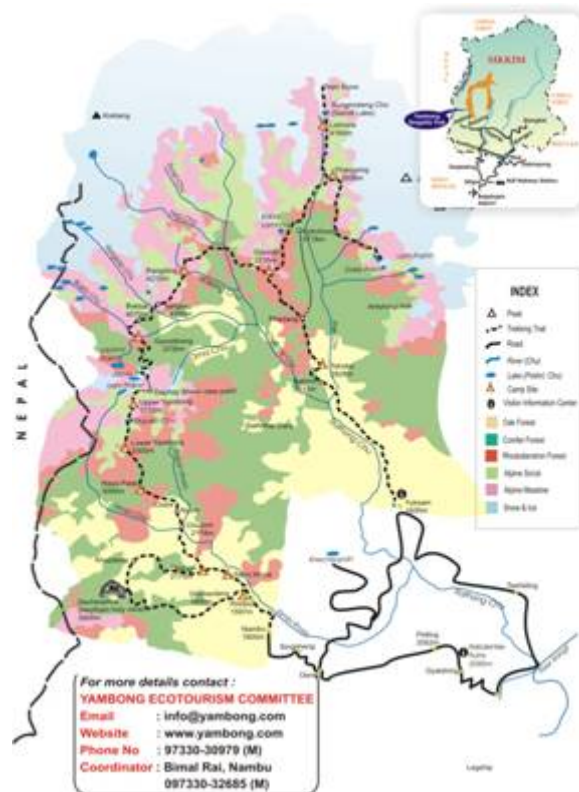


Yambong Singalila, the new ecotourism destination

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Yambong Singalila is a treasure mountain in Singalila range, this valley is also forms the border line between West Bengal, Nepal and Western part of Sikkim. This new destination has been packaged as *Yambong Singalila Trek* in the tourism market. The trek starts form 1,800 meter at Nambu village and goes up to a height of 5,100 meter at Dafey Bheer also called *devil's pass*. The top of the pass is a famous viewpoint, it gives a panoramic view of the world highest mountain Mt. Everest towards the left and towards the right is the beautiful Khangchendzonga range. This viewpoint is also surrounded by 6 alpine lakes at its base. It is a moderate 14 days round trek with entry from Nambu in West Sikkim and exit at Yuksam.



It is well said that, “tourism provides a novel opportunity for development of often remote and mostly resource poor but biodiversity rich mountain communities.” Earlier most villagers were engaged in pastoralism (yak herding and sheep herding) and large cardamom farming. In the year 2004, The Mountain Institute (TMI) (a non profit organization working with the mountain communities for mountain conservation), jointly with Sikkim Forest Department and Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) took up a joint intervention in the valley. The activities carried out included strengthening of villager institutions, incentives to ex-herders, health and sanitation programme, and providing better alternative livelihood through ecotourism, which then ultimately developed into the new ecotourism package “*Yambong Singalila Trek*”.

The local communities of Nambu, Rimbi, Sindrabong, Topung and Singpheng took the lead in making this programme a success. Their joint initiative in this community-based ecotourism gave birth to **Yambong Ecotourism Committee (YEC)** on 10th September 2005, which was setup to manage the Yambong tourism. Wider publicity was done through local media like Now, Nobeli and New Horizon. In the mean while www.yambong.com was also developed for more information sharing. The representative of YEC made a one time visit to most of the trekking operators here in Gangtok and briefed them about the trek.



Yambong Singalila then made a beginning in the tourism industry from October 2005. There has been an excellent growth over the last one year. Tourism within no time picked up so well in the valley, a total number of **314 overseas tourist and 13 domestic tourists** have visited this new destination between October 2005 and December 2006. An estimated total of **Rs. 16 Lakh (Rupees Sixteen Lakhs)** has directly gone into the hands of local ecotourism service providers who mostly served as porters, assistant guides and pack animal operators and a local fund of Rs.32,000 has been generated as revenue by the committee as contribution by its members. This fund have been utilized for expenditure incurred on salary for the office coordinator, communication, web site creation, office rental charge, organizing review meeting and repair of trails and log bridges.



While the total volume of **tourism business** generated by Yambong so far has been **about Rs 53 lakhs** (Rupees Fifty Three Lakhs), which includes incomes to travel, hospitality and other related sectors.

Other achievements of YEC

An office at Nambu, West Sikkim has been setup, an office coordinator has also been appointed who coordinates the trek. All the villagers involved in trekking tourism have been registered under Yambong Ecotourism Committee.

A **community campsite** at Chongri (yak herders village) has been developed. This community campsite consists of a kitchen cum porter's hut, toilet and bathroom with running water and a leveled camping ground, which is managed by the local NGO of the village.



With the support of Sikkim Development Foundation and Sikkim Ornithological Society (SOS) the **Yambong Bird Club** has also been formed. Many young youths have been trained in bird watching and have been provided with bird guidebooks, brochures and binoculars. They have also been made aware of the need for bird conservation.

Our **upcoming plans for 2007** includes capacity building of local youth, which will help them, avail better-paid jobs like cooks and guides. Promote home stay in all the villages and provide them training with the support of both Government and NGOs.

During the maiden trekking season in 2005 and 2006 we were able to ensure opportunities and income to 105 porters, 15 pack animal owners and 8 home stay operators. Although initially it was challenging for us to manage such a large number of

groups, later we learn from experience and could effectively manage the trek. The committee has also extended support to the travel companies to coordinate the trek.

Last but not the least a new tourist package called “Himalayan Heritage Hamlet trek” has also been developed. This 11day trek passes through some of the remotest villages where the traditional culture is still rich, vibrant and alive. One can experience the lifestyle of the yak herders at Chongri, Limboo culture at Topung, Bhutia culture at Melli, make a wish at the Khecheopalri wishing lake, archaeological delights at Yuksam, the first capital of Sikkim and Pokhri Dhara, Gurung sheep herders at Labdang, Lepcha indigenous community at Martam and in the end relax in the healing waters of the Borong Heritage hot spring. This can be downloaded from www.yambong.com



Our sincere thanks to the Hon' ble Chief Minister Dr. Pawan Chamling, Government of Sikkim for promoting Sikkim as an ultimate ecotourism destination, our area MLA, Madam Kalawatti Subba, who has always been guiding us as the Chief Advisor of the committee. The Sikkim Forest Department who approved the Yambong Singalila Trek, the tourism department who helped us promote and also recently revised the trekking rates, all NGOs who have helped us and undoubtedly all the travel operators who helped us promote this new ecotourism destination.

If you want to know more about Yambong-Singalila contact us at info@yambong.com or phone us at 09733091853.

