

Transboundary ecotourism in the Kangchenjunga Landscape: Opportunities for sustainable development through regional cooperation



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The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), is a regional knowledge development and learning centre serving the eight regional member countries of the Hindu Kush Himalaya – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan – and based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Globalisation and climate change have an increasing influence on the stability of fragile mountain ecosystems and the livelihoods of mountain people. ICIMOD aims to assist mountain people to understand these changes, adapt to them, and make the most of new opportunities, while addressing upstream-downstream issues. We support regional transboundary programmes through partnership with regional partner institutions, facilitate the exchange of experience, and serve as a regional knowledge hub. We strengthen networking among regional and global centres of excellence. Overall, we are working to develop an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem to improve the living standards of mountain populations and to sustain vital ecosystem services for the billions of people living downstream – now, and for the future.



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Transboundary ecotourism in the Kangchenjunga Landscape: Opportunities for sustainable development through regional cooperation

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Acronyms and abbreviations	v
Summary	vi
Kangchenjunga Landscape: A transnational destination	1
Defining transboundary ecotourism and transnational destinations	3
Locating transboundary ecotourism: Sustainable development and regional cooperation perspectives	5
The tourist economy: Regional, national, and local trends	6
Harnessing transboundary ecotourism potential	9
Ecotourism destinations	9
Ecotourism routes	9
Cultural routes	10
Regional cooperation for transboundary ecotourism: Enabling an environmental perspective	11
Harnessing transboundary ecotourism potential	12
Promoting inclusive and responsible growth	13
Strengthening connectivity	13
Public–private partnerships	13
Complementary intervention areas	13
Strengthening cross-border connectivity	13
Branding and marketing	14
Promoting niche segments	14
Public–private partnership	14
Destination plans and management	14
Capacity and infrastructure building	14
References	15

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
GBPNIHESD	G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment & Sustainable Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHT	Great Himalaya Trail
GMR	Greater Mekong Subregion
GTERC	Global Tourism Economy Research Centre
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
KC	Kangchenjunga Circuit
KCA	Kangchenjunga Conservation Area
KL	Kangchenjung Landscape
KLCDI	Kangchenjunga Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative
KNP	Kangchenjunga National Park
KNP	Khangchendzonga National Park
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
MoCTCA	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation
MoT	Ministry of Tourism
NCB	National Council of Bhutan
NCD	Nature Conservation Division
NPC	National Planning Commission
NSB	National Statistics Bureau
OIBN	Office of the Investment Board Nepal
PA	Protected Area
RECAST	Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology, Nepal
SASEC	South Asia Subregion Economic Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TCAD	Tourism and Civil Aviation Department
TCB	Tourism Council of Bhutan
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
WEF	World Economic Forum
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council

Summary

- The Kangchenjunga Landscape (KL) shared by Bhutan, India, and Nepal is a unique transnational ecotourism destination with rich natural and cultural diversity.
- Within landscapes, limited economic opportunities and poor connectivity due to inaccessibility present multiple issues and challenges. Among them are high unemployment and poverty, especially among the youth and women of the region.
- The geographical, natural, cultural, economic, and political interdependency of destinations and communities within the KL highlight the need, scope, and opportunities for transboundary ecotourism across the landscape.
- Transboundary ecotourism, as envisaged by KLCDI, can present opportunities for inclusive and responsible economic growth and promises achievement of the goals of protecting the environment, and sustainably empowering and creating employment for mountain communities.
- Regional cooperation on ecotourism provides opportunities for inclusive economic growth, connectivity, and mutual benefits that transcend boundaries by collaboratively harnessing the tangible and intangible natural and cultural attributes and values of the landscape in partnership with diverse stakeholders.
- Interventions focusing on strengthening cross-border connectivity, branding and marketing, promoting niche segments, public–private partnerships, green infrastructure, and capacity building could promote transboundary ecotourism across the landscape.

The Kangchenjunga Landscape (KL) is one of six transboundary landscapes identified by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region. A uniquely beautiful transnational destination, the landscape is adorned with spectacular mountains and valleys, which are home to diverse ethnic communities. The people of the KL, who number more than 7 million, are bound by a common heritage and shared cultures (ICIMOD et al., 2017).

ICIMOD's Kangchenjunga Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KLCDI) promotes integrated conservation and development programmes across the borders of Bhutan, India, and Nepal, and is jointly implemented by the governments of all three countries. The initiative has set up six pilot sites for ecotourism development in the landscape.

Figure 1: The Kangchenjunga landscape with its transnational natural and cultural assets





The Kangchenjunga massif

From a transnational destination standpoint, the scenic views of the Kangchenjunga range; its picturesque valleys, rivers, lakes, and tea gardens; and PAs such as the Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve, Bhutan; the Jaldapara National Park and Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP), India; and the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area, Nepal; are important natural heritages. Besides PAs, the KNP and Mai Pokhari (Nepal) are globally recognized – the first as a world heritage site and the latter as a Ramsar site. Inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List in 2016, the KNP is a mixed World Heritage Site in recognition of its outstanding universal values linked with tangible and intangible heritage. The KNP includes Mt Kangchenjunga; its adjacent landscapes: diverse plains, valleys, lakes, glaciers, snow-capped mountains, and hills covered with ancient forests; and the value systems of its indigenous inhabitants: myths and folklore built around the mountain with nature at their core, and worshipped by the Lepchas and other indigenous communities. The sacred meanings of these stories and practices have been integrated with Buddhist beliefs and constitute the basis for local people's identity.



The Lepchas are among the indigenous people of the landscape

The KL's image as a transnational destination is enhanced by the tangible and intangible cultural heritage shared by Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Such heritage includes rich ethnic diversity and indigenous ways of life including food, culture, folklore, and traditions, intricately interwoven with natural capital. The natural and cultural assets of the landscape and the values they embody are strong pull factors for tourists and provide valuable ecosystem services and livelihood opportunities to locals.



Local food cultures are an important aspect of ecotourism

Defining transboundary ecotourism and transnational destinations

Transboundary ecotourism refers to visits to destinations across borders to experience culture, nature, lifestyles, cuisines, landmarks etc. The scope of transboundary ecotourism is wide, while the types of transnational destinations are varied, such as relict areas, parks, monuments, and nature (Timothy, 1995); river basins (Zhang et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2016); heritage and cultural routes (Pattanaro & Pistocchi, 2016; UNWTO, 2015a); and geographic area (Batala et al., 2017). This suggests that transboundary ecotourism is linked with tourism that transcends borders and includes a range of destinations and activities that attract tourists in them (Timothy, 2000).

A transnational destination spreads across transboundary, cross-border or borderline/frontier regions (Rio et al., 2017; Sofield, 2006; Timothy, 2000). The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of 'frontier': "the edge of land where people live and have built towns, beyond which the country is wild and unknown", connotes both geographic boundary and the existence of unknown and inhospitable/wilderness areas (Chambers and Rakic, 2015). The mountain landscapes of the KL represent such frontier regions characterized by specificities of isolation, inaccessibility, scarcity, and marginality, presenting both challenges and opportunities for transboundary ecotourism. As they are remote and inaccessible, connectivity (physical, informational, air, and economic) is a major bottleneck to developing transboundary ecotourism. Scarcity and marginality dictate the availability of resources and the ability of the human population adapt to change, but it is their very isolation and the complementary pristine landscape and environment, heritage, authentic culture, and lifestyles that serve as major draws for tourists (Butler, 2002). Several examples exist where frontier regions have become popular tourist destinations. They include the border gates between North and South Korea (Timothy, 2000) and Pakistan-China (at Khunjerab pass); the Silk Road that traverses Asia, East Africa, and Southern Europe; the Camino de Santiago Trail in Europe; and the Mekong River basin in Southeast Asia.



The mountain landscapes of the KL represent frontier regions characterized by specificities of isolation, inaccessibility, scarcity, and marginality, presenting both challenges and opportunities for transboundary ecotourism.

Locating transboundary ecotourism: Sustainable development and regional cooperation perspectives

The geographical, natural, cultural, economic, and political interdependency of destinations and communities within the KL highlight the need, scope, and opportunities for transboundary ecotourism in the landscape. Despite being rich in natural and cultural wealth, mountain communities in the KL are poor in economy, skills, and options to diversify livelihoods to make ends meet sustainably. Ecotourism can help meet the goals of protecting the environment and creating employment for and empowering the community (Higham, 2007). Ecotourism serves as an important potential strategy for governments and communities to reduce poverty and gain prosperity, and therefore has significant policy and practice relevance. At the policy level, poverty alleviation is high on the agenda of the governments of Bhutan, India, and Nepal. At the practice level, ecotourism provides opportunities for jobs and employment, building capacity and community empowerment.

Developing transboundary ecotourism is therefore important for sustainable development and regional cooperation in the KL. Such an approach is critical for two reasons. First, to reduce poverty and bring prosperity leading to sustainable development, and second, to promote regional cooperation. Many local priorities, and the issues and challenges faced by the inhabitants of the KL – poverty and prosperity for sustainable development, for instance – are common across Bhutan, India, and Nepal.

Nearly 80%, 69% and 62% of the populations of Nepal, India, and Bhutan live in rural areas respectively (NPC, 2018; Haub and Sharma, 2015; NSB Bhutan, 2018), and poverty is pronounced in mountain and rural areas (Karki and Rasul, 2018). Poverty is also disproportionately and significantly high among women. Issues emerging from rising unemployment in Bhutan, India, and Nepal are increasing among the youth and women. As Lama (2016) suggests, the pervasive nature of mountain poverty is linked with the economic–social–political marginalization of mountain communities and the regions they inhabit, which leads to underdevelopment. Integrating socio-economy and geography with mainstream tourism markets that are sustainable and to destinations that transcend boundaries is important. By recollecting the histories of ancient routes where boundaries served as inter-connective bodies to facilitate the exchange of goods, services, and ideas (e.g., historical salt trade routes and the Silk Road) and reconnecting with current regional cooperation frameworks/models (e.g., KLCDI, SASEC, and BIMSTEC), transboundary ecotourism can maximize potential for reducing such pervasive poverty.

In Bhutan, unemployment is almost three times higher among young people, and female unemployment is higher, especially among the youth (UNCTAD, 2013). In India, Sikkim and West Bengal rank among the top 6 states with highest unemployment rate (MoLE, 2012). West Bengal is also the state with the second highest percentage of households with low average monthly income (< INR 5000) (MoLE, 2016). In northern states, unemployment is the highest in at least the last 20 years (Deshmane, 2018). Comparatively, the rate of unemployment is higher among educated youth and women (MoLE, 2016). Ecotourism, in this regard, can bring prosperity by providing employment opportunities for impoverished mountain communities, particularly, the youth and women of the KL.

The KL is shared by broad and multiple stakeholders who influence transboundary ecotourism development in the region, determine its management direction, and ascribe and devise varied values at different landscape scales. There are mutual interests and common goals shared by Bhutan, India, and Nepal when it comes to developing ecotourism collaboratively. In line with what UNWTO (2016) and Saltykov (2015) suggest, regional cooperation serves as a strategic tool to enhance international and regional partnership and competitiveness of ecotourism destinations within the KL. In particular, regional cooperation promotes inclusive economic growth, and connectivity and cooperation beyond boundaries by collaboratively harnessing the destinations' tangible and intangible natural and cultural attributes and values. Both KLCDI and the governments of the three countries recognize the importance of ecotourism to enhance livelihoods for sustainable development through regional cooperation.

Given this dynamic and the significant role played by transboundary ecotourism for a transnational destination such as the KL, the importance of integrating cross-border tourism management, collaborative partnerships, policy and research, and development cannot be understated. Because transboundary ecotourism is spread across destinations beyond borders, it is integral for sustainable development and regional cooperation. For this, ecosystem services at the landscape scale become the basis for sustained ecotourism. This suggests that transboundary ecotourism can be an effective entry point for sustainable development and regional cooperation in the KL.

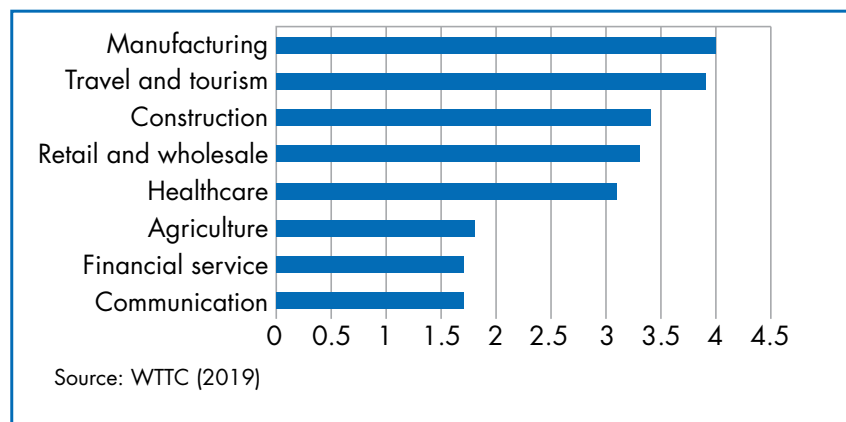


With its deep-rooted shared natural and cultural heritage and history, the KL provides ample opportunities to harness transboundary ecotourism as well as cultural experiences and products.

The tourist economy: Regional, national, and local trends

Tourism is one of the most prioritized sectors in Bhutan, India, and Nepal (NSB, 2017; MoT, 2017; MoCTCA, 2016) to bring inclusive economic growth for prosperity. There are immense opportunities emerging at the regional level, primarily in the areas of regional tourism, growth, and competitiveness performance. In terms of economic potential, travel and tourism is the second most influential sector in the world contributing to gross domestic product (GDP) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Global sectoral growth performance



The total GDP contributions of tourism are significantly higher in South Asia, Bhutan, India and Nepal (see Table 1). This region is also becoming a growth centre for tourism, with huge regional and domestic market growth and an increase in the spending capacity of tourists in these markets. Regional tourists from the Asia-Pacific region are shaping tourism growth in the Hindu Kush Himalaya. Regional tourists – from India, China, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Thailand, and Bangladesh – are major inbound tourists. Besides, domestic tourism is a rapidly increasing market with growth performance and spending either outperforming or at par with the spending of international tourists. For instance, India's domestic travel demand stands at 100 million tourists (WEF, 2017a). In most of the Indian Himalayan region, including in Sikkim, domestic tourism is the predominant market (NITI Aayog, 2018). In Bhutan, international tourist growth increased by 13.8%, while regional (mostly from India) increased by 35% (TCB, 2017). In Nepal, domestic tourism has emerged as a flourishing market. In addition, the spending capacity of Nepalis as outbound tourists is more than that of inbound tourists from abroad in Nepal. This trend has been observed over the last four years (The Himalayan Times, 2017). From a service perspective, employment generated by tourism in South Asia, India, and Nepal number in the millions, with an estimated 1 million jobs in Nepal and 49 million jobs in India (Table 1).

Table 1: Regional and national ecotourism growth

Category	South Asia	Bhutan	India	Nepal
Total GDP (%)	8.8	9	9.6	7.9
Employment (million)	51.1	NA	42,672.70	1,051.00
Expected jobs by 2029	63.6	NA	52,999.30	1351.4
Visitor export (spending in USD billion)	39.4	NA	28.9	746.3 million
Inbound arrivals	USA, UK, Bangladesh, China, and India	USA, China, Singapore, Thailand, UK, and Germany	USA, Bangladesh, UK, Canada, and Sri Lanka	India, China, USA, Sri Lanka, and UK
International spending (%)	15	NA	13	56
Domestic spending (%)	85	Na	87	44
Leisure	94	88	95	87
Business	6	12	5	13

Source: WTTC (2019a and 2019b); TCB, (2018 and 2017), NCB, (2016)

Nine million tourists visited KL member countries in 2016, with the annual revenue amounting to USD 23,415 million (Table 2). The revenue generated contributed 10% to India's total GDP (WTTC, 2017a), 8% to Nepal's GDP (WTTC, 2017b), and 9% to Bhutan's GDP (NCB, 2016) (Table 1). Similarly, India (40th) and Bhutan (78th) are among 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region that have improved the most in terms of the travel and tourism competitiveness indicator (WEF, 2017b). Thus there is tremendous opportunity for initiating transboundary ecotourism in the landscape and on harnessing shared tourist destinations.

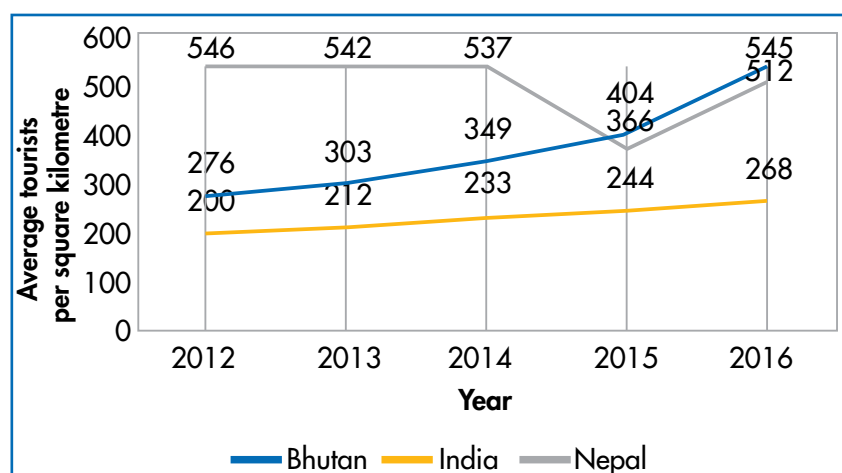
Table 2: Tourist arrivals and revenue in Bhutan, India, and Nepal in 2016

	Bhutan (million)	India (million)	Nepal (million)
Total tourist arrival (individuals)	0.25	8.8	0.75
Percentage change over the previous year	21%	9.7%	40%
Total revenue (USD)	73.74	22,923	518.49

Source: TCB, (2017); UNCTAD, (2013); MoT, (2017) and OIBN, (2018)

The average number of tourists per square kilometre in Bhutan, India, and Nepal has been continuously increasing over the years (Figure 3). Tourists' travel patterns and behaviours demonstrate strong inter-regional market share and mobility. Surveys of the Tourism Council of Bhutan indicate that 27% and 26% of tourists travelling to Bhutan combine their trips to also include Nepal and India respectively (TCB, 2012). This suggests that a large number of tourists travel inter-regionally, which is significant for the transboundary tourism market.

Figure 3: Tourist arrival trends in KL member countries



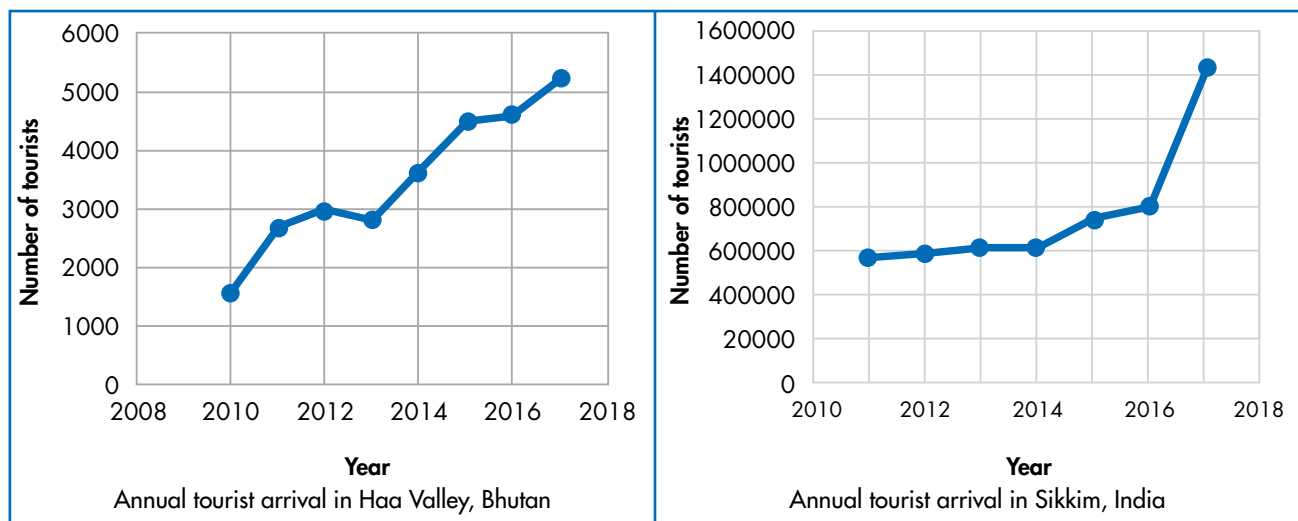
Source: UNWTO and GTERC (2017)



The KL region is becoming a growth centre for tourism, with huge regional and domestic market growth and an increase in the spending capacity of tourists in these markets.

Tourist numbers are also increasing in KLCDI pilot sites. In the Haa Valley of Bhutan, the total number of tourists increased from 1580 in 2010 to 5225 in 2017 (Figure 4). Similarly, 1.4 million tourists visited Sikkim, India in 2017, compared to less than 1 million in 2011. In Nepal, 70,000 tourists visited Ilam district, Mai Pokhari, and the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area in 2017.

Figure 4: Tourist arrivals in the Haa Valley, Bhutan and Sikkim, India



Source: Dzongkhag Administration Haa, (2018); TCAD, (2018)

Similarly, growth prognoses show that international arrivals in the Asia-Pacific region are forecast to reach 535 million by 2030 (UNWTO, 2017). International tourist arrivals are projected to increase in India and Nepal to 30 million and 1.6 million by 2028 respectively (WTTC, 2018a and 2018b). The Tourism Council of Bhutan aims to attract 500,000 tourists by 2023 (The Hindu, 2019), and it is expected that regional and domestic markets will add significantly to growth in Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Asia's growing middle class and active young population are the major drivers. Such tourism growth is interlaced with growth in economy, jobs, and enterprise along the tourism value chain, and is likely to bring prosperity.

These tourism growth analyses point to major emerging opportunities when it comes to transboundary ecotourism development in the KL. However, given the mountain specificities, particularly in relation to limited resources and capacity, and the sensitivity of nature, culture, and landscape to such tourism growth, preparedness for and management of transboundary ecotourism is crucial.

Harnessing transboundary ecotourism potential

Ecotourism destinations

With its deep-rooted shared natural and cultural heritage and history, the KL provides ample opportunities to harness transboundary ecotourism. Global heritage sites include the Kangchendzongka National Park, India, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Mai Pokhari, Nepal, which is a Ramsar site. Lake Tsomgo in Sikkim and Gorkhey-Singhlila National Park in Darjeeling, India, and Haa Valley in Bhutan are other unique destinations.

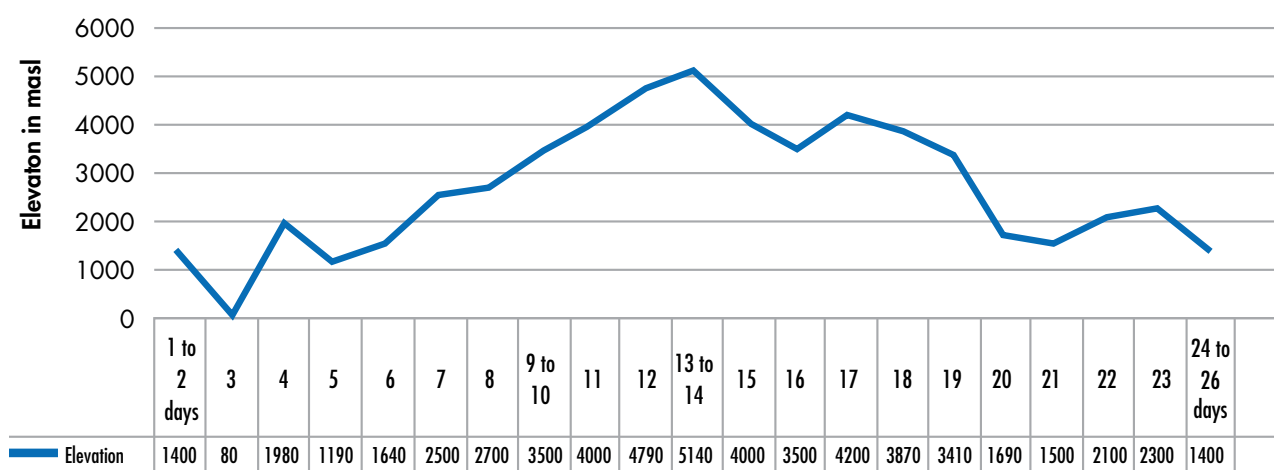
Ecotourism routes

Harnessing the potential for enhancing the viability and competitiveness of ecotourism destinations spread across boundaries lies on the development of routes. Routes or ecotourism trails help integrate destinations across borders and strengthen the product at scale (Stoffelen, 2018). Trails with such transnational scope include:

The Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) – The GHT is an adventure tourism destination with a transboundary trekking route that spans across mountain areas: from Humla in the west to Kangchenjunga in the east. The GHT is part of the longest and highest trekking destination in the world, conceptualized to link three other HKH countries beyond Bhutan, India, and Nepal. It offers great potential for cross-border tourism, especially for those travelling around Ilam (Nepal) and Darjeeling (India) and beyond.

Kangchenjunga Circuit (KC) – In 1899, explorer and mountaineer Douglas Freshfield and his team carried out an adventurous expedition covering Darjeeling, Sikkim, Zemu Glacier and Kanchenjunga Massive, and Khang-La pass spanning across two countries (India and Nepal). In 1992, a team from India carried out a trek traversing Darjeeling (India)–eastern Nepal–north Sikkim (India)–Darjeeling of the KL region. Presently, KC tours covering India–Nepal or Nepal can be completed in 17 to 26 days (Figure 5).

Figure 5: KC trek itinerary of Nepal



Note: Adapted from Nepal Footprint Holiday, (2019).

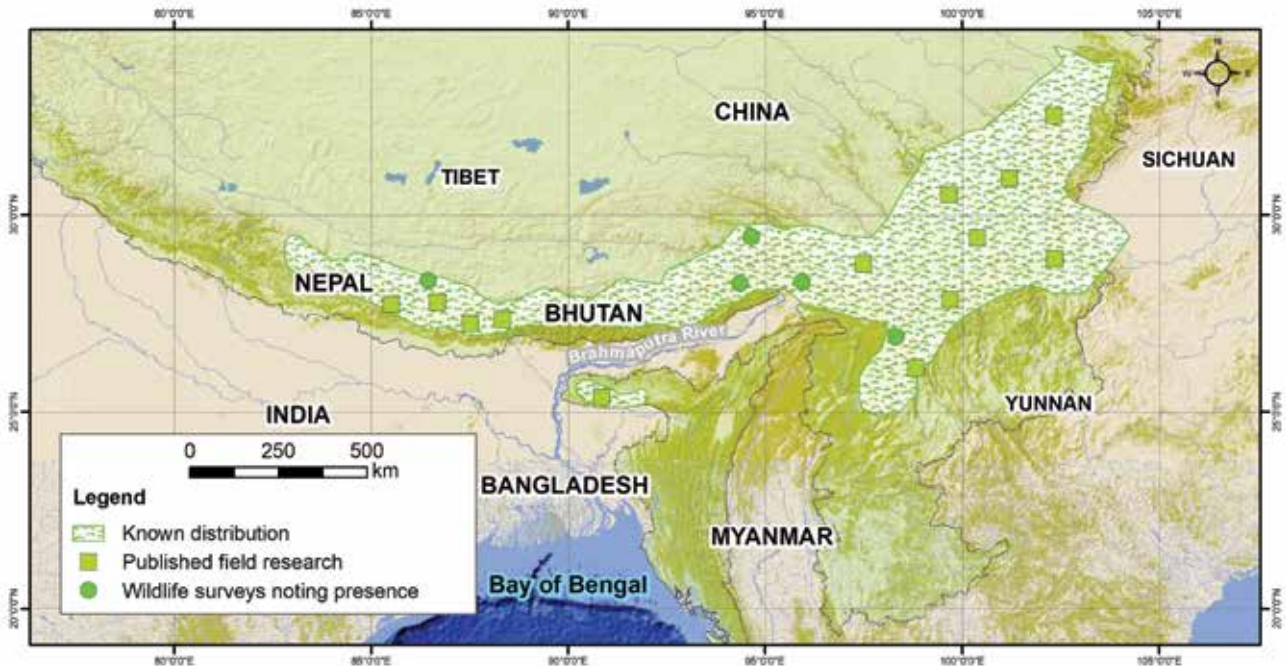
<http://www.treknepalhimalaya.com/nepal/nepal-trekking/eastern-nepal/kanchenjunga-trekking.html>

Singhalila trek – The Singhalila ridge, which geopolitically divides India and Nepal, offers another spectacular opportunity for transboundary tourism. The Singhalila region hosts more than 8000 tourists annually (Pradhan et al., 2014). The trek route starts at Mane Bhanjyang in India, climbs up to Sandakphu in the Nepal-India border before finally descending to Phalut in India and ending in Rimbick, India. Tourists visiting Darjeeling, Mirik, and Singhalila Park across the border could also visit KL Nepal.

Red panda circuit – Wildlife watching tourism is a growing market in the global tourism landscape (UNWTO, 2015b). Practiced as a non-consumptive form of tourism, such activity serves as an incentive for the conservation of wildlife and their habitat (Belicia and Islam, 2018). Native to the eastern Himalaya and southwestern China, the

red panda is an important wildlife species with a transnational spread (Xu and Guan, 2018) (Figure 6). Taplejung–Phawakhola, Kadebhanjang, Phurumbu–Ilam–Thumke, Gorkhe, Jamuna–Manebhanjang–Sandakpur–Jigme Keshar Strict Nature Reserve could be important landmarks for red panda tourism circuits.

Figure 6: Transnational red panda corridor

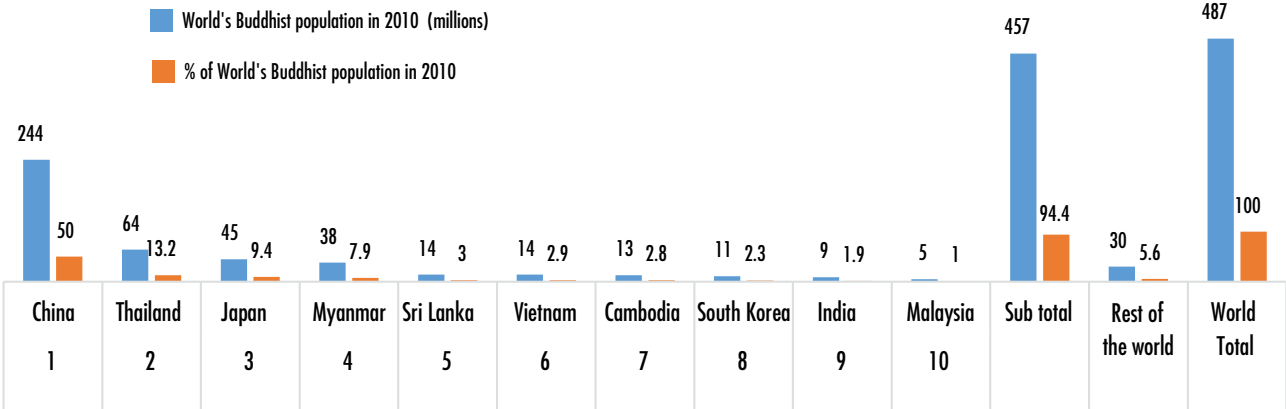


Source: Adapted from Dorji et al. (2012)

Cultural routes

Mountain regions invoke spiritual meanings among pilgrims (NITI Aayog, 2018). The transboundary cultural route traversing Bhutan, India, and Nepal, which includes a circuit of special importance for Buddhists, is an important transnational heritage and cultural tourism product. The region represents a composite of ethnic mountain communities who practice Buddhist traditions and faiths. Lumbini, Nepal the birth place of Lord Buddha; Bodh Gaya, India, the place of Buddha’s enlightenment; and the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, a refuge for thriving ancient Buddhist traditions and culture, are important cultural and spiritual landmarks for practitioners of the Buddhist faith. Traditional lifestyles guided by Buddhist philosophy and festivals that have largely remained unchanged for centuries could be big attractions for tourists. Rising intra-regional tourists from China, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, which have the highest Buddhist populations in the world (Figure 7) highlight growth prospects for a transboundary Buddhist circuit. Over 94% of the world’s Buddhist population resides in the Asia-Pacific region, and this population is projected to increase by 2050 (Pew Research Centre, 2015). The market prognosis for Buddhist tourists is positive and long term, indicating good prospects for a Buddhist circuit.

Figure 7: Ten countries with the world’s largest Buddhist populations



Source: Pew Research Centre, (2015)

In addition, spice and tea tourism – including a pilgrimage tour covering Pathivara (Nepal), Mahakal Dham (Darjeeling, India), Char Dham (Sikkim, India) and Tiger's Nest (Bhutan) – are key ecotourism destinations featuring transboundary cultural routes with scope for regional cooperation.

Regional cooperation for transboundary ecotourism: Enabling an environmental perspective

Transnational prospects for the KL as a potential and priority area for transboundary ecotourism are enabled by global and regional development frameworks and initiatives. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, UNESCO World Heritage Convention, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are guiding frameworks for sustainable tourism growth and prosperity through connectivity and regional economic cooperation. The SDGs in particular provide important strategic direction for transboundary ecotourism development in the KL. Targets 8.3, 8.5, and 8.9 – dealing with jobs, growth, and productive employment for all (women, youth, and men) – can guide policy design and implementation by 2030, targets 15.1 and 15.4 – dealing with conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of mountains and mountain ecosystems by 2030 – is also pertinent, as is target 17 – dealing with collaborative partnerships.

SASEC and BIMSTEC provide important regional policy and partnership frameworks, through which shared goals and interests of promoting transboundary ecotourism development can be addressed. At the KL level, ICIMOD's Medium Term Action Plan IV (2018–2022) and KLCDI's Regional Cooperation Framework and Regional Conservation and Development Strategy (2016–2026) (ICIMOD-NCD, 2018), provide strategic and context-based direction. Ecotourism development is a common priority of these global-regional frameworks. They promote regional integration by facilitating the movement of people and exchange of goods and services. Hence, the KLCDI's focus is on alignment with these global and regional sustainable development and economic cooperation frameworks.

At a country-specific level, transboundary ecotourism is further supported by the existing institutional structure and functional mechanism directly/indirectly related to sustainable ecotourism development. The tourism ministries (national/provincial/state) of Bhutan, India, and Nepal and their line agencies have mandates to promote inclusive economic growth and provide day-to-day service and implementation of the ecotourism programmes/activities. The vision, policies, and plans are strategic documents that support the institutions in their functional roles (Table 3). With sustainability at the core of their vision and mission, the promotion of inclusive economic growth and responsible ecotourism practices not only enhances opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and brings prosperity, but also maintains ecological and cultural values (NITI Aayog, 2018).

Table 3: Tourism policy and strategies in the three KL countries

Bhutan	India	Nepal
Bhutan 2020: A vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness	India Vision 2020: A healthier and more prosperous nation	Prosperous Nepal: Happy Nepali
12th Five Year Plan (2018–2023)	Sustainable Tourism in the Indian Himalayan Region (2018)	Constitution of Nepal, 2015 (2072 BS) – Article 51 (L) State policies regarding tourism
Bhutan Tourism Product Development Guidelines 2018	West Bengal Tourism Policy (2016)	National Tourism Strategic Plan (2015–2024)
Destination Haa: Tourism Action Plan (2018–2022)	Sikkim Tourism Policy (2015)	Tourism Vision 2020
Middle Path – Bhutan's National Environmental Strategy 1998	Guideline for Ecotourism in and around Protected Areas of India (2011)	The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, 2014–2020
Biodiversity Action Plan for Bhutan 1997	National Tourism Policy (2002)	Homestay Operational Guidelines 2011 (2067 BS)
Bhutan Tourism Rules and Schedules of Tariff for International Tourists 1995	National Strategy for Tourism Development (1996)	14th National Development Plan (2016/17–2018/19)
Trekking in Bhutan Rules and Regulations 1996	National Tourism Policy (1982)	Tourism Policy, Nepal (2009)
		Forest Act 1993 (Amended in 2014)



Tea and spice (Large Cardamom) gardens are important transboundary ecotourism products of the Kangchenjunga Landscape

ICIMOD's transboundary landscape frameworks outline opportunities for collaborating countries with shared interests and values (Shakya et al., 2012; ICIMOD et al., 2017) to pursue transboundary ecotourism development as a common agenda to promote the KL as a transnational destination. Such broad frameworks are crucial because they give due regard to processes of globalization and how they affect tourism, and the growing importance of regional (in the Asia-Pacific) and global integration for economic cooperation. In doing so they highlight how concepts of borders and tourism have transcended sovereign state boundaries in more recent years. Similar to what Sofield (2006) suggests, the globalization of mobility, communication, and economy, as reasons that have increased the permeability of traditional borders between countries. Under these circumstances, greater regional cooperation is critical to bringing sustainable development at the landscape scale.

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMR), the South Asia Subregion Economic Cooperation (SASEC), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) are some important regional economic cooperation frameworks promoting tourism for transnational destination development initiatives.

Transboundary ecotourism in the KL provides unprecedented opportunities for inclusive and responsible economic growth, crucial for long-term sustainability and equitable distribution of ecotourism resources among communities. The shared values and connectivity of communities in the KL – across environmental, economic, and social spheres – make transboundary ecotourism a powerful force in potentially strengthening regional integration and consolidating cooperation. Such regional cooperation would lead to sustainable development in line with the SDGs. Some of these opportunities are detailed below:

Harnessing transboundary ecotourism potential

With its long history as a favoured ecotourism destination, the landscape is well positioned to harness transboundary experiences and products. Historical tourist destinations and trekking routes could be rejuvenated and promoted under a Kangchenjunga transboundary tourism initiative. Strengthening the historic trekking route starting in Darjeeling through Sikkim to Zemu Glacier and Kangchenjunga Massif in Nepal before returning to Darjeeling, could be one such case. Existing relationships and collaborations where Bhutan and India, and India and Nepal share open borders is an added advantage for such a transboundary undertaking.

Promoting inclusive and responsible growth

Transboundary ecotourism could promote inclusive and responsible growth that benefits diverse stakeholders including marginalized communities at the local, national, and regional scales. For instance, value chains of ecotourism products could be promoted to generate jobs in both formal and informal sectors. This would provide an avenue to build the capacities of marginalized communities to ensure their meaningful participation).

Strengthening connectivity

Transboundary ecotourism could enhance regional experience by connecting key destinations across the Kangchenjunga landscape. The open borders between Bhutan and India, and India and Nepal already facilitate easier transnational air and land transportations to strengthen site connections and have good potential to promote regional tourism.

Public–private partnerships

Public–private partnerships could bring much needed expertise to support sustainable ecotourism development. The private sector can support resource leveraging from co-funding; investment for product development; and packaging, branding, and promotion of the region's produce as niche products and the tourism experience itself as unique and enriching.

Complementary intervention areas

Transboundary ecotourism initiatives have the potential to conserve ecosystems and sustainable development if they can include the following:

Strengthening cross-border connectivity

- Increase land and air connectivity (Delhi–Kathmandu–Paro, Kathmandu–Bagdogra)
- Improve immigration facilities at country borders (Nepal–India and Bhutan–India)
- Develop checkpoints at existing and potential border points with a common immigration procedure for Asian tourists



Transboundary ecotourism in the KL provides unprecedented opportunities for inclusive and responsible economic growth, crucial for long-term sustainability and equitable distribution of ecotourism resources among communities.

Branding and marketing

- Develop common standards for product branding and quality of services
- Develop a regional ecotourism package linking various themes such as agro-tourism, cultural tourism, pilgrimage, wildlife tourism, and adventure tourism
- Develop joint marketing strategies for specific ecotourism products (e.g., rhododendron, oranges, yak, birds, traditional food, etc.)

Promoting niche segments

- Identify, map, diversify, and promote existing and potential niche regional and transboundary ecotourism products
- Organize media tours to key destinations for promotion and publicity
- Link ecotourism with other local livelihood opportunities and value chains such as crafts, vegetables, and non-timber forest products

Public-private partnership

- Promote public-private partnership for service development – including travel and technology, hospitality, gastronomy, handlooms, etc. – and the development of smart business ecosystems – products packaging and marketing
- Promote investment opportunities using innovative financial mechanisms – foreign direct investment, bankable projects, remittances, low-interest loans for entrepreneurship etc.

Destination plans and management

- Map a comprehensive inventory of existing and potential national and transboundary ecotourism products
- Revive and promote transnational and transboundary heritage routes and trails
- Develop waste management strategies and actions

Capacity and infrastructure building

- Build capacity for quality hospitality and services with a special focus on women and marginalized communities
- Green and eco-friendly tourist infrastructure development (especially physical and communication) and promotion of services (including rural homestays)
- Promoting women's leadership in entrepreneurship and business

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