

A Himalayan campaign against plastic

Trash audit: Campaign members sift through the mounds created by visitors and others. | Photo Credit: [Darjeeling Chronicle](#)

Nothing prepared Yuraj Pradhan for the massive heap of garbage that greeted him as he headed to Tiger Hill near Darjeeling, known for its panoramic views of Himalayan peaks, including Mt. Everest and Kanchenjunga.

“It was a graveyard of plastic bottles, potato chip packets and other such products but all just plastic,” recalled 25-year-old Pradhan, who runs a home stay in the city. “We were shocked to discover this massive plastic dump near Jorbangla, within the Senchal wildlife sanctuary,” he said.

The hill economy is largely dependent on the huge numbers of tourists that leave the trash on the mountains. But now, 12 Himalayan States are jointly tackling the menace and demand measures to prevent the pile up.

The drive, initiated by two NGOs, Integrated Mountain Initiative (IMI) and Zero Waste Himalayas had twin objectives on World Environment Day: collecting as much waste as possible in a single day in the Himalayan foothills and analysing the trash.

Over 15,000 people were mobilised to collect waste from nearly 300 points in the 12 States. From across the borders, Nepal and Bhutan sent observers.

Mr. Pradhan said, “Eighty-eight of us went up to Tiger Hill.” The waste was segregated into 14 categories and then sold to garbage collectors or sent to collection centres.

“Out of these 300 points, 89 sent inputs to us,” said Roshan Rai, a key organiser of the exercise that took place on May 26.

Based on the inputs, IMI and Zero Waste found that 97% of it was plastic. In a report to the Environment Ministry, the NGOs said 62.67% was ‘multilayered plastic’ or polymer-based, non-recyclable food packaging. A further 17% was “plastic-layered paper, such as paper cups, and plastic-polystyrene utensils.” In Darjeeling and Kalimpong, nearly 70% was multilayered plastic, while other non-branded plastic made up around 12%.

The other major “enemy of the Himalayas is tobacco and all the chewing stuff,” said Mr. Rai, one of the presenters of the report.

“One of the key reasons for a massive escalation in use of plastic is all the biodegradable material to sell eatables— like paper bags— are out [considered old fashioned] and plastic bottles or multilayered plastic bags are in, choking the mountain,” said Dr Satyadeep Chhetri, a founding member of IMI in Gangtok.

Mr. Rai points out that Himalayan waste is “complete one way traffic. Garbage collection, sending out a vehicle, like in the cities, is not possible in the Himalayas.”

The Himalayan Cleanup report included a brand audit of the waste to enforce the ‘polluter pays’ principle, in collaboration with the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) covering 10 Indian cities. The brand audit sought to identify the top brands polluting the mountains and demanded that they take responsibility for the waste through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) mechanisms.

“The trash goes up but no one brings it back to the plains as the tourists are not interested to bring it back. Garbage collection, sending out a vehicle, like in cities, is not possible in the Himalayas,” he said.

“However, it is not only the tourists but the local community and the Defence installations that are equally responsible. There are tonnes of tetrapacks and bottles and plastics going up to defence installations. But there is absolutely no mechanism to bring them back and the mountain keeps taking the loads. The local inhabitants add to the littering,” Mr Rai said.

Brands to blame

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The audit puts global packaged food and beverage giant Pepsico at the top of the list, accounting for about 25% of all the waste generated by multinational corporations, while Parle Products topped the list of Indian brands.

“The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 were supposed to put the responsibility — or EPR — back on the producers, the big companies. But unfortunately the clause has been diluted as it was about to be implemented from this year,” said Mr Rai. The MP of Gangtok P.D. Rai, however, highlighted the need to implement EPR in the meeting with the Ministry officials.

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Mandatory segregation and recycling of plastic waste must be implemented before it is eventually phased out

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