

Tourism for biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihood

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Nepal has contributed 19.7% of its total landmass for protection of biological diversity through the establishment of protected area management system, which encompasses 9 national parks (IUCN category II), 3 wildlife reserves (IUCN category IV), 1 hunting reserve and 3 conservation areas (IUCN category VI) expanding over east to west and north to south of the country. The establishment of protected areas (PAs) in Nepal and worldwide groomed in around 1970s, when the role of local communities in biodiversity conservation and protected area management was not considered crucial.

According to the management objectives of (PAs), IUCN has categorized protected areas into six different categories. By its definition, national parks are generally of category II and do not have human settlements inside park. However, national parks in Nepal have human settlements inside the park and in fact, they have been resided there for centuries interacting with the nature and leaving their cultural marks in the landscapes. Accept the Special Site for Scientific Interest (SSSI - IUCN category I), all the protected areas will have human access for recreation, scientific studies and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

Due to the outstanding natural qualities and culture of indigenous communities, protected areas in general attract tourists from all over the world. Nepal's protected areas such as Sagarmatha, Langtang, Chitwan and Annapurna are of the same example. These protected areas have become unique destinations for national and international tourists and generate much needed income at the local and national level. Usually, the protected areas are located in remote and rural areas where the majority of the local populations are economically backward. However, because of tourism activities in and around PAs, rapid change in their social, economic, environmental and cultural values have also experienced over the decades. The majority of the changes are often positive but cannot be ignored the negative ones as well. Stress on natural environment through soil erosion, trampling of vegetation, litter problem, creation of demand on scarce energy, forest resources, creation of market inflation are few of the negative examples of tourism.

Nepal's tourist statistics show that in an average 45% of tourists visiting Nepal trek in protected areas and generate considerable economic opportunities in rural areas and contributes for poverty alleviation objectives of the government and MDG. Tourism is such an industry which creates business for skilled human resources and investors and employment for both skilled and unskilled labours at local, national and international levels. Not only that, it also generates the majority of the revenue for PAs and in Nepal, 50% of the PA revenue is plowed back to the local community for biodiversity conservation, livelihood improvement and sustainable development.

However, the situation is totally different in more remote areas of Nepal, where the local population are very poor. Comparing other protected areas of Nepal, access to Shey

Phoksundo National Park in Dolpa, Rara National Park in Mugu, Dorpatan Hunting Reserve in Baglung, Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in Kanchanpur, Makalu Barun National Park in Sankhuwasaba and Kanchenjunga Conservation Area in Taplejung districts are more difficult. In addition, government's policy in the past has not been favourable because of expensive trekking permit fees with lack of facilities to promote those areas as prime tourism destinations. Whatsoever efforts have been made to promote those areas are from the private sectors often driven by personal business interest. Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation as parental body of the national protected area management system is mandated to conserve biodiversity but not to promote tourism. However, these networks of protected areas have become tourism products of Nepal for national and international tourists. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Nepal Tourism Board and private sectors of Nepal have been promoting and marketing these products in national and international tourism markets. Ultimately, tourism has contributed to conservation of biodiversity and improvement of local people's livelihood considerably.

Nevertheless, the case is different throughout the protected area system in Nepal. The promotion and marketing of all the protected areas are not in the equal ratio and proportion. The effort is even worse in the conflict affected areas. Although, tourists tempt to visit inaccessible and wilderness areas, the conflicting situation did not encourage to do so over the last decade. The tourists arrival to such areas are further exacerbated by the decade long conflict thereby worsening the livelihood of the local communities and degrading the status of protected area generating less revenues.

The lessons learned from the past are that tourism has much to contribute for the improvement of local people's livelihood and conservation of biodiversity if developed, managed and promoted properly. Moreover, the entire nation and its people can benefit from numbers of associated activities that tourism brings in. Most importantly, the appreciation that we receive from tourists have much value to promote our natural and cultural heritages at national and international level. Thus, it can be concluded that biological and cultural diversity in and around protected areas are the core tourism products for national and international tourists, which generate income for local community and revenue for protected area authority. Biodiversity conservation and tourism management are therefore interrelated and have wider role for peace building as tourists visit only peaceful areas, engage people in business thereby contributing to the poverty alleviation objective of the Government of Nepal and United Nations' Millennium Development Goal.