

## Culture and Ecotourism

### **Chaired by:**

Max Haberstroh,  
Tourism Consultant in Kyrgyzstan

### **Introduction**

The countries of Central Asia are once again discovering their rich cultural and religious traditions embracing both Buddhist and Islamic values. While under the former Soviet Union, much of this was pushed into the background. Today, as different countries attempt to establish their identities as independent nations, they are looking into their cultural and religious roots. One might even say there is a cultural renaissance in Central Asia and attempts are being made to integrate the preservation of their culture with the environment and the economy.

There are many valuable lessons from other parts of Central Asia in this respect. Understanding traditional natural resource management systems will help to integrate these with modern management systems. Participatory approaches

to preservation of culture and natural resources have been widely accepted in other parts of the region and could provide valuable guidelines for Central Asia.

Today, there is a global interest in Central Asia because of the region's many unique cultural, historical, and religious characteristics. Opening the floodgates to mass tourism could also be just as unsustainable as the virtual closure seen in the past. Striking a proper balance is essential because, for many people in Central Asia, this could be their only source of survival at a time when economic opportunities are very limited.

### **Major Issues and Experiences**

#### **BUDDHIST AND ISLAMIC VALUES FOR NATURE PROTECTION**

**Nancy Nash**

*Buddhist Perception of Nature, Hong Kong*

Many people in the past saw nature as inexhaustibly sustainable. We know now that this is the case only if we care

for it. It is not difficult to forgive the past destruction which resulted from ignorance. Today, however, we have access to more information, and it is essential that we re-examine ethically what we have inherited, what we are responsible for, and what we will pass on to future generations. Clearly, this is a pivotal generation. Global communication is possible, yet confrontation takes place more often than dialogue for peace. Our marvels of science and technology are matched if not outweighed by many current tragedies; and these include human starvation in some parts of the world and extinction of other life forms.

Exploration of outer space takes place at the same time as the earth's oceans, seas, and fresh water areas grow increasingly polluted and their life forms are still largely unknown or misunderstood. Many of the earth's habitats, animals, plants, insects, and even micro-organisms that we know to be rare may not be seen in future generations.

*"We have the capability and a responsibility and we must act before it is too late."*

This is a declaration made by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1986 in recognition of UNEP's World Environment Day. That year the theme was 'Peace and the Environment'. His Holiness is one of those world's religious leaders and willing to speak out on a subject that is important to everyone. Fifteen years ago, when I first started working with the Tibetans on promoting ethics using religious teachings and backgrounds as well as cultural traditions to help the environment, I did not know very much about other religious traditions. Since then I have made efforts to study as much as I can. Central Asia embraces both Buddhist and Islamic values. Buddhist values promote peaceful living together with all species.

I looked at the Islamic values first from literature and then I visited Oman and the Sultan of Oman. I was deeply impressed by his leadership. He has incorporated Islamic values into every aspect of life in the Sultanate. The children of Oman, mostly Muslim, know answers to questions about fish, mammals in the sea, birds, reptiles, and even the landscapes of Oman. This reveals that the Omani people are proud to protect their own land through maintaining religious values.

From these two great traditions in the Central Asian region, I realised that, as human beings, we need a corner, or a bigger corner, of spirituality in our actions and ethical concerns for what we plan for the future.

*"The respect human beings bestow on wild beings is a mark of civilisation."*

-- Sultan of Oman.

#### **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL RESOURCES FOR MOUNTAIN DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION**

**Prof. Pei Shengji**  
ICIMOD, Nepal

Mountain systems and arid plains in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas (HKH) and the Central Asian Region are geographically connected and culturally linked in many ways. The transition from centuries of isolation to intense interaction with the outside world over the past decade has been so rapid and abrupt as to completely disintegrate the traditional and ancient natural resource management systems. The development and environmental problems of the HKH and Central Asia transcend national boundaries, since the interaction of highland and lowland extends across physical, biological, and cultural boundaries, and the changes in the environment and economy create a serious impact on indigenous communities in the region.

Sustainable development has been defined as a phenomenon, whereby meeting the needs of the present generation does not jeopardise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In mountain communities, one still finds a stronger sense of community and social responsibility than presently experienced in many developed societies where individual rights and freedom take priority. Villages and communities in the mountain areas of China, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and other HKH countries have conserved natural resources in the ecosystems surrounding their habitats over centuries with the help of their lifestyle, religion, and interdependent relationships established with nature.

The challenges that traditional societies in the region are facing in transformation from subsistence economies to market-oriented ones are varied, complex, and difficult. However it is time to understand that traditional natural resource management, traditional as well as cultural values, and their practice in local societies are as important as the need to introduce modern innovative approaches to sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods.

Participatory approaches to natural resource management have been implemented by many agencies in mountain areas of the region. Examples are the community forestry programme in Nepal and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in Pakistan. Joint forest management in the Indian Himalayas, the joint responsibility system for forest management in China, and the participation of local communities in the management of national parks and protected areas in many locations of these regions are good indicators of rural development and facilitation of improvement of living standards.

While methodologies developed for participatory natural resource management,

such as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal), were successful; farmer-to-farmer exchange programmes need to be implemented with rural development programmes in order to ensure the local people's active participation. PBM (Participatory Biodiversity Management) has been developed recently for community participation in biodiversity conservation and resource management. In this, local people's participation in conservation schemes and buffer-zone development of protected areas, community forestry, and pasture management must be highlighted in the participatory conservation approach in the region. Culture-based conservation is a long tradition of local communities, plants and animals are closely associated with many social customs and religious rituals of mountain people in the region. Sacred plants, animals, forests, and mountains are common phenomena in the mountain areas of the region. These can be effectively incorporated into modern conservation.

In Chapter 12 of Agenda 13 of UNCED 1992, the following is stated: "*Mountains are highly vulnerable to human and natural ecological imbalance and most successive to all climate changes in the atmosphere. Mountains are a source of key resources. As major ecosystems, they represent the complex and interrelated ecology of our planet. Mountain environments are essential for the survival of the global system.*"

These concerns are common to all mountain ecosystems — including the Himalayas and the Central Asian region.

**EXPERIENCES IN PROMOTING MOUNTAIN  
TOURISM FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT:  
LESSONS FROM NEPAL  
Dr. Pitamber Sharma  
ICIMOD, Nepal**

In the last few decades, tourism has emerged as one of the most potentially

important activities in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) mountains. As tourists discover the mysteries of the mountains, the policy-makers find that tourism is a means for providing alternative livelihoods and improving the living standards of mountain people. The emphasis is on promoting ecological tourism and exploring avenues for local development and for economic transformation of often remote, inaccessible, and marginalised mountain areas and communities. Mountain tourism can be sustainable only if it contributes to the economic, environmental, and sociocultural development of mountain communities. In the HKH region, Nepal has had a relatively rapid growth in tourism and increasing numbers of tourists visit its rural mountain communities. This growth has improved the economy but resulted in a host of environmental, sociocultural, and economic problems.

Demand for fuelwood generated by tourists is one of the reasons for degradation of forests. The construction of hotels and lodges along trekking routes naturally increases the demand for timber in the villages concerned.

Garbage generated by tourists affects the rural environment due to lack of management along trails and on camping sites, polluting local water resources and springs and rivers. Human waste disposal into rivers and streams by lodge owners directly adds to the burden.

Tourism-related economic opportunities have impacted land use along major trails. Emphasis on fruit and horticultural crops, decline of traditional agricultural practices, and, in some cases, relative neglect of livestock and pasture management activities have been noted. Modern cement and concrete structures gradually replace vernacular architecture and aesthetics associated with traditional villages. Trail degradation and consequent soil erosion, vegetation loss, and slope instability have been noted along

heavily used trails. The main justification for promoting tourism in the mountains is increased income and employment opportunities.

Invariably, the culture of mountain communities reflects a slow process of adaptation and change. The younger generation wishes to emulate the tourists' behaviour and consumption habits. Negative impacts include the decline in local cultural practices and institutions, commercialisation of art, loss of symbolism of cultural events, theft of cultural and religious objects and artifacts, and a thriving black market.

A more serious impact is the increasing social tensions between those benefitting from tourism and those not benefitting, sometimes aggravated to quite serious proportions in some trekking areas in Nepal. Rising inflation, limited economic opportunities for the mass of the poor and lack of mechanisms to facilitate a better distribution of tourism benefits, and discrimination in employment and even in providing lodging add to the woes.

Although the problems associated with mountain tourism have been conspicuous since the 1970s, the responses from the government as well as non-government agencies are relatively recent.

The first lesson is the need for a proactive role to preserve the culture and the environment so that distortion in market forces is minimised in terms of their harmful impacts. Based on careful assessments, systematic approaches to 'opening' and 'promoting' the area should be developed.

Second is the recognition of the role of different stakeholders which include the government, NGOs, the private sector, and the community.

Third is the need for building institutions at the local level in order to be able to deal with the incoming problems.

Fourth is the role of participatory planning covering all aspects of development, sharing of revenues and resources, developing the local economy, and training human resources. There are many experiments in the region that can provide valuable lessons for countries in Central Asia.

# **LADAKH AFTER 25 YEARS OF TOURISM** **Sonam Dawa**

*Ladakh Hill Council, India*

Ladakh constitutes the northern-most part of India in the Trans-Himalayas. Traditionally, the economy of Ladakh was based on subsistence agriculture in the lower areas, animal husbandry—especially in the Changthang area, and trade with Tibet, Sinkiang, and the plains of India. The quality of life was not exactly good. It was a peaceful, although difficult, life. The social and economic system, however, ensured that the rich and poor shared and cared for each other. People were by and large happy and contented.

In 1974, the area south of the Srinagar - Leh road, including the town of Leh, was thrown open to foreign tourists. Starting with the meagre arrival of 527 tourists in 1974, the number swelled every year and in 1988 it touched 25,000; and this included 8,600 domestic tourists. There was a slump in 1990 and 1991 due to disturbances in the Kashmir Valley. During the following years, the numbers picked up again and the average figure has been around 17,000 per year.

Tourism is truly a double-edged sword. It has been no different in Ladakh. Some of the positive and beneficial effects of 25 years of tourism in the region are as follow.

- ▶ The hordes of tourists, these too from the so-called developed west, taking keen and many of them really genu-

ine interest in the art, culture, language, religion, music, architecture, rivers and mountains, and monasteries and mosques have regenerated a sense of pride in past achievements and a degree of cultural resurgence in the region.

- ▶ Another equally important development that followed the entry of tourists into the region was the awareness generated amongst the people of environmental ecology, sustainable development, and the problems of development that the west was facing. The people of Ladakh started thinking and talking about alternatives.

Of the negative impacts, the following, based on experience in Ladakh, need special mention.

- ▶ Environmental degradation is visible along the trekking routes, in mountaineering expedition camps, in the capital town of Leh, and around the important monasteries.
- ▶ Commercialisation of a once subsistence economy has led to changes in traditional values and systems.
- ▶ Music, dance, folklore, and the arts—even religious festivals — are becoming commercialised. These have somehow lost the spontaneity and sanctity so vital for them to remain part of a living heritage. they may become soulless and mechanical like any other commodity on sale to tourists.
- ▶ Demand for souvenirs has generated demands for local handicrafts. There is also an ever-increasing demand for old artifacts, and there have been cases of theft and illegal sale of priceless antiques — including religious icons, scriptures, and statues from the monasteries.
- ▶ Stray cases of drug abuse and other undesirable habits picked up from hippie back-packers by the younger generation have been making the rounds of the gossip mills in Leh Bazaar.

Keeping in mind the fragile mountain ecosystem of the region and based on its carrying capacity, it may become necessary to restrict the number of tourists to a manageable limit.

Innovative alternative programmes, such as rural tourism, eco-tourism, nomadic tourism, winter trekking, rafting, etc, if developed, will also spread the economic benefits to a wider circle of people in the host country.

Last but not least, the people of Ladakh have to preserve its pristine environment and perhaps develop its unique arts and culture, songs and music, and architecture according to its own genius and not allow these to be elbowed out by external and undesirable influences. By retaining its uniqueness, tourism in Ladakh can flourish and remain sustainable.

**KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR:  
REVIVAL OF THE SILK ROAD PHILOSOPHY**

**Max Haberstroh**

*Tourism Consultant in Kyrgyzstan  
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If tourism development is given a firm spot by the countries in Central Asia, it will become the lever to get people moving within, and into, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Central Asia. After all, trade along the ancient Eurasian caravan routes and the mutual influence of different ideas have always stimulated pluralism and multicultural lifestyles. Moreover, 'cocooning the customer', which is undeniably suggestive of silk, is about to become a successful method of doing business nowadays - tourism business - along the Great Silk Road. Therefore, a small but active tourism 'platoon' with a common adherence to this ancient 'Silk Road Philosophy' should spread the idea of its revival. This may mean easing entry restrictions into the region as the first major step.

The next important step will be to let the tourism sector grow from the grass roots by permitting hundreds of private initiatives to develop.

Based on Kyrgyzstan's assets, the target groups are trekkers, mountaineers, nature adventures, rafters, equestrians, and photographers. Under the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan - Land of the Tien-Shan', (Tien-Shan means Heavenly Mountains), Kyrgyzstan posits itself as an adventure and special interest travel destination which complements and supplements its neighbours ('architecture' and 'nature') as a natural oasis on the Great Silk Road.

Kyrgyzstan could also benefit from its world famous author and ambassador, Chingis Aitmatov, and its highly reputable president, Askar Akayev, acting as the country's most outstanding promoters of tourism. The government should make use of its embassies and consulates abroad as information offices on basic tourism issues and give more support to the small- and medium-sized private companies.

Today the member companies of our Association appreciate what we have achieved together. The Kyrgyzstan Association of Tour Operators has become the strongest force in Kyrgyzstan's marketing of tourism.

More and more often member companies of our Association participate in tourism fairs in addition to the International Tourism Exchange in Berlin (ITB): marketing activities gave our Kyrgyz partners more trade contacts, led to new entries for Kyrgyzstan in traveller catalogues, to more guests, and (last but not least) to new investments in real estate, furniture, vehicles, and (above all) in personnel.

Our activities are based upon our 'Ecological Marketing Guerilla Strategy'. This means:



- ▶ clean your home first, then invite guests;
- ▶ find your own identity, then clear up your image;
- ▶ plant 'tourism viruses', thus promoting tourism for the grass roots;
- ▶ offer a good service by 'cocooning customers';
- ▶ support small private companies, which act like 'platoons', in order to find and serve niches in adventure and special interest tourism;
- ▶ cooperate with other partners; choose the fittest, promote the willing, consider important authorities, and beware of over sponsoring bureaucrats;
- ▶ promote Eco-tourism (as stipulated in the 'National Eco-tourism Strategy' published in 1994 by the Mexican Secretariat of Tourism in cooperation with the World Conservation Union) by active GREEN GLOBE membership and by cooperation with the Kyrghyzstan Biosphere Reserve; and
- ▶ use metaphors for the definition of ideas.

### **Conclusions**

There seems to be a need for an ethical approach to conservation. Destruction of natural resources results from a lack of respect for the environment. Many people in the past believed, in their ignorance, that the earth's riches were inexhaustible. Today with access to better information, we know that this is not so and we have the capability and the responsibility to act before it is too late.

The Dalai Lama stressed this point in 1986 on the occasion of World Environment Day. It was mentioned that Islam, like Buddhism, shows great respect for nature. Thus, drawing on these two great traditions, we must care for the environment.

The mountain areas of Central Asia and their varied ecosystems are rich not only

in the context of biodiversity but also in cultural diversity. Sadly, this is being lost under the impact of modern development. The international knowledge system and the indigenous knowledge system represent two global, but separate, systems. The latter is based on a holistic approach, rooted in a deep knowledge of the environment. Documentation of this unique knowledge is an urgent task. There are already some initiatives in this respect, e.g., in Nepal and Pakistan. It can have a productive, practical benefit, allowing better use to be made of local resources. Indigenous culture, however, is extremely vulnerable. Active measures are required to protect it. Transitional cultural zones can be used to help integrate traditional culture into modern life. Also, indigenous culture can be used to help in conservation of the environment.

Mountain tourism in the social and cultural context, especially in Nepal, has a cultural competitive advantage. In addition to their dramatic natural beauty, the mountains provide for advantage and challenge. Tourism, moreover, generates a huge amount of employment for the local population. It does, however, entail certain trade-offs. For example, it increases consumption of timber (for firewood and construction) and also results in a vast amount of garbage. But it also has positive effects; stimulating new forms of economic activity. The main conclusion is that tourism must be managed. Nepal has taken some innovative steps in this direction.

The unique flora and fauna of Ladakh in India have attracted growing numbers of tourists since the area was opened to foreigners in 1974. The number of tourists (domestic and overseas) has stabilised at about 17,000 per annum. Eighty per cent of arrivals take place in about 75 days. Efforts should be made to spread this out. There have been positive benefits from tourism, e.g., increased self-confidence of the local population since foreigners began to take their cul-