

Snow vanishing in Rohtang Pass

Shimla - The snow has almost melted away in Himachal Pradesh's Rohtang Pass this year much earlier than usual. Environmentalists say this is due to overcrowding and exhaust fumes of vehicles at the scenic tourist site.

The 3,915-metre-high Himalayan pass in the Kullu valley, some 55 km from the resort town of Manali, has never seen so little snow in early June.

Locals say the heavy winter and spring snow lasts well into July every year. However this year the rapidly melting snow has disappointed hundreds of holidaymakers who throng the pass from nearby Manali, 280 km from Shimla.

Until a few years ago the Border Roads Organisation would clear the heaps of accumulated winter snow in June. However, due to less snowfall in the last five years, the pass has started to open in May.

This year, the pass was thrown open to vehicular traffic May 5. But with the snow melting fast, the number of visitors is bound to fall in the coming months, say people connected with the tourism trade.

Environmentalists maintain that the heavy tourist traffic and exhaust fumes are responsible for damaging the fragile ecosystem around the pass, an important spot on the itinerary of tourists visiting Kullu valley.

The temperature on the Rohtang Pass has gone up by at least a degree in the last three decades, hastening the melting of glaciers around the pass, said J.C. Kunihal, a scientist at the Govind Ballabh Pant Environment Institute, Kullu.

According to Kunihal, the traffic has almost doubled at the pass during the peak tourist season in summer over the last three years.

In 2003, around 650 vehicles drove up to the pass from Manali, to either cross the pass into the Lahaul-Spiti and Ladakh regions or return to the resort town. The number of vehicles now has gone up to 1,000.

'The exhaust fumes of vehicles in the rarefied air is playing havoc with the fragile ecosystem of the pass and the valleys and hills in the area,' he said.

'In addition, clouds of dust are blown over the pass each day by the speeding vehicles that drive up and down the hairpin bends.'

Environmentalists have urged that vehicles equipped only with Euro II emission norms be allowed to drive up to the pass in order to maintain the ecosystem there.

According to them, the snow is turning black with the exhaust soot, which after melting goes into the water sources.

Some say the exhaust is so polluting that even the rocks along the roadside leading up to the pass are turning black or dark grey.

The Beas river originates at the edge of the pass. Incidents of flash floods downstream have also been on the rise in recent years.

The pass offers a majestic view of higher Himalayan peaks and the Kullu valley ends there, giving way to the bleak and barren hilly desert terrain of tribal Lahaul valley.

Around four years ago, the Rohtang Pass was in the news when environmentalists and the apex court rapped leading soft drink firms for painting advertisements on rocks along the road. The court ordered them to scrub clean the rocks damaged by chemical paints.

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