

Management of community-based mountain tourism: Case study of Makalu-Barun National Park, Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal has become a popular tourist destination, attracting increasing numbers of travelers each year. Nepal's natural beauty, extraordinary cultural heritage, rich ethnic diversity and artistic heritage and Nepal Himalayas particularly Mt. Everest is responsible in attracting visitors to Nepal.

Tourism has become a major source of income for the country and has become a major force in its economy. Tourism provides direct employment in the form of guides and porters in trekking, mountaineering, and other adventures in the mountain areas.

According to the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) records, tourist arrivals in 2000 were 376,503 against 421,000 in 1999. A total of 1,000-1,500 visitors to Makalu-Barun National Park and Buffer Zone generated an estimated Rs. 12.5 million (US\$ 275,000) annually for the rural economy.

Tourism has greatly helped the local economy by improving living standards with better health care, education, and building structure. The increased number of visitors over the decades in this region has also resulted in increased environmental degradation of these fragile mountain areas. There is a widespread agreement that excessive levels of unmanaged tourism can have a detrimental impact on Nepal's protected areas especially in the mountain region.

Environmental impacts can be found on natural resources such as like water, vegetation, energy, food and wildlife. There is pressure on forest resources as a result of the demand to meet the energy needs, such as fuel for cooking and heating while trekking. Similarly environmental pollution along trekking routes has been another problem associated with tourism.

Congestion becomes inescapable with ever-growing traffic, disturbance and crowding in mountain regions. Tourism also results in change of values such as loss of aesthetic sense in building infrastructure, demonstration effects changes in traditional social custom.

Despite the environmental impact from tourism in the region, there is very little reinvestment of the economic benefits of tourism in natural resources management and community development. The benefits from tourism are not well distributed. Those who have been the main beneficiaries are often the traditionally well off local people or investors and the government in the form of royalties and fees. If this trend continues, how can tourism in the mountain area be managed in a sustainable way? To overcome the increasing number of tourists visiting Nepal, and the concern of environmental impacts, The Mountain Institute (TMI) has been promoting community-based eco-tourism in the Makalu Barun. This program seeks to create a direct economic link for conservation by encouraging sustainable nature based tourism in the Makalu area. TMI's ecotourism activities focus on 4 aspects; 1) to promote sustainable mountain tourism while 2) minimizing the negative environmental impacts and 3) ensure that local communities receive direct economic benefits from these activities and 4) create local capacity for on-going management.

After working several years, tourism facilities have been significantly improved in the Makalu Barun National Park and Buffer Zone due to innovative approaches of The Mountain Institute. This innovative approach shows that there are ways through which the dual aims of resource conservation and maximization of the economic benefits of tourism can be fulfilled. The region is now safer for tourists, the lodges are cleaner and pleasant than before, less firewood is used due to introduction of back boilers, solar water heating devices and establishment of kerosene, blanket and stoves for porters, and local residents reap the common benefits.

Although there are more trekkers than before, the fragile eco-system is protected from damage through comprehensive eco-tourism programs. The ongoing work of the MBNP/BZ includes:

- Creating tourism promotion materials, maps, displays etc to increase visitor numbers;
- Promoting alternative fuel saving technologies to reduce dependency upon and use of firewood;
- Training local people as nature guides and cooks;
- Formation of locally controlled lodge management committees;
- Training lodge owners in standardized lodge management; including recipe booklets, management manuals, etc
- Creating and promoting designated campsites;
- Establishing locally managed kerosene depots and blanket depot for porters;
- Trail and bridge improvement programs to improve access and safety;
- Constructing porter's shelters
- Improved waste management for garbage and toilets;
- Developing codes of conduct for tourism operators;
- Formation of a 400 member porters association;

- Establish visitors information center to disseminate information to tourists and porters;

The Porters Association provides a good example of TMI's working approach and philosophy. In 1998, at the request of local people TMI organized a general meeting of porters who serve the Makalu Base camp trekking route. The meeting was called to address two main issues, a) to protect porters from abuse or unfair treatment from tourists and 2) to develop strategies to prevent misunderstanding and disputes between tourists and porters who speak limited or no English. About 400 porters attended the meeting, much more than initially anticipated.

As a result from this meeting, the participants recommended forming a porters association. This porters association would develop a code of conduct for porters and tourists, standardize pricing for different routes, and designed a membership card to identify members of the association. In exchange for these benefits, members of the porters association would pay a nominal fee to allow the association to have funds for additional meetings. The meeting concluded and the newly formed porters association asked TMI's assistance in developing porter identification cards and requested TMI to provide Rs10, 000 to establish the association. Now four years after the formation of the association, membership has increased, the management board has revolved according to their constitution, the funds available have increased Rs 10,000 to Rs 37,000 (Dec 1999 figures) all from local contributions and they have developed plans to use these funds to support community projects.

Based on the successful experience in Makalu, TMI has replicated the porters' association experience in Langtang National Park, and has shared our experience with Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, Sagarmatha National Park and in the Annapurna areas as they begin to replicate this approach in these protected areas.

The porters association demonstrates several key TMI operating principles in action. First, local people through their active participation identified the problem and suggested the solution. TMI acted only as facilitator for the meeting. Second, TMI provided initial support and technical guidance, but local people set up the structure to continue the activities after initiation. The locally managed Porters Association managed under rules and regulations designed by themselves acts independently of TMI. Third, TMI provided initial seed money and initial start up costs, but local people actively contribute to the fund, making future activities independent of future TMI financial contributions. For more information more detailed reports are available from TMI Asian Regional Office in Kathmandu.

The experience of The Mountain Institute provides some lessons in the sustainable management of tourism. It shows there are ways through which the

dual aim of resource conservation and the maximization of the economic benefits of tourism in affected areas and communities can be fulfilled simultaneously.

Notes to readers

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