

HOW UTTARAKHAND PLANS TO REDUCE PLASTIC WASTE ON THE CHAR DHAM YATRA AND BEYOND

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Employees of Recykal, a Hyderabad-based start-up, collect waste generated from Kedarnath to send it to recycling plant. Photo: Special Arrangement

Small steps can bring big changes. The Uttarakhand government has chosen the Char Dham yatra route that includes temples at Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri to implement a unique waste-disposal system in the Himalayas, Uttarakhand tourism secretary Sachin Kurve has confirmed. Hemkund Sahib and the [Valley of Flowers](#) will also see the implementation of a QR-code-based system that will streamline collection of waste and reduction of garbage along the route.

Visitors will scan a QR code on each plastic bottle and multi-layer plastic bag (of chips or biscuits) and pay a deposit over the maximum retail price (MRP). They can claim this amount back as a refund when they deposit the waste at a point at the end of the yatra. Up to 45 lakh QR codes are expected to be printed this year.

The idea and execution is being carried out by Recykal, a Hyderabad-based start-up that provides software solutions for better recycling and sustainability. Earlier this year, Uttarakhand and Recykal won silver for the project, in the Digital India Awards under a category that included a government's digital initiatives in collaboration with start-ups.

Last year, the project was piloted during the summer months, and executed compulsorily in Kedarnath, en route to the centuries-old Shiva temple on the banks of the Mandakini river at an altitude of 3,584 metres above sea level. It was done only on plastic bottles and 94,000 QR codes were distributed across traders on the way. The initiative across a 33-km stretch from Guptakashi to Kedarnath temple reached 546 shops, 334 eateries, and 94 hotels across the six-month duration of the yatra.

"Those who returned bottles included consumers, sanitation workers, mule owners and palanquin riders. If there were bottles that were not returned, the extra money collected was put in a corpus," said Sushma Sharma, the local representative of Recykal in Rudrapur.

Sensitisation workshops are being held for traders along the route, as the QR codes will be provided to them to paste onto each product.

According to Mayur Dixit, district magistrate Rudraprayag, where Kedarnath sits, the project last year saved 1.63 lakh single-use plastic bottles from entering the fragile mountain ecosystem. The daily solid waste generated in just Kedarnath amounts to about 1,000 kg, during the yatra season, from April to October.

Over 15 lakh people visited Kedarnath last year. He is hoping that this year's initiative will reduce the huge piles of trash strewn around the sacred shrine, mountains, and water bodies. In his weekly radio address on May 29, 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had appealed to people to keep the area clean.

The larger idea behind the initiative is to bring about a behavioural change in pilgrims. Last year, over 40 lakh people travelled to the four shrines. This year, the yatra, set to begin from April 22, has had over 2 lakh registrations as of March 23.

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