

## Tourism development and local communities

### Abstract

The goal of tourism in Nepal should be to improve the living standards of the people. In practice, the benefits from tourism are concentrated in the hands of a few people, typically based in Kathmandu. Small-scale, alternative forms of tourism could be developed to help to spread the economic benefits of tourism to local communities.

A study of tourism in Upper Mustang was made in 2003 (Heredge 2003) examining key issues in planning tourism development to maximize benefits to local communities there. In Upper Mustang at the time of writing, there was no evidence that any of the local people benefit economically from the limited numbers of visitors who go there. In Ladakh, an area in India that is also popular with tourists for trekking, a number of initiatives have helped to spread the economic benefits of tourism more widely to the villages and more remote areas in the region.

This paper aims to summarize some of the findings from the study undertaken in 2003 and looks at some of the initiatives observed in Ladakh to assess how applicable they may be to Nepal.

### Methodology

The study undertaken in 2003 drew primarily on secondary sources following a visit to Upper Mustang in May 2003<sup>1</sup>. In 2005, during a six week stay in Ladakh, contact was made with the Ladakh Project and the Women's Alliance of Ladakh, set up by Helena Norberg-Hodge.<sup>2</sup> Here it was seen that there have been a number of initiatives that have helped to spread the benefit of tourism to local communities.

### Article

The goal of tourism in Nepal should be to significantly and substantially improve the living standards of the people. In Nepal, most of the income from tourism is concentrated in the hands of a minority, often based in Kathmandu or Pokhara. In particular, in Upper Mustang, local people gain very little economic benefit from tourism, with all of the revenues going to trekking agencies outside of the area. Conversely, in Ladakh, whilst trekking agencies based in Leh and outside earn the majority of income generated from tourism, there were a number of smaller-scale initiatives that helped spread the economic benefits of tourism. This article will attempt to summarise some of these and consider how similar ideas might be applicable in Nepal.

One of the main reasons why tourists visit Nepal is to go trekking. Some also come as sightseers. An increasing number of Indian tourists come to visit sites of religious importance, and many visitors come for short stays (often to get an Indian visa) or to pass through on their way to Tibet. These shorter stay visitors generally limit their stay to Kathmandu, the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara and maybe Chitwan. For those who go trekking, they usually follow a number of standard routes mainly in the national parks and protected areas of Nepal.

There are about 500 trekking agencies registered with TAAN (Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal) based in Kathmandu alone. The owners of these agencies and

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<sup>2</sup> Norberg-Hodge H Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999



many of their staff, even if mostly originating from outside of the city, over time have settled in Kathmandu. Many have left their villages, moving their families to the city in search of better facilities and schools for their children. This means that the income earned by trekking staff largely gets spent in Kathmandu.

Not only is there a problem of control going outside of the local area to the metropolitan core, but also much of the profit from tourism leaks out to international and trans-national companies outside of Nepal. Many tour groups are organised by foreign companies who sub-contract to Nepalese agencies. These foreign companies cream off a substantial proportion of the cost charged to the tourist in their home country, often paying local companies, thankful for the business, comparatively low rates.

In Upper Mustang, the lack of a surplus of food and fuel in the region means that everything needed by tourist groups has to be brought in from outside of the area. Typically this means that provisions are bought in Pokhara or Kathmandu, so there are no benefits to local people in providing tourists with supplies. Treks into Upper Mustang generally start at Jomson and Kagbeni, where pack animals or porters may be hired. Again in most cases, this does not provide people in Upper Mustang with employment, as outsiders usually provide these services. Whilst not so extreme in other areas of Nepal, there is still a tendency to bring a significant proportion of supplies needed for treks from outside the area, as the costs locally tend to be much higher than in Kathmandu or Pokhara. The cost of transporting goods in areas not served by roads can double or treble their price.

For “tea-house” treks, where tourists stay at lodges along the main trekking routes, then more money does go to the lodge owners. However this is reduced when trekking groups only use the lodge for accommodation, bringing their own food to avoid the higher cost of food provided by the lodges. Although backpackers in general spend much less money, this often can be dispersed more widely if they hire guides and porters locally and pay for their meals and accommodation directly to local people along the way.

Polarisation occurs when existing social elites get richer, exploiting their control over land and other resources. Tourism does offer employment opportunities, but often not many jobs go to local people (Lindberg, Enriquez and Sproule 1996:553), and benefits go mainly to hoteliers, travel and trekking agencies and airlines (Pradhanang 2000:210). Even if local people earn income from tourism, experience indicates that these benefits tend to be highly concentrated among a small percentage of local people. In areas like Ghandruk (Annapurna), Langtang and Sagarmatha, besides lodge owners, the benefits of tourism have not spread much into the villages (Banskota 1998). The existence of *local* tour companies with linkages to the *local* economy would reduce the external control of resources. Problems with a lack of co-ordination with other economic sectors would need to be resolved, but this could be made possible by effective participation of all groups across the community (Shackley 1999:95-109, Gurung 1998).

Benefits of the multiplier effect of income from tourism in local areas will depend on the form of tourism that exists there. In Upper Mustang it is almost non-existent. Expenditure by visitors is minimal. The multiplier effect is higher when money is dispersed on a small scale through locally owned businesses that have linkages with the local economy (Pradhanang 2000, Shackley, Furze, de Lacy and Birkhead 1996, Sharma 2000). Outside of the main trekking routes however, there is limited penetration by tourists. Facilities for accommodation and meals are often more basic than mainstream tourists would find comfortable. There is also much less information and



less ease of access to more remote areas. Added to this, the increase in Maoist activities during the past decade mean that most tourists do not tend to stray off the beaten track. Benefits of the multiplier effect are also diluted by leakage. This will always be impossible to avoid completely, if not from the country, then from the local area. Goods transported from elsewhere in Nepal are carried in by porters and pack animals. Prices are then often two or three times higher than paid Kathmandu or Pokhara. The road from Tibet to Lo Manthang in Upper Mustang make imports from China much cheaper, but the leakage is much greater, as this means payments are going outside of the country, to the benefit of China and not Nepal. Overseas leakage of tourism earnings such as payments for imports, foreign staff salaries and an increase in consumption by locals of imported goods made available through tourism can be high.

Mountain tourism in Nepal relies on a relatively narrow market of those interested in nature, the outdoors, trekking and climbing. In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on “eco-tourism” and special interest holidays. The global market for these types of holidays has been increasing, even if it still makes up a small percentage of the total tourist market. This type of tourist tends to be older, wealthier and more educated. By further diversifying the kind of tourism offered in Nepal, this could attract visitors who otherwise might not be interested in “The Great Outdoors” or other more physically active holidays. Alternative forms of tourism, making accessible more and interesting venues for the shorter-stay, non-trekking tourists, could provide a way for local communities to develop tourism services.

Observing the types of tourism available in Ladakh, India, it can be seen there have been initiatives to help to spread the benefits from tourism outside of Leh, the main hub for trekking agencies, into villages and to local people directly. For example, local families have been encouraged to make available a room in their home for home-stay accommodation. This initiative was prompted as an incentive to protect the snow leopard, an endangered species that was taking its toll on livestock, thus incurring the wrath of villagers who felt justified in hunting what they regarded as a menace. Building on the attraction that these rare animals might have to visitors, home-stays in some areas were developed in partnership with the local people as a way to protect the snow leopard as well as a means to generate a supplementary form of income.

Information is made available through a number of sources. The Women’s Alliance of Ladakh does much to promote cultural awareness not only amongst Ladakhis, but also by promoting Ladakh to visitors. The Ladakh Project publishes guidelines for visitors to Ladakh, promoting the concept of supporting the local economy, cultural sensitivity and ecological issues.<sup>3</sup> A students’ organisation in Leh is pro-active in advertising their services as local guides. The Women’s Alliance of Ladakh is also very active in enhancing tourists’ awareness of the fragility of region, in terms of environment, culture and economy. Much work has been done to promote local produce and support the local economy.

A locally produced guidebook to Ladakh provides details about treks, including a number of “home-stay treks”. These tend to be quite easy, light-weight treks that tourists can do themselves, travelling light, going from home-stay to home-stay. Prices are fixed for accommodation and meals and the money goes directly to the family. The routes include places of interest and villages, most with access to limited transport. In particular, it was observed how many tourists who otherwise had little or no experience

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<sup>3</sup> Tourism for Change: Some Guidelines for Visitors to Ladakh The Ladakh Project International Society for Ecology and Culture [www.isec.org.uk](http://www.isec.org.uk)



in “trekking”, were very attracted to these short itineraries, which varied from just two or three days to maybe a week or so. An absence of telephones meant that booking in advance, though possible, was no more than a “guarantee” that the tourist would find somewhere to stay. In practice, the availability and limited scale of this form of tourism meant that it would be unlikely that all accommodation would ever be full. This form of “trekking”, with its emphasis on culture and the environment appeared to be very popular. Whilst not receiving many visitors, most of the home-stay families could be seen to receive a few during the tourist season, providing a useful source of additional income.

In addition to the more conventional type of trek in Ladakh, for the less energetic, there were also many options of using transport and camping at places of interest. Pony trekking was also an option in many places. Information was readily available about places of interest that could be visited from Leh. The state tourist information office supplemented information that privately owned trekking agencies provided.

There was seen to be a wide range of tourists in the area. Whilst there were many trekkers who had come for the dramatic scenery, trekking peaks and challenge of trekking at high altitude, there were also a large number of tourists who were not looking for this type of holiday. Many were there to relax, to experience the local culture and to take in the scenery without going for long or arduous treks. The abundance of monasteries and festivals, the number of scenic villages set in spectacular landscapes, river rafting and other alternatives to trekking meant that even though the tourist season in Ladakh tends to be limited to just three or four months of the year, the area was able to offer a wide variety of options to attract visitors.

Ladakh, despite its extreme climate and short tourist season, benefits from being a much smaller area than Nepal. However Nepal, covering a much larger area and with more diverse landscapes, could develop some of these ideas in a similar way. Although one of the main motives to go to Nepal is trekking, increasingly visitors are looking for something that is that little bit different. This may mean developing more routes a little “off the beaten track”, incorporating places of cultural and social interest or providing short and easy itineraries that appeal to a different clientele. There needs to be an ever widening range of venues and routes. This then can also help to encourage repeat visits and disperse tourism more widely, enabling some of the more isolated areas the opportunity to benefit from tourism. Home-stay accommodation and short itineraries could increase the number of visitor nights spent in an area, which in turn would increase the viability of further development. Alternatives to mountaineering and conventional trekking could be developed such as pony trekking. Itineraries on horseback could include exploration in more remote areas. There is the scope for many types of “special interest” itineraries that could follow specific themes: religion; vernacular architecture, festivals and indigenous art. Bird watching and nature tours are possible options that could be provided by local guides, familiar with the fauna and flora of their local area. Local guides were trained in the Manang area by ACAP in 2004, providing a valuable service to trekkers spending a few days in the area to acclimatise as they trek around the Annapurna Circuit. Local guides based in their villages could give information about the local places of interest, festivals and local culture. In Upper Mustang, a disadvantage of having to use a trekking company from outside of the area lay not only in language, but the lack of depth of knowledge about the culture and places of interest there. There is often a revival in interest in traditional languages and culture by local people when they recognise the respect that visitors have for them. This has been seen with Sherpas where their self-image has increased as a result of respect from



tourists (Furze, de Lacy and Birkhead 1996:171). In Ladakh this was evident and the people in many areas of Nepal could also benefit in this way.

Throughout Nepal there are many festivals that offer visitors an interesting insight into local culture. For example in Upper Mustang, there are the Sonam Pe Losar new year's celebration in mid-February, Sakaluka in late February, Tempa Chirim, or "Teje" in May, Saka Dawa from mid-May to mid-June and Yartung in late August. Great care is needed to avoid the risk of the festival losing value or ceasing to appear authentic. Many of the festivals fall outside the main visitor season, so the risk of this might not be so great. Information on what is being seen is essential. Tourists need to be able to interpret and respect what they are seeing, rather than become bored. In Upper Mustang, there was very little explanation of the significance of the dances and masks worn by the monks during the Teje Festival observed there. However, there the four-day long festival was totally for the benefit of local people (there were fewer than a dozen foreign visitors there during this time). Conversely at Sakti in Ladakh, the two-day Buddhist festival in August was probably attended by more tourists than local people, to the detriment of local people who were unable to see much without paying for a seat. However, religious tourism can be seen to have positive effects on local people (Shackley 1999:107-109). In addition, attending festivals can enhance visitors' motivations as by implication, with visitors seeking education, novelty, cultural enrichment and socialisation (Crompton and McKay 1997:425-439).

Referring to Nepal, Banskota (1998) suggested "new tourism products that are integrated within the local economy must be developed". He proposed a "mini-tourism hub" with a variety of products and activities developed at some distance, one or two days away from the "hub" where services would flow from the "hub". By developing new and varied products and through marketing, it should be possible to increase the number of nights spent at the "hub centre". These services and products would need to be environmentally friendly and of high quality in order to encourage people to stay for longer. This model is evident in Ladakh and is an effective way to help disperse the economic benefits of tourism.

The key to sustainable development of tourism is through the involvement of local people, not only in determining the form tourism should take, but also in controlling ways income from tourism should be spent to benefit their communities. The WTO stated that there was no reason to believe that rural communities are systematically in favour of tourism as many people see it as a source of disturbance and the cause of too many changes in local habits and customs (WTO 1983). However, tourism has benefited areas like Namche Bazaar, Ghandruk and Langtang and in many remote areas, without the development of "mountain tourism", these areas would not have benefited from tourism (Banskota 1998). As long as local people see the benefits of tourism, they will become the most efficient guardians of their natural environment and cultural heritage. Care is needed not to always over-emphasize the "bad" of tourism. Tourism is bound to bring change but these needs to be distinguished from sustained negative impacts. In the long term, impacts on mountain communities have been largely positive and in many remote areas, without tourism, there are few alternatives to improve well-being (Banskota 1998).

Benefits from tourism should go to the community as well as to individuals who are in direct receipt of tourism revenues. Improvements in education can address concerns that local culture is being eroded, by teaching children about their local heritage. Local teachers should be trained to avoid children being taught by outsiders, with little understanding of local religion and culture. Training will be needed for home-stay



management and other tourism services. Local people would be in a better position to be able to provide tourism services themselves rather than having to depend on outsiders providing these services. Improved education can help to provide better opportunities to improve living standards in general. Improved health care and education on hygiene and sanitation benefit local people as well as visitors. Alternative forms of energy would be needed, as there will be higher demands from tourism for energy for cooking, heating and lighting. Improvements to the quality of drinking water and sanitation would benefit local people and tourists alike. In Upper Mustang for example, restoration of the monasteries in the region, as well as enhancing the religious life of local people, can be seen to be maintaining the very assets that attract tourists to the area.

For local communities to become involved in tourism development, local institutions often need to be strengthened. People need to learn how important it is to preserve and maintain their cultural heritage. Much work has been done in Ladakh to promote pride in Ladakhi culture in the face of what are seen as threats from modernisation and globalisation. A primary objective in any tourism management strategy needs to be to preserve the uniqueness of places in such a way that everyone can derive economic benefit from tourism without the associated social, cultural and environmental problems.

There is extensive literature on community-based participation in tourism development planning, as this is of key importance to sustainable tourism development (for example Scheyvens 2002, Cole 1997, Din 1997, Hall 1998, Jannssen, Kiers and Nijkamp 1995, Roo 1991). Participation is a vital component of sustainable development generally and eco-tourism specifically. Community participation at the planning stage ensures that local people can identify problems and form their views. By being involved in planning and allocation of resources, they can control and manage tourism development on their terms, ensuring its sustainability. Local involvement is essential to implementation and management, both individually and collectively. This is a necessary component of sustainable development generally and eco-tourism specifically (Drake 1991:132).

Relying on tourism alone to generate growth is problematic. Expectations are disappointed when it is found not to be the answer to poverty and when the negative impact of tourism is seen to outweigh the benefits. Earnings fluctuate when there is global recession. Seasonality and political disturbances make tourism very unreliable. In particular, the political problems in Nepal during the past decade have seen tourist numbers in 2005 drop to one tenth of those who came in 1999, a peak year for visitors to Nepal. Political stability and peace is required before tourists will come back to Nepal in the numbers seen in the late 1990s. The number of people visiting Nepal has been increasing from just over 6,000 arrivals in 1962 (Ministry of Tourism in Shackley 1994:18) to a peak of just under 500,000 arrivals in 1999. However, arrivals fell to 361,000 in 2001 (WTO 2003:134) and by 2005 were being quoted at around 50,000. Escalating political unrest in Nepal has deterred many tourists from visiting. In particular, during the spring of 2005 and perhaps again in the spring of 2006, the state of emergency and escalating violence, strikes and tension means that visitors are avoiding the risk of coming to Nepal. Income earned from tourism should always be seen as a supplementary way to earn income. Many people leave agriculture to seek employment in tourism (MacLennan, Dieke and Thapa 2000), causing problems when the growing season coincides with the peak season for tourism. However, tourism can form a valuable supplement to agriculture (Pagdin 1995:229) and contribute to economic diversification. There are often comparative advantages in terms of climate, mountains,



eco-tourism and cultural heritage sites that can be useful in developing tourism (Brohman 1996:52).

In conclusion, by diversifying the tourism product on offer and by involving local communities so that they are in control rather than outsiders from abroad or Kathmandu, a variety of small-scale tourism services could be developed. This could serve to attract tourists who might otherwise not visit and the income earned would benefit local people.

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