

Major Issues of Mountain Tourism in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas¹

In this section some major issues related to mountain tourism in the context of Nepal, India, and Pakistan are briefly summarised. A clear long-term policy on mountain tourism development is yet to be formulated in Nepal. For a small country like Nepal, tourism development must be defined in terms of national goals and an appropriate growth path must be prioritised. Tourism development cannot be viewed in isolation from conservation, natural resource management, and mountain development as mountain resources form the very basis of both mountain tourism and the survival of local mountain communities. Both India and Pakistan also appear to suffer from this long-term policy vacuum.

There has been no concerted effort on the part of governments to establish the idea of the mountain areas being potentially rich in a variety of unique natural resources. Neither has mountain tourism been conceived as an integral part of overall mountain development. This lack of perspective in the cases of Nepal, India, and Pakistan appears to have led to a demand-induced tourism growth pattern which has not been able to contribute meaningfully to local development. The unique mountain environment of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas is, as a result, deteriorating, thereby reducing the tourist amenities and visual appeal of the area. Meanwhile the local communities living among these environmentally rich resources continue to lead subsistence lives. How to develop mountain tourism, mitigate poverty, and provide an impetus to mountain development remain to be answered in all these countries in the HKH region.

Ever since the formulation of the Tourism Master Plan (MCI 1972) in Nepal, diversification of sightseeing and adventure tourism have been the major thrusts in all succeeding policies. However, in actual practice, the operation of mountain tourism is centralised and the benefits accrue to a few operators in urban centres. Mountain tourism is concentrated in a few pockets (Khumbu, Annapurna, and Langtang in Nepal; the Swat Valley in Pakistan and Himachal Pradesh in India). Opening new areas and building rudimentary infrastructure

1 Refer to Banskota and Sharma (1994), Al Jalaly and Nazeer (1994), and TARU (1994) for greater details of the issues discussed in this section.

have been the sole bases of tourism and mountain development in Nepal. As a result, only small pockets have benefitted. In the newly-opened areas, local people are finding it difficult to derive benefits from tourism as only group tourists are encouraged to visit such areas and other complementary investment programmes and policy actions are not forthcoming.

The national economic interest has always been in increasing foreign exchange earnings from tourism through increase in tourist numbers with little or no attention paid to local needs and issues (Touche Ross 1993). Government policies on the private mountain tourism sector are totally lacking and preference for tourism investment in urban areas prevails. Linkage of mountain tourism with the mountain economy is an issue that has not been addressed. Some of the older tourism areas with several years' experience in mountain tourism operation have provided substantial revenue to governments but little attention has been paid to ploughing back some of this revenue into establishing linkages between local and tourism development. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project is an exception.

There are no effective policies and programmes to control firewood use. A major factor in controlling the use of firewood has been government failure to count the support staff accompanying tourists and the various tourist outlets, such as lodges, tea stalls, etc, as primarily tourism-related and the demand for firewood by these units as a demand for firewood by tourists. Policy failure arises from the fact that this derived demand for firewood is not considered to be an integral part of mountain tourism energy policies.

Nepal's mountaineering tourism is now suffering from *ad hoc* policy changes. *Ad hoc* policies and inconsistencies appear to be common in all three countries. Application procedures for mountaineering are very cumbersome. The practice of requiring cash deposits for garbage disposal, despite hikes in royalties and attachment of government liaison officers to mountaineering teams, has been perceived as an unnecessary hassle for mountaineers. Similar issues have also been reported in the case of Pakistan, especially with regard to the appointment of liaison officers.

Tourism as a multi-sectoral activity requires strong and effective coordination between other sectors, both private and public. Line agencies often have narrowly conceived areas of jurisdiction and take care of only those problems which directly affect their sectoral interests. No effective body has been established to harmonise this situation. Recently, it has been envisaged that the Tourism Council could tackle the said problem, but this body has not been fully effective. It lacks an information base and needs to be institutionalised. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, a newly developed Tourism Master Plan is reported to have addressed only the issue of pilgrimage tourism, and an overall concern for tourism in general, linkages with the local economy, and coordination with various institutions and sectors have not been adequately dealt with.

What emerges clearly in these three countries of the HKH region is that mountain tourism development is seen in isolation from mountain environmental resources and local community development. No concerted effort has been made to perceive the characteristics of the mountain environment and the values of the different environmental resources that these mountains harbour as prime resources which can be developed to benefit the local community and enhance tourist attraction and experience. Efforts to develop tourism in the mountains without duly considering mountain characteristics and the economic value of mountain resources can be more harmful to the mountain environment and its economy than beneficial. Therefore, tourism development should be an integral part of mountain community development and vice versa.

In many places in the mountain areas of Nepal, conservation means modification of traditional behaviour on the part of local people as well as of tourist behaviour. To the tourist, a change in the behaviour for the sake of conservation may not be as demanding as in the case of local people who depend very much on the use of local resources. In the case of Nepal, this has been witnessed in most protected areas where conservation has resulted in a conflict between local people and the management authority. This conflict, in most cases, is due to modification of behaviour in the absence of alternative incentives to compensate for the changes local people have been forced to make due to policy interventions (Kharel 1993; Stevens, Sherpa, and Sherpa 1993; Yonzon 1993).

There are more regulations and commands than economic incentives. Economic incentives are given little time to succeed, whereas regulations are given too much time to fail. Economic incentives and disincentives at national and community levels can play an important role in conserving mountain environmental resources. The main objective in using incentives is to smooth out the uneven distribution of the social costs and benefits of conserving the mountain environment and to use these incentives as policy tools for correcting the problems resulting from market failure and misguided policies (McNeely 1988).

Thus, the major problem in the context of tourism in the Himalayas can be stated as **the lack of appreciation of the value of environmental resources and the lack of vision on mountain and tourism development**. Without appreciation of the value of environmental resources and a vision on mountain development, tourism development alone cannot raise the living standards of the mountain people. A great deal of work remains to be carried out in this area and it needs to be carried out urgently so as to conserve the environment through tourism development for the benefit of local communities.