**[Treks and sustainable tourism](https://nation.com.pk/23-Nov-2020/treks-and-sustainable-tourism" \t "_new)**

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We did two fascinating treks during October 2020 on the sides of River Kunhar at the mouth of the Kaghan Valley. We first climbed the Makra feature along the Kunhar River’s left bank and the other to Musa ka Musalla off the right bank. However, our experiences over the years suggest that treks traverse a dwindling natural resource base and the touristic practices unfortunately contribute towards its degradation thus posing serious environmental challenges. While a strong eco-tourism paradigm has emerged in the developed, and even in some developing countries, we in Pakistan seem miles adrift. More on this but first let us cover the wonderful treks.

Makra draws its appellation from a spider-like extended configuration at its peak. Its height is 3,885 meters, or 12,746 feet, but we gauged its top point to be a shade above 13,000 feet. After an overnight stay at Shogran, we left early on October 3rd for the trek. It was myself along with Asad, Imtiaz and Amin. We kicked off from the scenic Siri Paye reached the Makra Top in slightly above four hours after a challenging trek. We could see some recognisable peaks along the upper Kaghan Valley and the Neelum Valley in AJK along with the adjoining regions of the Indian held Kashmir. Muzaffarabad lies on Makra’s base and it also serves as another approach for the trek. We saw many young people trekking up, some quite late. A great experience and it endowed a captivating perspective to a familiar touristic venue.

Musa ka Musala’s experience, on the other hand, made us traverse a varied landscape. The trek spanned nearly three days and two nights which allowed us to truly imbibe its unique beauty. We chose the Shinkiari –Mandagucha approach and started our trek on October 30. It was the same group of trekkers, less Amin. Our camping gear and food were hauled on hired ponies. We walked along the scenic Siran River in its catchment region. After crossing the Dor village at the confluence of Dor Nullah and the Siran, we started to climb along a ridge laden with moist lower Himalayan forest. The ridgeline expanded into a series of expansive layered plateaus which had retained the green texture even in late autumn. It must be a pageant of exciting colours and fragrances during the summers. We camped close to the Jabbar village after a four-hour trek. The water streams were depleted due to less than normal rains. A summer grazing hut housed the seven of us.

An early morning hike along the ridgeline brought us to the picturesque Gali, the jump-off point for the climb. The incline is mostly set above a 30 degrees gradient and after crossing successive crests we reached ‘Pehli Ziarat’, and another stiff climb led us to Musa ka Musalla or the summit at 4086 meters. It was an exacting four-and-a-half-hour trek. While the locals talk of a saint buried in the ziarat, no one seemed to know the reason for naming Musa ka Musalla. Like from Makra, we could see Malika Parbat (with reference to the Lake Saif-ul Malook) and the Kunhar River flowing from Balakot towards Muzaafarabad. Allai Valley’s mountainous façade is also visible. The summit sightings are a visual treat as they allow you to capture vast spaces in one contiguous dimension. We were treated to breath-taking sunsets and rises, and both treks coincided with the aesthetics of a full moon. Now, to locate the treks and tourism in a sustainable paradigm.

As per the International Tourism Society (ITS) ecotourism promotes responsible touristic activity that conserves the environment, contributes to the well-being of the local people, and educates all on these aspects. Importantly eco-tourism constitutes low-impact or small-scale activities, and it thus differs from the mass commercial tourism with its downsides. I will articulate my perspective on developing one of the trekking sites consistent with the ecotourism imperatives.

The Musa ka Musalla venue serves as an adventure tourism destination with trekking, gliding, and snowboarding. The latter two have been attempted by young adventurers. Treks lead to Musa ka Musalla and to some peaks in the Allai Valley. It has the potential to be developed as an adventure ecotourism venue. Trekking expeditions however, are organised by non-local actors, mostly Lahore, Rawalpindi or Islamabad based. While the local contributions make the treks possible, they get paid abysmally low. Local capacities can be built with web visibility to gain commensurate financial benefits. You require guides that are conversant with the region and the ecotourism paradigm, and provision of associated services and logistics.

Manda Gucha has scant touristic facilities like hotels which certainly require augmentation. In organising both treks we had to tap into our personal networks to access information to plan and get connected with the local support. A tourist information centre run by local volunteers would be helpful. The aim being not only to facilitate the tourists but to educate them on natural resource conservation.

We saw littered waste along the mountain slopes and water courses and even close to the summit. Non-biodegradable material should not be allowed ahead of Manda Gucha and waste should be disposed of in a scientific manner.

There were signs of extensive deforestation and we sighted deliberately set forest fires amid winter conditions. Locals affirmed a fast-shrinking forest resource base with mafias briskly at work. We did not come across any significant reforestation evidence despite tall claims. Sustainable use of local forests comes out as the most significant imperative. This is a core governance function being the main source of local livelihoods. Similarly, the Siran River catchment must be saved from pollution. Eco-tourism loses its meaning in a degraded natural environment.

Sadly, we came across numerous hunters killing pheasants and exotic birds. The locals seem to be having an adversarial co-existence with the mountain bears and the big cats. Research indicates the occurrence of organised poaching of bear cubs and even grown up animals in the region. This must stop as the wildlife is desperately trying to survive in a fast-shrinking habitat.

Finally, nothing would work without putting in place appropriate eco-tourism governance arrangements and statutes. The entire region should be accorded a Reserved Provincial Park status. Major donors, like WWF and IUCN, can assist by deploying expertise and, possibly, resources.

Kawai-Shogran, on the other hand, constitutes one of the Kaghan Valley’s mass tourism venues. I had earlier visited Shogran in 1988 and was disappointed to see the vastly depleted forests and the pot-holed roads. Travellers have little option but to hire the smoke emitting jeeps. Waste is mostly disposed of in the open or along the mountain sides. Siri Paye is infested with vendor stalls and they seem to be encroaching into the beautiful meadow that embellishes Makra’s scenic view. So many hotels have come up with apparently little consideration to the building codes in a very high-risk seismic zone. Corrective measures must be instituted from within a firm governance paradigm.

I have shared our wonderful trekking experiences and what we observed as we very much desire our younger generation to explore the tremendous natural beauty that Pakistan has to offer. That would only be possible if we consciously shun a consumption cum degradation paradigm with respect to our natural resources and adopt one that is sustainable. We need to recognise and conserve these wonderful places through practices based on ecotourism. In the end, I would like to profoundly thank friends and many wonderful people who made our treks possible.