lies in the lap of the Koshojan peak up in the Mankiyal valley in Bahrain, Swat, used to be the cleanest meadow a few years back. It has more than 100 huts of herders who have a local code which does not allow any herder to go to the pasture with the cattle until a certain time in summer – usually the end of June. When this ban is over all herders go there with their herds and flocks. When internet users discovered this place a few years back, they rushed to this piece of paradise. And now it is also filled with trash.

Tourists in large numbers also visit the famous deodar forests between Kalam and Ushu. And now it is heart-wrenching to look at the forest as it is full of trash spread everywhere.

In 2015 when we first visited Kumrat there were a couple of tent hotels, very clean and safe. After that we visited it almost every year and witnessed the growth of shoddy constructions in the area, and the forests turned into a trash can. One can see the same at the Badgoi Top and the Dasht-e-Laila nearby.

During Eid holidays, the road from Mingora to Mahudand via Madyan, Bahrain and Kalam is turned into a trash line with piles of trash spread on both sides. It is equally disturbing to see how Swat River is getting filled with more and more trash every year.

Many domestic tourists come to these areas with a specific mindset. While living in cities, these people have developed a certain kind of superiority syndrome even though we all know the general conditions of our big cities. Most Pakistani cities compete with each other in the race of being the most polluted. They also face issues of broken streets and other crimes. Still cities are considered ‘civilized’ whereas people living in Hunza and Phasu are regarded otherwise.

These tourists come to the mountains and have some stereotypes about people living here. During the peak days of tourism in Swat and Hunza, we often see many tourists and locals fighting with each other. Most tourists think that people in Hunza and Kalashdesh are not tied with cultural norms. And for the mountain people of Swat and Dir, several domestic tourists have the notion that these people are savages and uncivilized.

Such ill-informed tourists – and we have seen many of them – make strange demands from people in Kalashdesh and Hunza. This irritates the locals and when they resist those demands the tourists shout at them insulting their whole tribes. This results in fighting where such tourists get bitter lessons for insulting the people.

The same is done with other mountain people. When tourists have any issue with a single local person, they start abusing the whole population and resultantly get the ‘dose’.

The activities of many domestic tourists in certain public places make the lives of the local women tiresome. These tourists often enter houses in the Kalash Valley without any prior consent of the households and make issues for women present. Many people who visit Swat and Dir usually do not care about the sanctity of a house while having fun in front of these houses or bathing in the streams and rivers there.

Many trekkers usually go to the pasturelands, for example, to Chukail after the ban is lifted. But many families live in these huts, and the women there have to bring water or care for the younglings of their cattle outside the houses. The presence of tourists outside their homes creates trouble for them.

Finally, there must be a few tourists who actually want to learn about different languages and cultures in these areas. Many vloggers from the cities come and make vlogs without any knowledge about the local people, their languages and cultures. A number of vloggers behave exactly like the colonizers and present distorted facts about these people and languages.

Some of our good friends in Pakistan and abroad usually get uneasy when we post an image of a pasture or lake. They ask us to keep these places hidden from the ‘trash-ers’ – they call these domestic tourists ‘trash-ers’.

We can only make an appeal. And this appeal will reach only a few. A large number of tourists – the trashers and teasers – will still behave the same regardless of our request.

We would love everybody to visit our mountains but they should pay attention to this little piece of advice: ‘Leave nothing here [tourist spots] except your footprints, and take nothing from here except photographs and fond memories!’

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