

MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN NEPAL: FROM IMPACTS TO SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The Himalaya is characterized with immense natural beauty and is inhabited by over 150 million people with a rich cultural diversity. It is also one of the poorest regions of the world. With a rapid population growth and lack of opportunities to economically advance, the livelihoods of the mountain people are quickly deteriorating along with the natural environment. Mountain tourism could be an important vehicle for development of the region, turning the tides of deterioration by alleviating poverty of the mountain people while at the same time helping to conserve the unique natural and cultural resources of the region. Mountain regions share roughly 15-20% of the global tourism market, generating between 70 and 90 billion US dollar per year. However, research has shown that these tourism dollars do not necessarily reach the poor. This study describes the main impacts of mountain tourism in Nepal. However - in contrast to conventional impact studies- it moves beyond simple description of these impacts and instead builds on this information to suggest new strategies to help poor mountain communities to benefit more from tourism development in their area. It argues that only with the deliberate adoption of sustainable and pro-poor tourism strategies and policies, combined with an integrated conservation and development approach, tourism can function as a true vehicle for poverty reduction of poor mountain communities and development of the region.

Introduction

The mighty Himalayas have caught the imagination of travelers for a long time. The region is characterized with immense natural beauty extending on very fragile slopes and is inhabited by over 150 million people that have a rich cultural diversity. It is also one of the poorest regions of the world. With a rapid population growth and lack of opportunities to economically advance, the livelihoods of the mountain people are quickly deteriorating along with the natural environment. Mountain tourism could be an important vehicle for development of the region, turning the tides of deterioration by alleviating poverty of the mountain people while at the same time helping to conserve the unique natural and cultural resources of the region. In some remote and inaccessible mountain areas, it may even be the only viable option for development.

Tourism is the world's largest growing industry, with 691 million international tourist arrivals worldwide, generating 523 billion US dollar per year (WTO 2004), with an expected annual growth rate of 4.1% over the next 20 years (Lama and Sattar 2002).¹ It is estimated that mountains share roughly 15-20% of the global tourism market, generating between 70 and 90 billion US dollar per year (Mountain Agenda 1999; PAIA 2005). After coastal regions, mountains are thought to be second in global popularity as tourist destinations (Walder 2000). Recent trends indicate a surge in the number of

¹ Considering the fact that domestic tourists are not included in these figures, the actual number of tourist arrivals worldwide is much higher.

visitors to ecotourism destinations, mainly located in the mountains. Hiking, camping, mountaineering, rock-climbing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing and other forms of non-consumptive recreation are in growing demand (Nepal 2003). The potentials for tourism development in the Himalaya are therefore enormous.

The contribution of tourism to developing economies is huge: tourism accounts for more than two times the cash transfers from rich to poor countries than governments give in aid (Ashley and Mitchell 2005). Many mountain regions have seen a strong rise in living standards after tourism was introduced. Even in the European Alps, where tourism has become one of the major sources of income for many mountain resorts, most mountain communities were poor agricultural settlements before the growth of mountain tourism began in the 18th century (Beniston 2000, cited in Walder 2000).

The need to address mountain concerns and the potential contribution that tourism can make to mountain communities is increasingly being recognized. Agenda 21 of the UN Conference on Environment and Development stated that the fate of mountains may affect more than half of the world's population, and acknowledged mountain tourism as an important component in sustainable mountain development and conservation (UNESA 1992). However, research has shown that tourism does not necessarily lead to development and conservation, if no deliberate efforts are made to link the industry with the development concerns in the mountains, specifically poverty alleviation, environmental conservation and regeneration and the empowerment of local communities (e.g. Banskota and Sharma 1998). The challenge is to balance resource utilization and conservation to make mountain and tourism development sustainable, so that its positive impacts on mountain communities and environments are maximized, while at the same time its negative impacts are minimized as far as possible.

In this study, the impacts of tourism are explored in one of the most mountainous countries in the region: the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal. The nature and scope of mountain tourism in present-day Nepal is described. The major impacts identified so far under the broad themes of economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts are summarized. In contrast to conventional impact studies, this study does not confine itself to these descriptions, but attempts to translate them into new strategies for sustainability. The aim is to move from simple description of tourism impacts, but rather to use that information to suggest appropriate and feasible approaches that will help mountain communities benefit more from tourism development in their area. After looking at the distribution of the impacts, strategies are identified to increase the benefits to the poor, so that tourism can function as an enhanced vehicle for poverty reduction and mountain development in Nepal.

This study is based on desk research, using secondary data on impacts in the mountainous areas of Nepal that have been documented in the media, policy documents and academic circles. By doing so, this study has some unavoidable limitations. First, despite the importance of the tourism sector in the mountain economies, we were unable to discover any continuous studies on mountain impacts and how these have changed over time. Data on mountain tourism impacts in Nepal have been collected in a sporadic and unsystematic way, making it difficult to indicate trends over time. Secondly, there is a clear regional bias in the data that have been recorded. As mountain tourism in Nepal is primarily concentrated in a few protected areas, specifically the Annapurna and Sagarmatha/Everest (see Brief Overview), most of the impacts that have been observed

refer to these limited geographical areas. Naturally, these impacts do not necessarily reflect the situation in the less visited or less accessible mountainous regions of Nepal.

Mountain tourism in Nepal: a brief overview

With her diverse topography and geography, home to 8 of the 14 highest mountain peaks in the World (including Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the World), rich biodiversity (including rare and endangered mammals such as rhinos, tigers, snow leopards and red pandas), and rich ethnic diversity among it's people (61 ethnic groups and 70 spoken languages, with very distinct cultures, lifestyles and traditions), all within an area of not even 150,000 square kilometers, Nepal is naturally blessed as an appealing tourist destination in the Himalaya. Indeed, most of the tourists are said to visit the country for its unique natural and cultural resources (SNV 2003). With 83% of the total landmass consisting of mountain landscapes, mountains play a focal role in the tourism industry. In a survey conducted among almost 1600 international tourists, almost half of the visitors (47%) indicated that they considered scenic beauty and mountains as the most important factor in deciding to visit Nepal (MARG 1997).

The initial impetus for tourism came with mountaineering, but it was not until 1955 that Thomas Cook offered the first organized tour of Nepal for foreign visitors (Karan and al 1994). Ranking among the least developed countries in the Asian and Pacific region, tourism constitutes one of the most important sectors of the Nepali economy. In 2004, the country was visited by 385,297 international tourists (NTB 2005b). The contribution to the national economy is substantial, with the tourism sector comprising 3.6% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), earning over 168 million US dollar, or 15.9% of the total foreign exchange earnings (MoTCA 2000).

Different outdoor activities, such as rafting, mountain biking and wildlife tourism are popular in Nepal. In mountain areas, most people come for trekking and mountaineering, with trekking being the most popular mountain tourism activity. Most trekkers come in organized groups, participating in organized tours that are arranged by tour operators in the major towns, especially Kathmandu and Pokhara. For accommodation they rely on camping or lodges and teahouses. Whereas teahouses and lodges are generally locally owned, and use local products and facilities, campers are generally self-sufficient and bring all necessities (food, shelter, equipment) themselves (thus leaving less economic footprints in the local economies).

Almost all trekking and mountaineering in the mountains is done in Protected Areas (PA's). With the fairly recent designation of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, there are now a total of 6 National Parks, 3 Conservation Areas and one Hunting Reserve in the Nepali mountains (with another 3 in non-mountainous areas; see table 1).

Table 1: Protected Areas: National Parks, Conservation Areas and Hunting Reserves in Nepal

Protected area (year of establishment)	Area (Sq.km.)	Altitude (m.)
Royal Chitwan NP (1973)	932	150-815
Royal Bardia NP (1976/1988)	968	152-1,494
Shivapuri NP (2002)	144	1,366-2,732
Khaptad NP (1984)	225	1,000-3,276
Makalu Barun NP (1992)	1,500	435-8,463

Sagarmatha NP (1976)	1,148	2,800-8,850
Langtang NP (1976)	1,710	792-7,245
Shey Phoksundo NP (1984)	3,555	2,000-6,885
Rara NP (1976)	106	1,800-4,048
Total	10,288	
Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (1987)	1,325	2,850-7,000
Kanchenjunga CA (1997)	2,035	1,200-8,598
Manaslu CA (1998)	1,663	1,360-8,163
Annapurna CA (1986,1992)	7,629	1,000-8,092
Total	11,327	

Source: HMGN/MFSC 2002, cited in MOPE 2004; note: NP – National Park, CA – Conservation Area

The Annapurna (conservation area) and Sagarmatha (National Park) are amongst the most popular mountain destinations for trekkers and mountaineers. As pointed out in the introduction, the research data in this study are therefore mostly based on mountain tourism activities in these two destinations.

Mountain impacts

As stated in the previous paragraphs, the potential for mountain tourism in Nepal is enormous, and the demand for mountain tourism activities is growing. Projections from the 10th 5-year Tourism Plan from the National Planning Commission, estimate that by 2015, over one million tourists (1,219,000) will visit Nepal, leading to foreign currency earnings of 635 million US dollar - 4.1% of the GDP (NPC 2001). With mountains as a focal point of the tourism industry, this scenario demonstrates the great potential of tourism to contribute to mountain development. However, as past experience indicates, management of mountain tourism (and thus control over its impacts) is of crucial importance, if it is to stimulate development in the mountain regions.

Economic impacts

Economic impacts are diverse. Benefits and problems need to be looked at both in overall terms, as well as in terms of regional differentiation and groups who benefit. Tourism development has both positive and negative impacts on mountain communities' economies. The most important of these are summarized below.

Income and employment

On a macro level, tourism is one of the principle sources of foreign exchange in Nepal (The Mountain Forum 1999). Tourism growth has been strong in the last decade of the 20th century. By the end of 2001, the tourism sector was assumed to have directly employed 80,000 people, and the contribution of this sector to the total foreign currency income generation and total gross domestic product had been 12% and 3.1% (NPC 2001). Not all tourist expenditures are formally registered in macro-economic statistics, however. A large amount of money comes in through informal employment, such as informal guides, porters, pack animal owners, street vendors, et cetera.² In some areas, these indirect contributions even appear the most significant sources of income– for instance in Humla, where formal labour markets are very restricted (Saville 2001:27-29). In some popular mountain regions, tourism expenditures constitute the majority of

² The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that tourism generates an indirect contribution equal to 100% of the direct tourism expenditures (UNEP 2000).

household income. An old study of Khumbu (gateway to Everest and home to the famous Sherpas), for instance, indicated that in the mid 80s already 80% of the households derived their income from tourism (the Mountain Forum 1999). This did not only make the Sherpas one of the most affluent ethnic groups in the Nepali society, but also created economic enrichment for some groups in the wider mountain area, offering for instance employment and cash income to porters and lodge employees from beyond the local boundaries and foreign traders who came across the borders in growing numbers to sell their produce to both local residents and tourists (ibid).

Leakages and inflation

Having said that, there are many hidden costs to tourism development, which can have unfavorable economic effects on the host communities. One of these are the economic leakages. Although tourism expenditures may be high, it is highly inequitable in terms of beneficiaries. In almost all of the mountain areas of the Himalaya, most of the earnings from tourism flow to large urban-based tour and travel agents and entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry, with little spontaneous effects on the poverty alleviation of the rural mountain people (Sharma 1998). Studies in the Annapurna Area have shown that although the scope for local production in for instance horticulture, dairy and livestock is large, the linkages with the local production base are often insignificant and few, due to which dependency on outside imports is substantial – e.g. with 68.09% of possible leakage from tourism generated income in Ghandruk, and an 76% import rate in Ghorepani (Banskota and Sharma 1997).

Another problem is inflation: price hikes caused by the increasing demand for basic services and goods by tourists while local incomes do not increase proportionally. Although in some instances separate markets exist with distinctive goods and prices for 'locals' and 'tourists', it is generally recognized that inflation is a problem in the most popular mountain destinations of Nepal (see e.g. SNP 2005). Whereas exact figures for Nepal are not available, studies conducted in other tourism destinations show that these price hikes can be substantial (e.g. UNEP 2000).

Increased vulnerability

Although tourism can be a strong catalyst for the economic development of the mountain regions, it may also increase the vulnerability of mountain communities. Most jobs in tourism are for seasonal, with 40% of all visitors arriving during the two-month period of October and November (Nepal 2003). This is often a blessing for some rural areas, as it means that the tourism season does not overlap with the major agricultural activities. At the same time, however, it also creates social and economic insecurity for those who depend on the industry. Likewise, an over-dependency of the local markets on tourism may weaken the stability of mountain economies. While it can be claimed that as a general principle tourism development decreases the vulnerability of mountain communities as it provides them the much needed economic resources, too much reliance on tourism make communities vulnerable, as tourism demand is in general a volatile industry, extremely susceptible to external developments that communities have only little control of, such as natural disasters, exchange rate fluctuations and political unrest (see also Roe and Urquhart 2001). This is evidenced, for instance, in the recent decline of tourism arrivals after escalations of the internal conflict in the country (NTB 2005a; Bajracharya 2005) - needless to say with dramatic consequences if the majority

of your household income is to be derived from tourism such as in the Khumbu example above.

Socio-cultural impacts

As the majority of tourists in Nepal is attracted by the rich natural and cultural resources of the region, environmental and cultural heritage conservation is one of the main themes of contemporary tourism development (see also Inskeep 1994). However, although the effects of direct and indirect relation of mountain communities with tourists and/or interaction with the tourism industry in the mountains is a much discussed topic in popular debates, good studies on tourism and culture in Nepal are hard to find.

Assessments of socio-cultural impacts

It is very difficult to assess socio-cultural impacts. The influences are not always apparent, as they are often indirect, hard to measure, ambiguous and dependent on value judgments. Not only tourists, but also local people who travel for education, trade or other purposes bring in new ideas and behavior that affect cultural practices. Communities are connected to the global world through the Internet, receive western-style education, and are faced with different realities through radio, television or magazines. To what extent can tourism be held accountable for these cultural changes? Often, socio-cultural impacts are hard to disentangle from wider processes of development (see also Ashley et al 2000), or globalization (see e.g. Roe and Urquhart 2001; Blench 2001; DFID 1999). The Sherpas of Khumbu, for instance, have not only become more affluent, but also more westernized after tourism has taken off in their area. Admirers of the Sherpa culture have lamented that the Sherpa culture has undergone many undesirable transformations - for instance neglecting their traditional agricultural and pastoral activities, which always formed the basis of their traditional culture, and sending less lamas to their monasteries (e.g. Haimendorf 1984; Fisher 1990). However, the Sherpas themselves have heartily embraced these changes, feeling that the economic prosperity brought by tourism has directly helped to improve their general living standards and significantly improved their quality of life (Robinson 1993, cited in Sharma 1995). Many changes are natural byproducts of development, in fact highly sought after by mountain communities.

In the end, the judgments of socio-cultural impacts will for a great part depend on the definition of culture that is being applied. Negative value judgments are often based on limited concepts of culture (e.g. culture as a set of traditions that have to be preserved), whereas a less static definition (culture as a dynamic system of value and meaning that is constantly in change) will naturally lead to less harsh judgments on the destructive impact of tourism on the host culture.

Tourism as a tool for socio-cultural conservation

It is clear that tourism can contribute towards the promotion of social development by providing for, and enhancing, for instance infrastructure, educational opportunities, water and electricity supply and health care provisions. It could also function as a direct tool for the conservation of the rich cultural heritage of the mountain people. Tourism can foster pride in cultural traditions and provide mountain people indeed a stake in the state and future of their cultures by giving value (and income) to the maintenance and restoration of authentic cultural features, and supporting community development – for instance by

helping to avoid urban relocation by creating local jobs, or even act as a supportive force for peace (e.g. UNEP 2000). Studying the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Khumbu, Rogers and Aitchison concluded for example that tourism has led to a revitalization of the Sherpa culture, as the international exposure of their culture after the scaling of Mt. Everest has made them a 'celebrated people', and the Sherpas have been able to direct this fascination towards the building and repair of local monasteries (1998).

Cultural erosion

Others, however, claim that tourism has had many negative impacts on the socio-cultural environment of the mountain communities. The erosion of mountain cultures and associated values such as the dissolution of distinctive cultural attributes and traditions (e.g. changes in people's behavior, dress and lifestyles), changes in family and social structures, pollution of sacred places and a breakdown in religious beliefs, and a loss of traditional community support systems are often cited as examples (e.g. Lama and Sattar 2002). Some claim that tourists, mostly by the virtue of their purchasing power, will eventually destroy the very thing they came to visit, by transforming local cultures into commodities for sale, and changing sustainable lifestyles into an extractive and consumptive lifestyle (e.g. King and Steward 1996). However, it is arguable to what extent this is necessarily bad or threatening to the cultural heritage. Is it bad if a dance that is traditionally being performed only during certain festivals is now staged several times per year, if this increases the pride in local cultural traditions and allows mountain people to gain a better living from it, and may bring cultural aspects to the forefront that otherwise might get lost or forgotten? Again, the pattern is dynamic and impacts are not necessarily stable or constant. Negative impacts on culture generally manifest themselves early, but once communities start profiting from tourism they tend to place more effort on reviving the cultural characteristics that attract tourists in the first place.

Naturally, this is not to say that tourism development should take place without any regard for the socio-cultural environment, or that appropriate strategies can help mitigate unwanted impacts at least within the limits of acceptable change.

Environmental impacts

Most of the environmental impacts of mountain tourism that have been observed and discussed in the literature are site-specific, and do not necessarily reflect the situation across the country. Equally, it is not always possible to separate the impacts of tourism per se from the environmental impacts experienced in the country from the population itself. Nevertheless, several reports indicate that environmental problems can be severe, at least in the most visited areas.

Environmental degradation

The large increase in the number of trekking tourists in the most popular mountain destinations of Nepal since the 1980s³ has drawn a lot of attention to tourism and its potential to exacerbate the environmental problems of the region (Nepal 2003). Tourism has been considered by many authors as one of the major causes of environmental degradations in the mountain tourism destinations of Nepal (e.g. Bjønness 1983; Bayers

³ E.g. from 14,332 in 1980 to 76,407 in the Annapurna; or from 5,836 in 1980 to 26,683 in 2000 in Sagarmatha).

and Banskota 1992; Gurung and de Coursey 1994). Some even go as far as claiming that recreation and tourism activities in mountain environments are surpassing the resource extraction industry as the single largest threat to the conservation of mountain ecosystems (e.g. Denniston 1995). A report from the Asian Development Bank claimed that Nepal needs to spend at least 90 million US dollar to restore its environment to maintain its Shangri-La image (Cockerel, cited in Upadhyay 2005). Others, however, claim these statements are exaggerated, as many of the environmental problems are unconnected with tourism activity, or merely historical changes in the landscape (e.g. Ives and Messerli 1990; Stevens 1993a; Paswon et al 1984:244). A classic study by Eckholm (1976), for instance, showed that even before tourism took off in the Nepal Himalaya, the region was already suffering from environmental problems, including deforestation and soil erosion – attributing it to the vicious cycle of poverty, increasing population, exploitation of resources, inappropriate land use and unsustainable farming practices. These findings seem to be confirmed by a later study of Byers, who by using photography in the Sagarmatha National Park in 1960 and 1984, concluded that tourism did not significantly change the land use patterns in the park (1987). Nonetheless, several environmental problems have been linked to tourism development, especially in Sagarmatha and Annapurna.

Regional variations

Tourism-related environmental problems seem to be more severe in the Sagarmatha National Park than in the Annapurna Conservation Area. Although some of the differences in environmental problems that both areas face appear to be related to differences in climate and other geographical conditions (such as for instance the dispersion of settlements), there seems to be a correlation with the associated environmental management structure and supporting policies. Whereas the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is generally acknowledged as a model that led to an overall improvement of mountain livelihoods with only limited negative impacts (e.g. Gurung 1992), Sagarmatha is often cited as a model of mountain tourism development that - although it did bring considerable economic benefits to the Sherpas (see economic impacts) - this has not been without environmental costs (e.g. Stevens 1993a). A first Management Plan for Sagarmatha National Park was prepared in 1981, but this plan has by many been regarded as being inadequate, and little has been done to enforce the regulations set to mitigate the negative (mainly environmental) impacts, due to which destructive practices persisted (e.g. Weaver 1998, Robinson 1994). The ACAP, on the other hand, has developed a very successful tourism management plan that has proven to preserve the local culture and environment while developing tourism by involving local communities and bringing people right into the heart of conservation activity, where they feel resources belong to them, and therefore must be protected (e.g. Rowell 1989; Gurung 1992; Bajracharya 1998, Doggart and Doggart 1996). The effect of the different approaches is visible not only in environmental terms, but also in economic monetary terms. Before the ACAP was established, deforestation and littering were common phenomena, and the average trekker spend only 3 US dollar per day, of which only 20% reached local people. After the establishment of ACAP in 1986, however, satellite mapping showed a dramatic increase in forest cover and cleaner trails, and about 50% of the tourist revenue stays in the local economy (Gurung 1998; Sherpa et al 1996, cited in Chettri et al 2005). At the same time, the environmental problems in the Sagarmatha National Park seem to be quite severe.

Everest in threat

Although the problems of forest depletion are not widespread throughout the Sagarmatha National Park, it is said to be severe in the main trekking corridors (Rogers 1993 and Stevens 1993b cited in Walder 2000). It is estimated that one trekking tourist in Nepal can use to 5 kg of wood a day (UNEP 2000). During the peak trekking seasons, the number of visitors in Sagarmatha rises to more than 5 times the resident population, increasing the local demand for firewood by 85% (ICIMOD/CREST 1995). In addition, timber for construction and grazing, and forage requirements of livestock seem to put a heavy demand on forest areas (the Mountain Forum 1999). New studies are needed to assess the introduction of new (renewable) energy technologies on the collection of firewood in both ACA and the Sagarmatha National Park, as these data are not available.

Littering seems to be another serious concern. In the late 1980s, the Sagarmatha region received much negative media publicity on solid waste issues. The trail to the Everest base camp was labeled 'the garbage trail', some other trails frequently visited by tourists nicknamed as 'toilet paper trail' and the region itself labeled 'the World highest junkyard'. Campsites had become increasingly littered, as trekkers and mountaineers left behind garbage, oxygen cylinders and even camping equipment. It is said that there were 17 metric tons of garbage per km of tourist trail (the Mountain Forum 1999) - although ironically some say that the Sherpas themselves may have contributed to the majority of littering along the trail (Shrestha 1995). The establishment of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC)⁴, however, appears to be an effective response. From 1994 to 2003 it removed 202,745 kg of garbage (i.e. 2,023,745 tons) from the region (STN 2006), leaving the villages, trails and base camps now as good as clean (SNP 2005). Despite these massive cleaning up initiatives, the disposal of human waste seems to have remained a problem. Because the slower decomposition rates of human wastes at higher altitudes pose a special problem, the indiscriminate disposal of human waste and the threat to health associated with it are serious concerns. Contamination of water sources has been reported in different areas (Robinson 1994).

Finally, trail erosion is often mentioned as a problem. In the heavily used areas of Sagarmatha, the trails have been severely damaged with little maintenance or repair work evident. The Mountain Forum estimates that over 12 % of the trails in Sagarmatha are severely degraded, requiring urgent restoration and maintenance (1999). Trying to protect the area from further deterioration, these issues are currently the focus of attention in the new strategic tourism, park and buffer zone management plan for the next five years, focusing for instance on the spread of visitor flows, control of crowding and environmental pollution, avoidance of overdevelopment, trail management and cultural heritage conservation (SNP 2005).

Tourism as a tool for environmental conservation

In spite of all these environmental threats, tourism also has the potential to create beneficial effects on the environment, by contributing to environmental protection and

⁴ A Namche-based NGO established in 1991. Its original goal was to manage waste disposal along the trekking routes and Himalayan Base camps in the Khumbu region. Since then, SPCC has expanded throughout the Khumbu region from dealing with pollution control to include community motivation, environmental conservation and tourism promotions.

conservation, as it is a way to raise awareness on environmental values and serve as a tool to finance protection of natural areas and increase their economic importance. Financial contributions to conservation are both direct (e.g. through park entrance fees) and indirect (e.g. contributions to government revenues). Besides, it has demonstrated positive effects on wildlife preservation and protection efforts. The immense success of the ACAP is again an interesting case in point. But there are many other examples, such as the Snow Leopard Conservancy's Homestays Programs, who have been recognized to be highly successful in turning the fate of the endangered Himalayan snow leopard by using tourism as the main conservation incentive for locals (Hillard 2005). By learning to value mountain tourism assets as the basis for a mountain tourism economy, many tourism stakeholders have come to realize the importance of conservation of those assets and proper tourism management (see also Lama and Sattar 2002:13).

Who benefits and who bears the costs?

It is important to realize that not all economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts - both positive and negative- are evenly distributed among the mountain population. The costs and benefits of tourism are not the same for every person involved. The people who benefit from tourism are very often not the same as the people who bear the costs. Looking at the popular trekking routes in the protected areas, Lama and Sattar (2002:9) for instance argue that the local populations living in and around the mountain parks often bear the burdens of tourism, e.g. in terms of the increase garbage and security risks, inflation etc, but generally receive little benefits from park entry fees for the much needed local development and conservation.

Unfortunately many of the burdens of tourism are borne by the more disadvantaged in society: notably the poor and women. As touched upon in the paragraph on economic impacts, no concentrated efforts have been made to spread the economic benefits of tourism to rural areas, where the poverty is most prevalent. Whereas estimates from the Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal, suggest that on the average only 6% of the tourist expenditures goes in fact to the rural areas (Touche Ross 1990), studies from SNV show an even less rosy picture for the remote countryside, estimating that of the 57 million US dollar per year spent by trekking tourists visiting rural areas in the hills and mountains of Nepal, less than 10% is spent locally (and of this, more than half is spent in the Annapurna Conservation Area alone), with remote districts even receiving less than 1% of the total tourism revenues (SNV 2003).⁵ On a positive note, the study recognizes that the scope for enlarging the tourism sector to generate more (additional) income and employment in rural areas is large, provided that appropriate (pro-poor) interventions are made (ibid).

The distribution of revenues are neither evenly spread across social lines. The rural poor in more remote areas of Nepal – even in the potential trekking areas- have as yet not been able to reap much economic benefits from tourism development (SNV 2003). The most substantial economical benefits, especially jobs, are concentrated among few, with net benefits likely to be smallest for the poorest of the poor. A review of 24 case studies

⁵ As the number of visitors to these remote areas is also lower, a lower percentage of the total tourist expenditure in these remote districts is not unexpected. Besides, in the remoter districts, tourists have fewer opportunities to spend and hence the flow of benefits from tourism to the local communities is also less. Most informative are per capita figures, indicating how much money is spent in the remote districts per tourist (instead of tourists as a whole), but unfortunately these figures are not available.

in Asia indicated economic gains for all sections of the community, but with those better off gaining most (Shah 2000). Even in the highly successful model of the ACAP, the benefits of tourism development are said to go mainly to lodge and restaurant owners, with subsistence farmers and poorer lower classes benefiting only to a limited extent (Hummel 1994; ICIMOD/CREST 1995b). Some of the main reasons why the poor seem to have been unable to benefit much from tourism, is that the linkages between tourism and the local production system are weak (see also sustainable strategies), and supply-side planning and management has been poor and in some cases even completely ignored (Banskota and Sharma 1998).

Similarly, impacts vary among men and women. Women, for instance are the first to suffer from loss of natural resources (e.g. access to fuel wood) and cultural/sexual exploitation, and the generally long absences of males in guiding or portering jobs adds considerably to women's already heavy burdens of households, childrearing, agriculture and resource-collection tasks. On the other hand, the impacts can also turn out more positive for women. Women are furthermore more likely to benefit from tourism-induced infrastructure improvements (e.g. piped water or a grinding mill), and in some mountain areas and culture, tourism has availed a higher socio-economic status and independence for women (Ashley et al 2000; Lama 2000 cited in Lama and Sattar 2002:10; ICIMOD/CREST 1995a: 74), or led to their empowerment (SuMiT 2005).

In order to distribute the costs and benefits evenly amongst society, and keep the negative impacts within the limits of acceptable change, and at the same time ensure that the poor will profit from the developments, sustainable and pro-poor strategies and policies are needed.

Enhancing positive mountain impacts

As indicated in the brief overview on mountain tourism in Nepal, the impacts that have been discussed in this study are mainly based on the experiences in the popular mountain destinations of the Himalaya (in particular in Annapurna and Sagarmatha). As tourists arrive in greater numbers there, these are the places where the impacts are most seen and felt. Naturally the intensity of the impacts depends upon visitor numbers, management and policy. Lower intensities of tourism development will keep environmental and cultural problems low, but will also contribute less to the economic improvement on the livelihoods of the mountain people – often the main motivator for people to get involved in tourism in the first place. In order for mountain communities to benefit from tourism development, an appropriate balance therefore has to be found between economic viability and limits of acceptable change on the other impact levels, with appropriate management strategies and policies to support that balance.

Sustainable mountain tourism development

In order to maximize the economic, cultural and environmental benefits for mountain communities, while keeping the adverse impacts within the limits of acceptable change, sustainable development strategies have to be applied. As stated in the introduction, mountain tourism could help alleviate poverty and conserve the fragile cultural and physical mountain environment, but deliberate efforts and actions have to be made to link tourism to the main development concerns in the mountains in order to make this happen, especially related to poverty alleviation, environmental care and the empowerment of local communities (e.g. Banskota and Sharma 1998).

Pro-poor strategies to combat poverty

Over the last two decades many sustainable tourism models have developed. What these models have in common is the aim to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income and employment for local communities (e.g. PAIA 2005). But how do you do that? A relatively new approach in the impact and sustainable tourism debate is the model of 'pro-poor tourism' (PPT; see e.g. Ashley and Mitchell 2005). In contrast to community tourism, or conventional sustainable tourism, pro-poor tourism focuses explicitly on maximizing benefits for the poor (as the end, not a means; ICIMOD/CREST 1995; Banskota and Sharma 2000; DFID 1999; Roe and Urquhart 2001; Ashley et al 2001).

There are different ways to make this happen. One of the main priorities is to link tourism with the local economic production system (backward linkage) and with the macro economy (forward linkage). This will enhance the opportunities of local people to profit from tourism and reduce the amount of leakages. Another strategy is to increase the tourists' length of stay in local areas. A higher number of visitor nights in mountain communities can help reduce leakages, as the increasing demand size allows more local people to participate in the market to sell their products and services. However, it is necessary to strike the right balance. When visitor numbers become too high, the positive economic gain may not outbalance the corresponding negative social and environmental impacts that may result (e.g. in the form of overcrowding, increased pollution etc).

When weighing the positive and negative impacts, it is important to look at the environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacities of the regions: naturally some mountain ecosystems are more vulnerable than others, and some ethnic groups are more resilient than others in dealing with foreign influences. In highly sensitive environments, it could therefore make more sense to keep the tourism numbers small. This is not to say that the contributions to the local economy cannot be substantial. E.g. in Sirubari, a small mountain village area where small-scale quality tourism is advocated, only 250 tourist visits per year are made, but each 3-night tourist stay produces an income equivalent to 4 months of per capita income (Raj 2001). Several studies have shown that with lower intensity of tourism development, both environmental and socio-cultural problems are negligible, but so are the economic benefits. A minimal level of the tourism market (both in terms of visitor numbers and duration of stay) therefore has to be assured to enable the establishment of enough economic links with the local production system to generate wider impacts (Banskota et al 2005).

These strategies have to be integrated with general tourism development, as mainstream activities such as tourism planning need to be influenced by pro-poor perspectives; and pro-poor tourism cannot succeed without successful development of the whole tourism destination (DFID 1999). Destination or supply-side planning, and the development of new sustainable tourism products (or to diversify existing tourism products) is needed as a greater variety and richness of attractions and activities in a destination will increase the propensity of travelers to visit the destination and may extend the length of their stay and increase their expenditure, thereby increasing opportunities for local participation and benefits from tourism development in the wider area beyond the lodge community (e.g. ICIMOD/CREST 1995b; Banskota and Sharma 2000; WTO 2001).

Environmental care and community empowerment

In order to make the pro-poor strategies truly sustainable, environmental protection and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources should be an integral part of the planning process. The use of an active environmental and socio-cultural planning approach is essential, and this should include defining the limits of acceptable change with the actors involved, as well as continued socio-economic, cultural and environmental impact assessments in the mountain regions (e.g. Green 2001; SNV 2003). As has become clear in the Annapurna and Sagarmatha case, both concepts are intimately linked. The Annapurna case illustrates that even with greater intensity of tourism development, social and environmental impacts can be controlled and minimized, if appropriate policies and actions are implemented by locally based institutions, whereas the experience in the Sagarmatha region has shown that the absence of effective policies and actions can lead to severe problems (but also that the introduction of new sustainable policies, plans and institutions - such as the introduction of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee – the tides of degradation can be reversed). With good management structures, focused on community involvement and participation, and supporting policies greater visitor numbers can be accommodated without exceeding the limits of acceptable change. Although the ACAP model cannot be necessarily uncritically applied to other mountain tourism destination sites⁶, there are important lessons to be learned. As Green pointed out: the experience of ACAP has demonstrated that sustainable development of tourism needs financial sustainability, local people's participation and a coordinated, integrated approach, in order for tourism to be a tool for conservation and development (2001). It has proven that well-planned tourism development activities can meet the environmental and socio-economic costs of tourism development in mountain communities (ibid), and that developing and strengthening local institutions, which represent local communities' interest and concerns, are crucial in delivering conservation benefits. An increased and more equitable distribution of benefits will most likely enhance the conservation efforts, as it will give more people an incentive to protect the environmental and cultural resources on which the industry relies.

Policies

The development of favorable national or regional policies is crucial if community-based tourism initiatives are to be a success. These policies should be pro-poor, mountain-specific and take into account the gender and cultural differences of the different mountain people.⁷ Although efforts by all stakeholders are needed (see 'Pro-poor

⁶ As Bajracharya et al (2005) have pointed out: there are distinct features of the ACA model that may be unique to the Annapurna area – including the traditional strong communities and way of life, the spectacular scenery stimulating tourism and the dispensation of ACAP to retain tourist income, augmented with the provision of the ACA infrastructure and expertise. Although it is debatable, therefore, whether the example of ACAP can be extended without modification, or will be similarly successful in other mountain tourism destinations, it is still believed to be an inspiring role model from which important lessons can be learned.

⁷ Studies have shown that present tourism policies are not pro-poor and not geared to the special needs and spiritual characteristics of sacred mountains and their caretakers. Also, the cultural landscape is often disregarded. In some cultures, mountain houses holds are for instance traditionally open to travelers, while other cultures have restrictions about people of other religions or ethnicity staying or eating in their homes. Naturally, these types of differences affect

strategies to combat poverty'), there is much that only governments can do, and therefore a leading role for the government in steering these pro-poor tourism strategies is a great advantage (Ashley et al 2001). At minimum, there should be a policy environment that facilitates pro-poor tourism, e.g. by creating a policy and planning framework that removes some of the barriers to the poor to benefit from mountain tourism, by promoting participation of the poor in planning and decision-making processes surrounding tourism, such as in the ACAP example, by encouraging partnerships between the private sector and poor people in developing new or diversifying existing tourism products, and by ensuring the cultural and environmental development concerns of the mountain regions (ibid; see also Roe and Urquhart 2001). Eventually, the goal of sustainable tourism can only be reached if poverty alleviation, the needs of the tourists and conservation of the physical and cultural environments (including gender issues) are given equal consideration in both policy and practice (see also Banskota and Sharma 2000). The Tenth Five-year plan of HMG of Nepal (NPC 2003) defines poverty alleviation and an increased local participation in conservation as its main objectives, which gives reasons for hope. However, the story does not end here, as it is the partnership between government and tourism promoters, planners and developers, and between private sector, non-governmental and community organizations and the poor themselves, as well as the implementation of the policies, that ultimately determines the success of the new strategic lines.

Conclusion

Tourism development in the Nepali Himalayas has both positive and negative impacts on the mountain economies, and the socio-cultural and physical environments of mountain communities. In general, tourism has contributed much to the development of the mountain regions in Nepal. However, the benefits are not equally distributed, and many benefits leak away because of poor planning and management, or because supportive policies are lacking or not being implemented. If sustainable tourism strategies are applied, with an integrated conservation and development approach, the impact on the poverty alleviation of the mountain people, who rank among the most poor in the world, can be improved. Pro-poor strategies and policies, linking mountain communities to the tourism industry, and enhancing economic opportunities through developing new tourism products or increasing the number of visitor nights in local areas, have to be combined with supply-side management and a good management structure (involving local communities) plus a careful conservation of nature and culture. Only then can tourism be used as a true vehicle for the development of the Himalayan region.

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a culture's (or household's) ability to partake in small-scale enterprises such as home stays, and thus need to be reflected in policies and plans (e.g. Lama and Sattar 2002)).

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