

Ecotourism: Nepal's Experience

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Introduction: An Overview of Tourism in Nepal

Nepal, a small Himalayan Kingdom, sandwiched between two giant nations of Asia: the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China to the north and India to the south, east and west, has a relatively short history of modern tourism. It was only opened in the early 1950's to rest of the world, paving the way for today's modern tourism development. Since then, the rich, diverse and spectacular lofty Himalaya, cultural heritage and biological wealth of the country have been drawing international tourists to Nepal.

In the early days, tourism in Nepal was mainly concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley, and only few mountaineers visited the Everest and Annapurna regions that are today's main draw. As time passed, Nepal developed the necessary infrastructure to support tourism development. An international airport in Kathmandu, a full-fledged hotel sector, the construction of domestic air-strips, establishment of public and private tourism related institutions, and travel and trekking agencies, all became instrumental to the growth of the tourism industry in the country. Tourist numbers started to soar, from about 6,000 in 1960's to over 300,000 per annum in 1990's. By 1994, 326,531 tourists were visiting Nepal each year (DOT 1994). As a result, Nepal is now a well-known international destination not only for mountaineering, but also trekking, rafting, cultural tours and wildlife safaris.

Tourism is also one of Nepal's important sources of foreign currency. In 1994, US\$88.2 million was earned from tourism, an increase of 32.9% over the previous year. The total contribution to GDP from tourism for 1993 and 1994 was 4.4% and 19.6% of total foreign exchange earnings for Nepal (DOT 1994). It is also an important sector for employment generation; although nationally it provides only one percent of the total employment, nevertheless, it is an important source of income and employment in the Kathmandu valley, Pokhara, Chitwan, Everest and Annapurna regions, all of which are popular tourist destinations. While the contribution of tourism to the national, regional and local economies has been viewed in positive light, it has also been linked to many detrimental social and environmental issues. Thus, over the years the value of tourism to the overall development process of Nepal has been questioned.

Impacts of Tourism

The impacts of tourism may be encapsulated in the following well-known phrases coined by reporters, visitors and Nepalese observers:

*"Tourism is a goose that lays golden eggs, but it can also foul its own nest." (Gurung and DeCoursey 1994), a phrase widely used to explain the present state of tourism in Nepal.

*"The Himalaya are the highest rubbish dumping sites on the earth," "Trekking is wrecking," and "Good-bye to Shangri-La," are some of the examples of catchy headlines that have appeared in national and international media which have linked tourism to pollution and deforestation problems in Kathmandu and Pokhara valleys, and also in the Everest, Langtang, Chitwan and Annapurna regions.

Tourism has created new demands for goods and services, and this has inevitably exerted new pressures on scarce resources, particularly forests, thus affecting wildlife habitats and pollution. Linked to this, tourism is a symbol of the affluent western life-style and consumerism. The demand of foreign life-styles for market goods is much higher than that of the native population, the majority of whom consist of subsistence agro-pastoralists. The accumulation of plastics, bottles, tin foils, cans and so on along Nepal's trekking routes reflects this. Furthermore, the growing orientation of local population towards the western life style and socio-cultural delinquency including increased use of drugs and a growth in criminal activities, have all been linked to a shift from traditional values induced by the advent of tourism, along with other modernization programmes.

However, in recent years, tourism's contribution to environmental conservation, the improvement of living conditions, employment generation for less educated and less-skilled people, has been recognized. Several pilot schemes have been designed to promote linkages of tourism to local development and resource conservation; these have often been labeled as ecotourism initiatives in Nepal.

Ecotourism in Nepal

Ecotourism or nature tourism is defined as "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontrolled natural areas with specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas" (Ceballos-Lascurain 1988). Apart from the Kathmandu and Pokhara valleys, tourism in Nepal generally involves traveling to a natural and less-developed area for adventure and to experience varying socio-cultural and environmental settings; hence, tourism in Nepal embraces strong elements of "ecotourism" or "nature tourism."

Having said this, I admit that it is the very nature of tourism in Nepal that makes it "ecotourism", but the tourism product itself, except in few areas such as the Ghalegaon and Sikles area and in the Upper Mustang, is neither carefully conceived, designed, intended nor developed as a distinctive tourism product. World-wide ecotourism has been used as a marketing jargon and Nepal's experience is no exception to this rule. Ecotourism, if not properly designed, managed and monitored, becomes a form of mass tourism that creates unforeseen and highly negative environmental and cultural problems. This has been the case along the main trekking routes, especially in the Everest, Annapurna and Langtang regions of Nepal, particularly in the past. Earlier, tourism was much more nature oriented. Neither the government, nor the private sector as well as the local people developed any tourism infrastructure. As a result with the increase of tourists by a few thousands, the negative impact on the environment was very visible.

With this experience, Nepal initiated a number of concrete steps towards developing environmentally and socio-culturally sound tourism. The King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC), the foremost non-governmental organization in the country, is playing a leading role in developing planned ecotourism in its project areas, especially in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA). In addition to KMTNC, there are

a number of other organizations involved in promoting responsible tourism or ecotourism. A brief summary of activities currently being undertaken in Nepal is provided in the following paragraphs.

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP): The cultural and natural beauty and diversity of the Annapurna region can hardly be matched in Nepal. This has made the Annapurna region the most popular destination for trekking tourism, drawing over 45,000 visitors annually who bring an equal number of support staff with them (ACAP 1995). The 90,000 plus visitors, whose consumption of fuelwood is two times that of a local resident (Banskota and Sharma 1995), is exerting tremendous pressure on forest resources, affecting the quality of wildlife habitat and leading to increased soil erosion and landslides. In addition, there is a huge accumulation of plastic bottles, canned tins, batteries and so on, leading to visual and water pollution. Hence, the ecotourism became the priority focus and strategic need for halting the region's environmental degradation.

In December 1986, following the Royal Directive of His Majesty King Birendra, the KMTNC, the leading national non-governmental organization in the field of conservation and development, took initiatives to design and implement an innovative conservation project which aimed at integrating conservation with sustainable human development and tourism management through ecotourism.

Before 1986, when a natural area was thought to be threatened with severe environmental problems, Nepal afforded it a protected area status such as national park or wildlife reserve. In all of these initiatives the local people living in or on the peripheries of the area were never considered as an integral part of the area to be protected. Wildlife and the maintenance of biodiversity became the main focus. The protection was sought through the deployment of regular armed forces who consumed more than 70 percent of the total budget of the Department of National Parks (B.N. Upreti pers. comm.). For the first time, ACAP departed from this conventional approach, and local people became the focus of conservation efforts in the ACA (Gurung 1992). The protection of the dwindling resource base was sought from them and all available resources were invested on their welfare. For this reason, the Annapurna region was given a different status of the protected area system and became the first and largest conservation area, covering some 7,629 square kilometers, or five percent of the country total land area.

Within this context, the ecotourism programme became the single most important strategy for integrating tourism into the conservation and development of the region. Much emphasis has been placed on improving the condition of the local lodges. The keys to making tourism manageable and beneficial to local communities, while linking it to the overall social and environmental development of the region, include:

- *Providing training opportunities;
- *Promoting alternative energy sources and fuel efficient devices;
- *Charging entry fees to international trekkers;
- *Decentralizing tourism management through formation of locally formed lodge management committees (LMC), and
- *Promoting kitchen gardening, poultry and other subsidiary services.

The Annapurna region has shown a remarkable improvement during the last nine years of ACAP's operation, but it is still too early to quantify the extent of that improvement. However, there are enough general indications confirming the improved environmental condition and living-standard condition of the local people. An evaluation of ACAP carried out by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in 1994 found out that over 70% of the local people attributed to ACAP the improvement of the area's forests, watershed and habitats. It also found a 90% improvement in general awareness of the environment and environmental issues among the local people, of which 87% was attributed to ACAP (Banskota and Sharma 1995).

Upper Mustang Conservation and Development Project (UMCDP): The upper part of Mustang, situated in the northern part of Nepal adjoining Tibet, was a forbidden region for tourism until March of 1992. To reach Lo-Manthang (12,500' ASL), the ancient walled city and the capital of Mustang, it takes 10 days of hard walking from the nearest road-head or four days from the nearest seasonal airport. There are geographical, climatic and political factors which retarded tourism development in the upper Mustang until recently. The region is situated in the rain shadow area and receives less than 100 mm of rainfall annually. In addition, the combined effect of a strong sun and wind induces high evaporation rates, and these environmental factors are responsible for Mustang's arid and desert landscapes. Furthermore, Mustang shares its northern border with Tibet. Therefore, until the recent political change, it was considered a strategic area for border security.

In March 1992, after the restoration of the parliamentary democracy in Nepal, His Majesty's Government of Nepal opened upper Mustang for trekking tourism, with a premium fee of US\$700, of which part of the revenue was to be ploughed back for the conservation and development of the region. It was also decided by the Government that management responsibilities for this area would be handed over to the KMTNC/ACAP, by including upper Mustang within ACAP's jurisdiction. ACAP's experience in the lower part of the Annapurna region proved an advantage to design and plan a management strategy for the upper Mustang which not only looks at the ways of optimizing tourism benefits, but also attempts to maintain the social and cultural integrity of Mustang. As in the southern Annapurna area, local people are the focus of ACAP's endeavors in Mustang too. Thus, KMTNC established the Upper Mustang Conservation and Development Project (UMCDP) in November 1992 with its headquarters at Lo-Mangthang, the capital of Mustang.

Mustang provides a very different destination for Nepal's tourism market, and the government of Nepal has decided to limit the number of tourists to only 1,000 per year. In addition, they must travel using a government-recognized trekking agency only. The garbage generated by tourists has to be brought back down from the mountains for disposal, and each group must be escorted by an environmental officer in order to ensure that the trekkers do not travel beyond authorized routes. Funds generated from the tourism fee are being invested in improving local health care, drinking water supplies, irrigation facilities, schools, and in encouraging heritage conservation, reforestation, and alternative energy sources. In this way, the local people will be able

to tangibly see benefits of tourism and will be more willing to participate in the conservation of the unique heritage of Mustang.

Ghalegaon-Sikles Ecotourism Project (GSEP): Given these experiences from the Annapurna, Everest and other parts of Nepal, where unmanaged tourism usually leads to environmental degradation, the need for environmentally sound, sustainable tourism that also conserved natural resources and benefitted local communities, was widely recognized. As a result, KMTNC/ACAP developed a week-long model trekking route between Ghalegaon-Sikles in the western part of Nepal in 1992. Once developed, this route will be using alternative energy or energy saving devices, and local people will be trained on lodge operations in order to improve the quality of their product. Proper waste management systems will be developed. A natural and cultural museum will be built to promote local culture and tradition simultaneously training the local people in order to produce local arts and crafts so that non-lodge owners can also benefit from tourism. Basic infrastructure such as drinking water, trails and bridges, schools and health care systems and camping facilities will be improved so that it will not only benefit tourists but also local people. Most importantly, emphasis is being placed on biodiversity conservation, particularly the protection of the last remaining rhododendron forests located between Ghalegaon and Sikles, thus highlighting Nepal's national flower.

The GSEP is funded by the Asian Development Bank, as a part of the "Tourism Infrastructure Development Project," a multi-million dollar loan to His Majesty's Government of Nepal. Once this project is completed, tourist flow will be channeled from one direction and will be carefully monitored. Once this model becomes successful, it will help to promote responsible and sustainable ecotourism elsewhere in Nepal.

The Sagarmatha (Everest) Pollution Control Committee (SPCC): Since the first successful ascent of Mt. Everest by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and Sir Edmund Hillary in May 1953, the region has become a mecca to mountaineers and trekkers. The local economy has improved greatly through tourism as have local livelihoods. However, along with the economic development, mountaineers and trekkers have exerted significant pressures on forests and also have produced hundreds of tons of garbage along the trails, mountain slopes and basecamps, leading to environmental deterioration (Hillary 1993).

Realizing that further degradation would jeopardize the tourism industry, local economy and the fragile environment, in 1992 His Majesty's Government of Nepal took the drastic measure of restricting the number of climbers and increased climbing royalties from US\$10,000 to a staggering sum of US\$50,000, effective from 1993 (MOTCA 1995). It was also decided that unless local people benefitted from tourism, the environment could not be protected. Thus, His Majesty's Government of Nepal established the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund. Part of the revenue is being ploughed back into the region for the environmental protection and sustainable community development program. In this case a local NGO, SPCC, was given the responsibility of tourism management and environmental upkeep.

Since the establishment of SPCC, local people have generally kept the region cleaned. SPCC has provided training for lodge-owners, and information centres have been established in order to sensitize visitors and locals so that the fragile ecosystems of Everest can be better protected.

Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP): In 1992, after the tragic death of a British trekker in the Everest region, friends of the deceased person and a group of Nepali environmentalists felt the need to set up a centre in Kathmandu to distribute free information to trekkers on safe and environmentally sound trekking and mountaineering in the country, in order to prevent such tragedy from occurring again in the future. The result was the establishment of the Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP). Since 1992, KEEP has established an information centre in Kathmandu where free information on sound and safe trekking is provided to interested persons. Regular lectures on various subjects ranging from ecology, economy, and culture to development have been offered. KEEP has also designed eco-trekking workshops for managers, sardars, cooks and support staff on environment, health and sanitation, alternative energy and kitchen management and camp site management. English language classes have been run regularly to improve trekking staff's communication skills with their clients. Since its establishment, more and more tourists have visited the KEEP information centre and are getting advice.

The Partnership for Quality Tourism Project (PQT): The year of 1993 was a dark year for Nepal's tourism. Worldwide, unfair publicity about Kathmandu's garbage problem, the deforestation and litter along some of the major trekking routes, and the political turmoil within Nepal and neighboring countries in addition to the global economic recession, greatly reduced tourists' visitation to Nepal. Nonetheless, it turned out to be a "blessing in disguise." Both the public and private sectors realized that, unless they came out together as partners, the tourism industry would be further plunged into decline and oblivion. Hence, in 1994 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Nepal provided a forum by supporting a year-long project known as "Establishing a Partnership for Quality Tourism" (PQT 1995).

The main objective of PQT is to develop a partnership between the private and public sectors in the tourism sector to foster a good working relationship with the ultimate goal of sustaining the industry. To achieve this, three Task Forces represented by players from both private and public sectors have been formed to direct three pilot programmes, namely, urban attraction, village training, and production of video films for international promotional use. In addition, a main Steering Committee has been established under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation. The Steering Committee established an Institutional Review Task Force that will review the rules, regulations and functions of the existing tourism related institutions and ultimately propose an organization that can effectively manage tourism development, taking overall responsibility of managing a quality tourism industry for Nepal.

Discussions and Conclusions

Tourism was traditionally considered as a "smokeless" industry, passive and harmless to the environment. It can bear fruit to sustain many development programmes, but it can also destroy the very fabric of the

industry upon which it is based, if it is not properly managed. Tourism is a fairly young industry in Nepal, really developing only after the 1970's. Innovative schemes such as KMTNC's ACAP, UMCDP and GSEP, SPCC, KEEP and PQT are becoming pioneering examples for developing ecotourism within the regional Himalayan context.

However, these are some isolated examples. Both the government and the private sectors use "ecotourism" as a marketing tool only, without clearly understanding that sustainable tourism depends upon the proper management of the natural environment and the maintenance of its biodiversity. Ecotourism, by definition, is nature based. When short-term benefits are given priority over the conservation of biodiversity by the government and private sector, the future of the whole tourism industry is in doubt. Due to proper environmental management exemplified by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, one can easily observe that even with a hundred percent increase in the number of tourists (from 25,000 in 1984 to 46,000 in 1994), the overall cumulative negative effects of tourism have been minimal. The quality of tourist products has improved along with the satisfaction of tourists themselves, and the tourism industry has also benefitted local communities.

In all of the endeavours discussed above, emphasis has been placed on developing a grassroots approach to sustainable tourism programmes, which can assist in environmental protection while addressing the local need for social, cultural and economic development. This has been achieved through the careful selection of programmes, people's participation, institutionalization of local bodies, and more importantly, by sensitizing the local people, bureaucrats and trekkers to the key issues involved.

The ecotourism is now viewed as a tool, not only to create distinctive tourism products, but also to improve the livelihoods of local people and their environment. Key successes include getting the government to collect entry fees from trekkers visiting the Annapurna region, and using either part or all of these funds to create an endowment fund that has been ploughed back to local conservation and development efforts. This has improved local livelihoods though expenditures on improving schools, drinking water, trails and so forth as well as increasing local confidence. Besides community development programmes, tourism revenue has been used as an important leverage to promote alternative sources of energy, for training and awareness programmes, the provision of soft loans to build proper facilities - actions that have made possible the development of a series of eco-lodges in the Annapurna region.

Ecotourism has also been used as a new product to diversify tourism volume from one area to another. It has been used as a management tool to keep the pressure off one particular area, thus encouraging wider distribution of tourism revenues. The need for proper facilities such as toilets and waste disposal for better caring for the environment and guests alike has become the main aspect of sustainable tourism development in the Annapurna and Everest regions. Finally, ecotourism has provided the key strategy to educate all direct and indirect beneficiaries in Nepal, with education and conservation values spreading and extending from communities to thousands of trekkers. It is believed that unless all join hands to improve the

area and support initiatives to the best of their abilities and available means, tourism, conservation and development schemes will not be sustained in the long run.