

**Tourism development and environmental management in Nepal:  
A study of Sagarmatha National Park and the Annapurna Conservation Area  
Project with special reference to upper Mustang**

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**"The abode of Gods, King of mountains, Himalaya!  
You bound the ocean from east to west,  
A northern yardstick to measure the Earth."  
-Extract from a Sanskrit poem by Kalidas**

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## **Abbreviations**

ACA	Annapurna Conservation Area
ACAP	Annapurna Conservation Area Project
AHF	American Himalayan Foundation
CDC	Conservation Development Committee
CAMC	Conservation Area Management Committee
DDC	District Development Committee
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
KMTNC	King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation
SNP	Sagarmatha National Park
WWF	World Wildlife Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UMBCP	Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project
UMCDP	Upper Mustang Conservation Development Project

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## **Abstract**

Mountains are now thought to be second only to beach locations as the most popular tourist destinations. However, the popularity of mountains as a tourist destination comes at a potential cost to the mountain environment. Nowhere is this more so than in the Himalayas, which as home to the world's highest mountains, have been the focus of much attention in the academic press. Some articles have suggested that the Himalayas were being damaged beyond recovery as a result of unsustainable human activity, while the more pragmatic view is that the extent of the problem is exaggerated. While experience in Nepal has shown that tourism does damage the environment, it can also be an invaluable means of development and environmental conservation. To achieve this, a holistic approach to tourism and environmental management is needed that takes account of the needs of the local community, tourists and the

environment. By examining tourism development and environmental management in Sagarmatha National Park and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, using secondary data sources, a number of issues were derived that form essential elements to this holistic approach. These issues formed the terms of reference for the primary research, which looked at tourism in Upper Mustang. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with people involved in development and environmental conservation in Upper Mustang. Using the terms of reference as the outline for each interview, an assessment was made of their importance to sustainable tourism development and environmental conservation in Upper Mustang. It was found that in the case of Upper Mustang, each of the issues considered forms an essential link towards the goal of achieving environmentally sensitive development. The primary research results in this report therefore correspond to previous experience of tourism and environmental management in Nepal and elsewhere.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Setting the context of the report**

The stunning beauty of the mountain environments in Nepal has been largely responsible for the increasingly significant role tourism plays in the Nepalese economy. This report looks primarily at mountain tourism in Nepal, the environmental impacts of this and how they are managed. In the present context, mountain tourism means trekking and the environment refers to the natural, physical environment. However, no discussion of tourism and environmental management in the mountain areas of Nepal is complete without reference to the socio-economic environment as tourism can play a pivotal role in the development of mountain communities (Shrestha, 1995). This will become increasingly apparent as this report progresses.

Despite the importance of tourism in Nepal, it has proceeded in a largely ad-hoc, demand-driven and unplanned manner, resulting in damage to the mountain environment in certain parts of the country (Banskota and Sharma, 1995a). This approach has also led to crowding in certain destinations, such as Sagarmatha National Park, while others, in part due to their remoteness, have remained neglected until recently. Upper Mustang is an example of this.

The mountains in Nepal create a unique resource for tourism development. As tourism in this context relies on the environmental quality of the mountains, environmental management becomes the central theme for using this resource for development in general, and tourism in particular (Shrestha, 1995). Furthermore, it has been suggested that tourism, protection of the physical environment and development can have a symbiotic relationship provided there is a holistic approach that addresses the needs of the environment, tourists and the mountain community (Banskota and Sharma, 2000; Bisaz and Lutz, 1998, cited in Godde, 1998). It follows that trekking tourism could be a means of

development in the impoverished mountain regions of Nepal, but the benefits of tourism will only be sustainable if environmental management capabilities are in place.

In a recent study of mountain tourism and environmental management in Nepal, it was suggested that ideally tourists, the local community and the natural environment all benefit from tourism (Nepal, 1999). In this win-win-win scenario, tourism enhances the management capability of the area, the local community benefits from the protected areas and is encouraged to support conservation activities, and tourism benefits the community in general thus producing a favourable attitude towards tourism (ibid). The focus of this report are the specific considerations that have to be made in order to achieve this win-win-win scenario.

## 1.2 Aims and Objectives

*The aim of this project is to make a comparative analysis of the experiences of tourism and environmental management in Sagarmatha National Park and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project in Nepal, and derive from this a framework linking tourism with development and environmental management in Nepal's mountain environments. The issues highlighted in this framework will act as the terms of reference for the primary research.*

*The objective of the primary research is to examine the importance of the issues highlighted in this framework in relation to the development of tourism and environmental management in Upper Mustang.*

Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project have been selected for an analysis of the issues surrounding tourism development and environmental management because they are the two most popular trekking regions of Nepal and are the subjects of a great deal of tourism literature. Between them, they illustrate the major issues concerned with trekking tourism and its potential impacts on the mountain environment. In brief, tourism in Sagarmatha is widely acknowledged to have brought considerable economic benefit to the region but not without degradation of the physical environment (Stevens, 1993a; Rogers, 1993). In contrast, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project is considered to be a model of sustainable tourism management, where there has been an overall improvement in the livelihood of the local population and conservation of the environment as a result of carefully planned and managed tourism (Gurung, 1992).

A comparative analysis of secondary data relating to trekking tourism in these two regions is used to draw out the issues that are important to tourism development and environmental management in Nepal's mountain regions.

These issues are put together to form the terms of reference for the primary research. This is discussed in detail from section 2.7 onwards.

The findings of the primary research are based on a series of in-depth interviews with four individuals who are involved in the development of tourism in Upper Mustang. A discussion of the research methodology is presented in Chapter 4, and the research findings are presented in Chapter 5.

### **1.3 Structure of the report**

**Chapter 2**, the literature review, begins with a brief review of the global significance of mountain environments and their growth in popularity as tourist destinations. To set the context for a more detailed discussion of tourism in the Nepal Himalayas, the opening section of Chapter 2 also addresses, very generally, the impacts of tourism in mountain regions and the concept of sustainable mountain tourism.

Before focussing specifically on the issues of tourism in the Nepal Himalayas, it is first necessary to review what became known as "The Theory of Environmental Degradation" (Ives and Messerli, 1989). In essence, this suggests that a significant rise in the population in Nepal, particularly in the mountain regions, was unsustainable, resulting in accelerated and widespread environmental degradation, particularly deforestation. It is important to review the issues surrounding this as it formed the basis of much of the subsequent discussion of tourism in Nepal.

The impacts of tourism on the mountain environment in Nepal are discussed in detail in section 2.7 using the Sagarmatha National Park. The development and management of tourism in Sagarmatha is then contrasted with the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. As discussed in Section 1.2, the result of this is the development of a conceptual framework for the development of tourism and environmental management in other mountain regions of Nepal.

**Chapter 3** looks specifically at Upper Mustang and discusses the issues surrounding tourism, development and conservation in that area. This chapter introduces the Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project, a five-year project designed to use tourism as a means of local development and environmental conservation. It is this project that is the focus of the primary research.

**Chapter 4**, as mentioned above, gives an account of the primary research methodology, why it was selected and how it was applied. There is also a discussion about alternative methods that could have been used and suggestions for further research.

**Chapter 5**, the Research Findings, presents a summary of the answers given by each interviewee. The full transcript of each interview is available in Appendices E, F, G and H.

The concluding section, **Chapter 6**, discusses the research findings and their relevance to previous work in this field of research. It concludes that the issues in the tourism development and environmental management framework, devised through the analysis of the secondary data, is highly relevant to the development of tourism in Upper Mustang. There is also a discussion of the applicability of the research outside Nepal. This suggests that although the approach to tourism and environmental management has to be customised to suit the peculiarities and objectives of each location, the framework at least provides a basis for addressing the important issues common to all. It is also suggested that because of the nature of these issues, tourism and environmental management can only be sustainable on a limited scale.

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**Notes to readers:**

The paper is a Master's thesis carried out in The International Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Management, Bournemouth University, UK.