

CRITICAL ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Tourism and other off-farm employment activities in Marpha-Jomsom have evolved in an integrated fashion. Because of the critical interlinkages between different off-farm activities and tourism we have attempted in this chapter to identify the critical issues and options with respect to the economic and environmental sustainability of tourism and other off-farm activities.

Environmental Degradation

Mustang District is characterised by an arid to semi-arid climate and meagre plant cover. R.W. Brown noted in 1982 that forest management was essentially unknown in Mustang and that forest resources were depleting at an alarming rate. In addition to fuelwood, timber forest areas are important for fodder, especially in the southern region of the district. As a result of forest depletion, accelerated soil erosion, often culminating in massive landslides, is a common occurrence.

The forest cover of the district was reported to be only 3.38 per cent of the total land area. Deforestation is particularly rapid along the main trekking routes and near the settlements. Jones (1988) estimates that approximately one hectare of forest area around Ghodepani (about 65km south of Jomsom) is disappearing annually, mainly to cater for tourist needs. Other studies (CEDA 1989, Sharma 1989) also note that the fuelwood requirements of hotels and lodges on the trekking route are much higher than normal household requirements. This appears to be true for the Jomsom and Marpha areas also. The critical issues pertaining to environmental degradation in Marpha-Jomsom are:

- excessive use of fuelwood, particularly by hotels/lodges for cooking and heating;
- no effective enforcement and regulation of laws pertaining to the use of alternative sources to fuelwood, particularly in hotels/lodges;
- extraction and lopping of tree twigs/branches by local people;
- free-range grazing practices which contribute to loss of regenerative capacity of the plants;
- increasing demand for timber for the construction of hotels, office buildings, and industries; and
- problems of garbage disposal and littering along trail and camp sites.

Some options to deal with the issue of environmental degradation are given in the following passages.

Restriction on Uncontrolled Felling and Free Use of Fuelwood

Seemingly, uncontrolled felling and free use of fuelwood and timber, particularly for hotel/lodge businesses, call for stiff restrictive measures. The hotels/lodges should therefore be required to use substitute energy such as kerosene, and electricity (by charging tourists) for running their businesses. This could be achieved by a system of monitoring the use of kerosene and electric heaters for cooking and heating purposes in all tourist hotels/lodges.

Promoting Alternative Sources of Energy

The installation of a mini-hydropower plant (240kW) at Tukucho near Marpha-Jomsom and the use of solar heating systems are alternatives that should be explored further by: a) construction of other mini-hydropower plants to meet local energy requirements; b) encouragement to local people, particularly the hotel/lodge owners, to have solar heating systems installed; c) institutional support, such as credit and technology, to act as an incentive for the widespread use of such systems; d) propagation of fuelwood efficient heating/cooking stoves; and iv) e) development and propagation of building designs that require less timber.

Controlled Grazing Practices

While awareness has to be created regarding the sustainable use of pastures, an institutional mechanism based on the participation of grazing households also needs to be developed. Local pasture development and veterinary offices could play the role of catalysts in this effort.

Reforestation/Afforestation

Reforestation programmes through the participation of the local community have to be launched seriously and at a faster rate. Effective coordination of the activities of various NGO and government agencies, such as CARE/Nepal, the DFO Office, and the Soil and Water Conservation Office, could lead to meaningful achievement.

Provision of Camp Sites

Camp sites with appropriate provision for the disposal of garbage and litter need to be developed. Local bodies need to be provided with incentives for monitoring the sanitation and environmental condition of camp sites.

Code of Conduct for Tourists

Tourists are also greatly accountable for environmental degradation and pollution problems such as littering, garbage disposal, and burning excessive firewood. These problems could be overcome through issuing and monitoring a code of conduct for tourists and the involvement of local community organisations in such efforts.

Lodge/Hotel Operations

Although the conditions and facilities of the hotels/lodges in Jomsom and Marpha are known to be relatively better than other places on the route, there is a need for new hotels/lodges of better quality. To some tourists the present facilities are not up to their needs and expectations. They also felt that the present hotel/lodge rates could be raised if improved facilities were provided. So opportunities exist, both for opening new standard hotels/lodges and improving/expanding the facilities and capacities of the existing ones. Priorities in the provision of loans and other facilities would help to improve the quality of the hotels/lodges.

Overcrowding is also a frequent problem during peak tourist season in Jomsom and Marpha bazaars where tourists spend relatively more days (2-4) to rest and also to wait for flights to Pokhara. The total number of lodges is now 27 with a capacity of 300 beds. During the peak season the number of tourists arriving daily exceeds 500. This implies that the carrying capacity of the existing facilities is insufficient and needs to be expanded if tourism is to be further promoted.

The major issues in the operation of hotels/lodges are:

- i) informal household-level management,
- ii) lack of adherence to THAM regulations, and
- iii) sanitation.

Because of the informal nature of operations, the cost accounting in most hotels/lodges does not take into account such things as the cost of household labour, depreciation of assets and returns against labour, fuelwood, and home-grown agricultural and livestock products. Oftentimes there is cost-undercutting as a result of competition between formal and informal (unregistered) lodges. Also, in spite of the fact that the hotel/lodge owners are required to abide by THAM regulations, there is a great deal of variation in physical facilities and service standards vis-a-vis prices charged. Often sanitary conditions with respect to the handling of food are poor. Contamination of locally procured food is a major health hazard to trekkers.

In view of these issues, the options are:

- i) training and orientation for hotel/lodge managers in such areas as accounting, basics of lodge management, and provision of services;
- ii) institutional support for strengthening the activities of THAM and enabling it to maintain the service standards of different grade hotels/lodges so that tourists are assured of at least minimum standards of service vis-a-vis prices; and
- iii) training of cooks and others on aspects of food sanitation.

Some of these activities have already been introduced. However they need to be coordinated through a local organisation like THAM.

Technology and Innovations

Technology and innovations appropriate in the context of off-farm activities have not been as widely adopted as expected. The problem is pronounced particularly in hotel/lodge businesses, fruit storage and processing, woollen goods' production, and transportation. In Jomsom and Marpha only a few motivated entrepreneurs have installed solar heating systems. Similarly, the use of fuelwood, which all hotel owners consider to be a free good, is barely substituted by other types of energy. Almost no hotels/lodges use kerosene or electric heaters. It is not that these owners are not aware of the new technologies and innovations or that they cannot afford to install them. Awareness and a system of monitoring and implementing regulations are lacking.

Options

Widespread adoption of new technologies needs to be stressed through awareness campaigns regarding appropriate technologies and their advantages in terms of income, employment, and sustainability.

- Development and promotion of technology packages suitable to the area in heating/cooking systems, woollen weaving, transport technology, construction, fruit preservation, storage processing, and packaging.
- Provision of incentives (preference in loans) to the users of new technologies.

Transportation and Marketing

Transportation and marketing continues to be a perpetual problem in the area. The existing pack animal transport system is not only traditional but also expensive, time-consuming, and more prone to losses and leakages. All of these have significant cost implications. Because of transport problems, the area is completely isolated from major markets and shows a greater degree of fragmentation.

Options

- Improvements in mule transport technology (i.e. packing, loading, and unloading) which is efficient and less prone to damage, losses, and leakages.
- Operation of local markets (*hat-bazaar*) on a regular basis. This will encourage local trading and help promote the market economy.
- Search for potential markets outside for local produce such as dried apples and light woollen goods which can possibly be transported by air cargo.

Institutional Support and Incentives

Critical issues with regard to the institutional support system in the area include the following:

- inadequate institutional loans/credit to local entrepreneurs for OFEAs which force them to borrow from informal markets where interest rates are as high as 60 per cent per year;
- lack of an integrated "package" service to entrepreneurs, i.e., credit, technology, training, skill development, raw materials, and marketing; and
- unclear government policies regarding taxes, subsidies, and other economic incentives to entrepreneurs. At present loans are not extended to expand/improve the hotel/lodge business. This policy has to be reconsidered if the quality of hotels is to increase. Also an "integrated" approach for institutional support to tourism-related activities has to be evolved through consultation with local entrepreneurs, financial institutions, and other relevant organisations.

Preservation of Cultural and Historic Heritage

Preserving the traditional culture, values, and practices often becomes a problem whenever a place is opened up for all to see. During the field survey, some tourists and local informants raised this as a major issue. The potential problems were reported to be:

- theft and burglary of valuable antiques (idols, inscriptions, and books) from the monasteries (*ghomba*).
- possible negative influence on the social order and value system of the area, and
- loss of original culture/character in new markets like Jomsom.

Increased awareness on these issues can be brought about through institutional support to local organisations.

Improvement and Expansion of Infrastructure

Some basic infrastructural facilities need to be improved to provide services to the growing number of tourists and enhance the carrying capacity of the area. This is an important consideration for the area where the annual tourist inflow exceeds 10,000 at present and is anticipated to rise steadily each year. Construction/improvement of trails leading to some potential tourist areas like Tilicho lake (about 24 km from Jomsom), Dhaulagiri ice fall (about 2 days' walk from Jomsom), and the construction of viewing towers would help promote and diversify tourism in the area.

Improvements are critical in the following areas:

- improvement in trail and bridge conditions and maintenance of sufficient signposts showing distance, direction, elevation, and altitude along trekking routes;
- improvement in the management of air transportation to and from Pokhara-Jomsom providing for greater frequency and a more reliable service; and
- installation of communication facilities such as telex, fax, and phone for emergency purposes-in this context the facilities in the recently established office of the Department of Tourism in Jomsom have to be strengthened.

Wider Distribution of the Gains from Tourism

The gains from tourism should also accrue to interior villages so that potential income-generating activities can be established in these areas. In the cases of Jomsom and Marpha, these may include a number of farm and off-farm activities, viz., fruit and vegetable production and marketing, dried apple preparation, carpets and woollen goods' production, distilleries, and forest resource-based industries such as incense-making.

Growth of tourism has generally been noticed to widen the disparities between people living in the growth points and those living in the interior. Promotion of off-farm activities linked with tourism in the outlying villages and settlements could effectively narrow such gaps.