

General Tourism Policy of the Government

HMG/N strengthened and organised tourism administration by establishing a separate Tourism Ministry (now the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation) in 1979. The Department of Tourism, which predated the Ministry, was formerly placed under the Ministry of Transport and Communications before being placed under the new Tourism Ministry. A Hotel Management and Tourism Training Centre (HMTTC) was created within the Department of Tourism in 1972, with a view to conducting 'on the job' training courses for employees in various tourism-related services, as well as for new entrants into the profession (HMG/N MOT 1987-88). Another major measure taken in support of tourism was the establishment of a high-powered National Tourism Council in 1992 under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister, with the Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation as its Vice-Chairman. In the same year, a Tourism Development Board was also established with the Minister for Tourism as its Chairman (DOT HMG/N 1992: 9). The main objective of the Tourism Council is to bring about the much needed inter-ministerial coordination in tourism promotion and planning, and the objective of the Tourism Board is to have a body endowed with high decision-making authority in tourism. The government brought out a Tourism Act in 1978, a National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973, and a series of rules relating to trekking, mountaineering, and National Parks and Wildlife in the 70s and 80s (Tenzing and Banskota 1992: 161, 163). A 10-year Tourism Master Plan was drawn up by HMG/N in 1972, and the concern of the government for boosting tourism is more than reflected in the country's Seventh Plan (1985-90). The Plan laid out four main objectives, two of which are to increase the government's foreign exchange and revenue

earnings and to enhance employment generation (in the private sector, mainly), already stated above. The two other objectives include i) prolonging the length of stay by tourists in Nepal and extension of tourism into other areas of the country and ii) expansion of domestic product industries to act as import substitution in tourism consumer goods (Banskota and Sharma 1993: 1). Nepal has made good progress in the first three objectives. The most prominent of its achievements is the steady increase in foreign exchange earnings from tourism. In 1992, the total earnings in foreign exchange from non-Indian tourists stood at US\$ 61,090,000 (DOT HMG/N 1992: 65). Although there was a sudden decline in the number of tourists in 1993, by 12.2 per cent (see Summary Table 1), the amount of earnings in US\$ actually rose by 18.1 per cent over 1992 (DOT HMG/N 1993). Nepal, however, has failed to achieve much with respect to the fourth objective (Banskota and Sharma 1993: 12).

Notwithstanding the increase in foreign exchange earnings, the government's tourism policy and its work in tourism development have more critics than admirers. The government is widely blamed for failing to come up with an integrated or long-term perspective on tourism (Himal 2(3) 1989; 5(6) 1992; Banskota and Sharma 1993). At best, the government's policy on tourism remains *ad hoc*, piecemeal, and it responds or reacts in the face of criticism directed at its action or lack of it. For some years now, international environmentalist groups have reported on the problem of an increasing pile of non-biodegradable litter and garbage in the Mt. Everest and Khumbu areas, introduced by trekkers and mountaineers. Edmund Hillary, the hero of Everest in 1953, nicknamed it "the world's biggest junkyard". Still, no serious effort seems to be afoot to control, regulate, and clean the area of garbage. The few moves made in this direction are anything but determined. Commencing in the spring of 1992, the government royalty for climbing Mt. Everest was raised to US\$ 50,000. A rule now requires (effective from the autumn of 1992) climbing expeditions to bring back all their non-biodegradable garbage to Kathmandu for re-export to the country of origin. Expeditions are required to deposit a sum of US\$ 2,000 with the Ministry of Tourism, which they can reclaim on certification by the accompanying expedition liaison officer that their garbage has actually been brought back. This is all the government has been able to achieve on the issue of environmental pollution in the mountains so far. There is little else the government does to make sure such rules are actually working. An expedition to Mt. Pumori is said to have taken 200 metres of nylon rope and returned to Kathmandu with 300 metres (Himal 5(6), 1992: 21).

The government's policy on tourism or tourism management suffers from a number of other flaws in addition to the lack of an articulated tourism policy.

There is, for instance, an attitude of smug satisfaction among politicians and bureaucrats who, having stated a policy or promulgated a rule, do little else. There is little concern to see how such policies are being actually translated or implemented on the ground. There are any number of distortions in the application of rules for which either individual bureaucrats themselves are responsible or private travel and trekking agencies who bend, overlook, or ignore such rules at their convenience. The government has evolved no effective mechanism for monitoring, apart from appointing liaison officers, a system which is not without drawbacks. This attitude of indifference, unless there are personal gains to be made by members of the government or of the bureaucracy, deals a crippling blow to tourism development. The government does little to review or update the rules in the light of the impacts they make.

One of the latest rules to be announced relating to tourism, in general, and to trekking and climbing, in particular, by the government, introduces a stiff hike in visa and trekking permit fees, the national parks' fee, the royalty paid for trekking peaks, and the royalty paid for climbing middle and high-altitude peaks, not counting the embarkation fee and the airport tax. The Trekking Agency Association of Nepal (TAAN) has made a strong representation to the government stating that the raises are "unfair and unjustified". In a memorandum to the government submitted in February 1992 they protested against such an excessive fee structure, which is not to be found in any other country in the Himalayan region. They fear that this will make trekking and climbing activities in Nepal quite uncompetitive, leading to a falling off in trekking and climbing tourism in future. This could bring about an economic disaster and throw thousands of people employed in the private tourism sector out of a job. In a recent announcement, the government lowered the rate of the tourist visa fee, effective from July 1, 1994 (Rising Nepal, June 1994), but has not still relented to the other demands for lowering trekking and climbing royalties.

The TAAN blames the government accusing it of being interested only in maximising profits and monetary gains for the government from its tourism policy to the exclusion of other considerations (Private Communication: TAAN Officials). Apart from the exorbitant royalty rate for climbing Everest, the royalty levied on other peaks over 8,000 metres is US\$ 10,000. Similarly, trekking fees are charged at differential and uneven rates for different areas. They range from US\$ 5 per week for normal areas to US\$ 90 per week to visit other specified areas. For more exclusive areas, such as Upper Mustang and Upper Dolpa, the fees are as much as US\$ 700 per week for the first ten days, with an additional charge of US\$ 70 for each extra day spent. If the trekking

area happens to be in a National Park Area, the tourist is required to pay an additional fee of Nepali Rupees 600 flat. The TAAN has also expressed its unhappiness with the rule of setting an arbitrary limit of 900 tourists a year for Upper Mustang on the plea that it cannot go all out on the publicity front to attract tourists, in case many may exceed the stipulated limit and have to be refused entry. The TAAN, however, does not object to Mustang and Dolpa being opened up only to agency-handled group tourism, for obvious reasons. This rule is criticised by others, however, for creating no trickle-down benefits from tourism to local hosts (Thapa 1992: 126-128).

The government has done little to explain the reasons behind the huge hike in fees. Is there an underlying philosophy or a sound concept behind such a move? People are left to their own assumptions; which might be that it is done to cut down the number of expeditions to Mt. Everest and to protect the Khumbu area from environmental pollution, on the one hand, and to protect the cultural sensitivity of regions such as Upper Mustang and Upper Dolpa on the other. But, in truth, the government seems ambivalent and does not have the courage to of its convictions in relation to tourism policy or in basing its actions on it. In all these years it has dragged its feet in evolving and adopting a tourism policy. A draft policy has been drawn up but has not yet been announced. Perhaps the government is afraid that spelling out a policy clearly and explaining the underlying philosophy of tourism might give the government a moral responsibility to act on it.

This points to yet another defect in the government's tourism policy. One has an impression that there is a lack of independent thinking which is based on a true appreciation of the country's ecological peculiarities. Ideas about tourism development and expansion are dependent upon external drives and circumstances created by international tourism and travel organisations, or by loaning agencies such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank. It proceeds on the assumption that what is good for them is also good for Nepal. The Himalayas are a great source of attraction for tourists and tourism expansion in Nepal is recommended through overexploiting this one sensitive resource. A study on the tourism development programme, funded by the Asian Development Bank for the Ministry of Tourism, Nepal, and carried out by Touche Ross, in association with a group of international consultants in 1989-90, recommended the enhancement of tourism marketing. It projects a growth in tourist numbers of around 950,000 persons by the year 2010 (Touche Ross 1990). The Himalayas and trekking are shown to be among Nepal's two main tourist attractions.

In the end, two things seem to emerge from the government's overall tourism policy so far. One seeks to raise the tourist numbers by recourse to any means. In 1988 the government called upon the tourism sector to increase the number of tourists visiting Nepal to one million by the year 2000. The private sector criticises the government for projecting an overambitious and unrealisable plan in contrast to the little it actually does to provide the necessary infrastructure to achieve it. The government, however, seems determined to do it. In the meanwhile, it has issued licenses to more 5-star hotels in Kathmandu to open casinos. The other aim of the government seems to be to increase its revenue base and foreign exchange earnings from tourism, even if this means continually raising the fees payable by tourists.