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Ecotourism in the Himalayas: The Nepalese Experience

by *Elizabeth Kalbfuss*



Yak-packing in Nepal
(Photo: Elizabeth Kalbfuss)

NAMCHE BAZAR: For centuries, this hillside village — the gateway to the Mount Everest region — has been renowned as a market centre. Even today, a few traders still travel across the snowpeaks from as far away as Tibet and surrounding hills to barter salt and yak meat for rice, millet and other goods from the south. But lodge owners from across the region also travel to the Saturday market to pick up supplies for the tourist trade: peanut butter, Mars and Snickers candy bars, and rolls and rolls of toilet paper.

More than 20 years of intensive tourism have had a significant impact on both the way of life of Sherpa communities and the environment they depend on. "I remember in 1970 when we first saw trekkers here and everybody went out to see the white people," says Anu Sherpa, who has lived in Namche Bazar all his life. At that time, he was an 11-year old boy with one year of schooling who dressed in clothes made from yak wool and wore buffalo-skin shoes.

Now he owns and runs the Himalayan Lodge Restaurant and Bar, complete with roof-top satellite dish. While his wife likes to watch movies on one channel, he cheers for the Australian cricket team on the sports channel.

Tourism Boom

All of Namche is a boom town. At least half a dozen new trekking lodges were under construction this spring; stone houses with wooden beams obtained from outside the protected forests of the park. Land values in this village of about 1,000 people are rumoured to be about the same as those in Kathmandu,

with a population of over 400,000.

In 1994, more than 325,000 tourists visited Nepal, compared with around 46,000 in 1970. Mountaineers and trekkers come to experience the majestic Himalayas, while other tourists enjoy the thrill of spotting rhinos and tigers in southern wildlife reserves like Chitwan National Park. In the Annapurna region and Sagarmatha (Mount Everest), tourism increases the population of hillside villages by four- to five-fold. Tourism adds about US\$70 million per year to government coffers and is the country's largest source of foreign currency.

Capacity for Growth

By the end of the decade, Nepal aims to attract up to one million tourists annually. "We feel there is still tremendous capacity to increase tourism," says Kumar Prasad Paudel, joint secretary in the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. "We have introduced systems of ecotourism and given people a sensitivity for the environment."

Until recently, however, the price of Nepal's popularity with tourists was a steadily deteriorating environment. Although mountaineering expeditions have come regularly to Mount Everest and other peaks since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's ascent in 1953, it was only five years ago that the first Nepali organized clean-up of the base camp site brought out 500 yak loads — 30,000 kilograms worth — of leftover trash.

Annual Clean-up

The Nepal Mountaineering Association is now negotiating with the government to institute a yearly clean-up of the base camp. "Now, it's very clean. But on some routes you can still find garbage," says Dorjee Lama, of the Khumbu Environmental Conservation Committee office in Namche. Outside Lukla, for example, where the nearest air strip is located, broken beer bottles and trash nestle between the red-flowering rhododendron trees. More common, however, are refuse pits containing garbage awaiting incineration, as well as depots for storing empty beer and pop bottles until they can be flown back to Kathmandu for recycling.

Several years ago, the government agreed to turn over a portion of the trekking fees generated in Sagarmatha and Annapurna to groups like the Khumbu committee for use in clean-up and conservation activities. "We were sick of hearing that Everest is a toilet bowl," says Mingma Norbu Sherpa, of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). WWF put in the seed money and the Rinpoche — the local lama in the monastery at Tengboche — launched the Khumbu group. Mingma Sherpa approached the lama for his support rather than a political figure because, in the Buddhist Sherpa community: "If the lama talks, everybody listens. If it's a politician, nobody listens."

Even with the Rinpoche's backing, it still took three-and-a-half years to persuade the government to approve the introduction of tourist entry permits. Today, entry permits generate over CA\$500,000 a year for the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. "This is a direct benefit of tourist dollars. It pays for conserving biodiversity and culture," says Mingma Sherpa.

Road to Recovery

Because of initiatives like this, environmentalists say that the Mount Everest region is now on the road to recovery. "I've watched the place for 30 years and it is basically in good shape," says Malcolm Odell, of the Makalu-Barun Conservation Project, which is partly funded by IDRC. "I saw more wildlife in two days [on a recent visit] than in two years when I lived there [in 1966]."

Indeed, many of what Odell calls key indicator species, such as musk deer and Himalayan tahr, seemed to

be thriving. "If I see them wandering through the village, that tells me that all of the other species are in great shape too."

Fragile Ecosystem

This does not mean there are no ongoing environmental threats. According to the WWF's Sherpa, every trekker puts stress on what will always be a fragile ecosystem. Above 4,000 metres, vegetation grows at a snail's pace, he notes. Moreover, the average trekking group that does not rely on kerosene consumes 10 times more firewood per day than a local Sherpa family.

"People who used to work in the field, who used to tend yaks," he adds, "are now working as guides and assisting tourists so there is [also] an indirect impact on the traditional lifestyle."

The potential for destructive change is making the Makalu-Barun project team proceed cautiously. Located just east of Mount Everest, the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area includes tropical rain forests at elevations just above sea level as well as majestic mountain peaks. The park is also home to several ethnic groups.

Tourism Development

Tourism development is one component of this project. The national park now receives around 500 visitors per year and an increase in tourists could help reduce poverty in the region. The challenge is to ensure that local people benefit economically from the park, but not at the expense of their culture or of the environment. Ang Rita Sherpa, the park's tourism development officer, is planning facilities that cater to trekkers, such as environmentally friendly lodges that will be leased to lodge keepers.

"Many people think tourists are good, they bring cash. They don't realize [their culture may suffer because] culture is linked to tourism," he worries.

Cultural Survival

Back in Namche, Anu Sherpa sighs when asked about the survival of Sherpa culture, as though it is a question he has answered many times. "Come," he beckons. In his family's private quarters, the satellite TV occupies one small corner. On the opposite wall, the whole length of it, is a newly built Buddhist shrine with intricately carved dragons and other animals.

Then he smiles, anticipating the next question. "The wood," he says, "was carried in from outside the park."

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Ecotourism in Northern Thailand

by Glen T. Hvenegaard



**Bird watching is a popular activity at Doi Inthanon National Park in Thailand
(photo: Glen Hvenegaard)**

The brilliant Green-tailed Sunbird emerged from behind the rhododendron, offering a group of excited British birders a satisfying look. This race of sunbird is endemic to Doi Inthanon National Park and a key tourist attraction for some visitors. After four days of bird watching in the area, these birders had spotted a total of 165 species, leading one veteran to describe the park as one of his "favourite places" in the whole world.

This sentiment is widely shared. In 1993, more than 900,000 people visited Doi Inthanon in northern Thailand, triple the number of a decade earlier. Most tourists come to enjoy the scenery, relax with friends, or make a pilgrimage to the summit of Mount Doi Inthanon, which is the highest peak in the country. Others, such as these birders, come specifically to experience the stunning biodiversity in the park. Growing numbers of Thais have also taken up birding, or "du nok" as it is called in Thai.

Ecotourism Benefits

Birding is a popular form of "ecotourism", an activity that may ultimately help governments improve their management of natural resources. Ideally, ecotourists visit sites such as Doi Inthanon National Park to observe wildlife and spend money in the area. As a result, governments and locals have economic incentives to maintain these areas in a natural condition to ensure continued visits by ecotourists.

Ecotourism is therefore promoted as a [tool for biodiversity conservation and rural development](#).

To achieve these twin goals, however, careful management and planning is required. Before promoting ecotourism activities, park managers should assess and mitigate the potential impacts from ecotourism. We analyzed these impacts during an IDRC-funded study conducted at Doi Inthanon, in which 857 park visitors were interviewed. The study evaluated and compared the impact of ecotourists versus conventional tourists. In economic terms, we found that visitors to Doi Inthanon spent a total of CA\$12.5 million in Thailand during their stay and that ecotourists spent 33% more than other tourists, including a higher amount inside the park.

Low Budgets

Today, 13% of the land base of Thailand is environmentally protected. However, efficient management of the protected areas is constrained by low budgets. Park entrance fees have the potential to contribute directly to management expenses, but are currently channelled into the Thai government's general revenues. Doi Inthanon now has a two-tiered fee system, where foreigners pay a higher amount (CA\$1.25 compared to \$0.25) per person.

To increase revenues from ecotourism, some governments may be tempted to create additional parks. However, this approach could backfire if popular sites receive more funding for conservation purposes than less popular but more ecologically important sites. Another strategy is to request donations from park visitors. More than 80% of the tourists we surveyed said they would be willing to contribute to conservation efforts at Doi Inthanon -- one respondent said she would have made a donation "if only she knew where to give." However, other tourists were skeptical that their donations would be used efficiently and expressed concerns about the potential for corruption.

Harassment of Wildlife

Ecotourism has the potential to cause harmful environmental impacts. One issue is the harassment of wildlife. For example, some birders attract birds by whistling or playing a tape-recorded song, which brings them out into the open to confront the "intruder". When used too often, however, this strategy may cause birds undue stress. Another issue is trampling. Birders often venture off the trail in pursuit of birds, damaging the underlying vegetation and soil in the process. To reduce this problem, park managers have constructed a raised boardwalk around a heavily-used bog at the summit of Doi Inthanon.

Litter is also a concern. Most of the birders we surveyed were conscientious about keeping the park clean. But Phil Round, an ornithologist and conservationist in Thailand, says that even when litter is placed in garbage bins, it may end up being thrown into the woods and burned. Similarly, air pollution can be a problem on busy weekends when up to 5,000 vehicles travel to the summit each day. Fortunately, some tourists use public transport, especially trekkers and birders.

Social Impacts

Besides its economic and environmental impacts, ecotourism can have social effects. At Doi Inthanon, more than 4,000 people, including Thais, Karen, and Hmong, inhabit some 600 villages located in the park. [Hilltribe villagers](#) earn a living by growing rice and cash crops, such as ornamental flowers and strawberries, which are often sold in nearby cities. About 80% of villagers also collect plants and fuelwood for personal use or to sell. Villagers raise additional revenue by selling garden produce and handicrafts to tourists. If hilltribes can benefit economically from ecotourism, they may support habitat-protection initiatives and depend less on unsustainable uses of park resources.

Currently, around one-third of all tourists stop at the hilltribe villages, where their contact with residents is mostly restricted to the souvenir trade. The exception are trekkers whose goal is to experience village life

and interact with the locals. For hilltribe villages, the impacts of tourism include increased commercialization, altered food habits, and the substitution of traditional dress for Western clothing such as t-shirts. More than 60% of the trekkers we surveyed felt that their contact with village residents had negative economic and social impacts.

Shared Excitement

By contrast, the impact of ecotourism is generally more benign. At the Doi Inthanon Birding Center, birders are given the opportunity to share the excitement of recent sightings with each other. The Center, operated by a Thai birder, is a place to exchange news and gossip over a delicious Thai meal. It was here that a bird watcher from England celebrated a rare milestone -- sighting his 2,500th bird species (out of some 9,000 known species around the world).

The primary goal of Thai national parks is to conserve the land in a natural state, while providing opportunities for education and recreation. Compared with other types of tourism, ecotourism has the most potential to meet these goals. It is clear from our research that ecotourists are distinct from conventional tourists and have different -- and often more beneficial -- environmental, social, and economic impacts on protected areas.



Photo: Glen Hvenegaard

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On safari in East Africa:
tourism can have positive or negative effects
on biodiversity and local culture

Tourism, Biodiversity, and Culture: Toward a Sustainable Ecotourism Strategy

Tourism is a relatively new social activity that has recently emerged as a global phenomenon. Long before tourists began traipsing all over the world, social interactions involving different cultures usually occurred in the context of commercial trading, wars or migrations. As a result, cultural exchanges were relatively restricted, occurring in specific geographical regions or within the expanding limits of political and military empires.

However, with the advent of technological advances in communications and transportation came a shift in people's attitudes towards travel. People (namely westerners) began to travel for the sake of traveling, which launched a process of cultural globalization. This process has accelerated in recent decades as a result of further technological breakthroughs in the airplane and information industries.

Cultural Impact

It is from this perspective that one can begin to comprehend the cultural impact of international tourism. When tourists arrive at their destination, they bring with them different beliefs and behaviours, which to some extent influence the host culture. At the same time, tourists are changed by their experiences. In short, tourism is an interactive phenomenon, affecting both the hosts and the visitors.

But this effect is lopsided. The influence of tourists on the societies they visit is generally more pronounced than vice versa. The majority of global tourists come from a few affluent countries (dominant cultures), which are relatively unaffected by visitors from smaller local cultures. On the other hand, tourism increases the risk of irreversible cultural and ecosystemic disruptions in smaller societies.

Social Impoverishment

If we assume that culture is the foundation of a society, it is clear that tourism - if conducted in a nonsustainable manner - can contribute to social impoverishment. One problem is that the foreign culture, as portrayed by tourists, appears out of context. While on vacation, many people change their styles of sleeping, spending, gambling, and socializing. As a result the view that local people receive of the visitors' culture is not only alien, but also inaccurate.

In general, the more exotic the location, the more in demand as a tourist destination. This is why tourists tend to favour places with a high degree of biodiversity, such as Costa Rica, as opposed to Kansas or the humid Pampas, which are relatively uniform environments. The paradox is that tourism, which thrives in high- diversity environments, can accelerate the degradation of such environments.

Latin American Ecotourism

In Latin America, the ecotourism industry is based on both natural and cultural attractions. Nature tourism is an important enterprise in the Amazon region (Venezuela and Brazil), in Costa Rica, and in other mainland Caribbean countries. Another popular form of tourism is "ranch" tourism (called "turismo de hato" in the Venezuelan llanos, "turismo de estancia" in Argentina and Uruguay, "turismo de fazenda" in Brazil, and "turismo de ranchos" in Mexico).

The demand for exotic vacations has expanded to include visits to indigenous and minority ethnic groups in remote locations around the world. In many places, indigenous peoples have maintained local traditions and developed sophisticated practices for the sustainable exploitation of their environment. However, these groups are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of tourism. In the search for untouched and authentic tourist destinations, many places once considered "off the beaten track" have become overpopulated with visitors, accelerating the pace of social and environmental degradation.

Sustainable Tourism Strategies

For these reasons, the development of a sustainable approach to tourism must be based on strategies that protect and strengthen both natural and cultural diversities. It should avoid the clash of conservation-versus-people — which has become particularly common in Africa. It needs to integrate the rights of local communities to use and manage natural resources. And it should ensure that any profits from tourism are used by the local populations as well as for the conservation of natural resources.

Ecotourism has the potential to help preserve and enrich local indigenous cultures not only in the short term, but also from a transgenerational long-term perspective. Indeed, the development of a sustainable tourism model could play a valuable role in the development of more sustainable societies worldwide. There are, however, significant risks involved in any tourism or ecotourism initiative. When developing an ecotourism strategy, the vulnerability of the natural or cultural resource being promoted must be carefully assessed to ensure that any planned activities do not threaten or undermine it. Furthermore, it is absolutely critical that local communities, in their struggle for sustainable livelihoods, be involved in integrating ecotourism activities into self-reliance projects that benefit both the community and the natural environment.

IDRC Initiatives

IDRC currently supports a number of projects and initiatives that deal directly or indirectly with ecotourism in Latin America, Asia and Africa. These projects are intended to help promote greater recognition of the value of the natural and cultural environments, and to support the design of integrated natural resource management strategies that include local communities as participants, while promoting an equitable distribution of the benefits obtained. It is expected that these projects will contribute to the development of sustainable tourism policies and strategies at the national and international level.

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[Diversity, globalization, and the ways of nature](#), by Danilo Anton

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