

Introduction

Mountain Tourism in Nepal

Mountain tourism in Nepal began in 1952 when the first ascent over a 8,000m peak was accomplished by Maurice Herzog on Mt. Annapurna I (8,091m). Another historic event involved the ascent of the highest peak on the planet, Mt. Sagarmatha or Mt. Everest (8,848m), by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary in 1953, and it received wide publicity and increased the attraction for the Nepalese mountains throughout the world. However, even after a period of 10 years, the number of tourists visiting Nepal was limited. It was just over 6,000 in 1962. The number grew almost nine-fold in the ten years from 1962 to 1972 (Indian tourists not accounted for). Since then, with a few exceptions, the trend has been one of growth (Table 1, Figures 1a and 1b).

Current estimates show that the growth rate was just over six per cent between 1976 and 1982. While the number of tourists visiting Nepal continues to grow, there has not been an encouraging growth in tourism spending. The growth in spending in US Dollars has remained more or less constant or has even declined (Banskota 1994). Nepal is thus receiving more and more tourists, but she has to bear a higher and higher environmental cost for each of her guests. The government plans to raise the number of tourists to one million by the year 2,000 A.D. The volume itself is not so large compared to European destinations. Salzburg, (area 8,000sq. km.), for example, hosts over 1.5 million tourists in a year (Uitz 1993). Although the tourist volume in Nepal is still low and is growing steadily, the overcrowding effects at mountaineering base camps and popular trek camps are more pronounced and much publicised. Regular visitors like Sir Edmund Hillary recommended that Everest be closed for a number of years in order to give it some rest. According to him, "*changes can happen in a relatively short period. In forty years, I have seen the transformation of the remote Khumbu area on the southern slopes of Mt. Everest. In 1951, the Khumbu was a place of great beauty, with 3,000 tough and hardy Sherpas living a remarkably full and cooperative life despite their rigorous environment. Now it has become largely a tourist area with 12,000 foreigners streaming in each year, leaving their litter and tempting the Sherpas to break their traditional forestry customs and sell hundreds of loads of firewood for luxury fires*" (Hillary in Kemf 1993).

Although Nepal is well-known as a mountain tourist destination, large areas are not directly affected by tourism. Of the total land area of 147,181sq. km., about two thirds is occupied by hills and mountains with a congregate panoply of over 1,300 peaks and pinnacles including the world's highest mountain (Gurung 1990). The potential for opening up new areas is limited, mainly because of transport and accommodation facilities. Signs of overcrowding and visible strains on carrying capacity in certain destinations are often the outcomes of negligence on the part of trekking or mountaineering groups and the ineffective management structure of the government against the poverty stricken conditions of local inhabitants.

Although the magnet of mountain tourism in Nepal is Mt. Everest and other high peaks, the stepping stone for all visitors still remains the capital city, Kathmandu. Its natural greenery was described as "the wildest dreams of Kew" (Kipling, quoted by D.D. Bhatt 1964). It was linked with the outside world by an airport in 1954 and by a road to India in 1956. Kathmandu was also known as a temple city where there were more temples than houses and more deities than people. In recent years, the city has developed into an ill-reputed centre of environmental degradation. The touristic value of Kathmandu appears to be on the decline. Air pollution, water pollution, and garbage have severally inhibited the capacity to absorb tourists in Kathmandu.

Table 1: Tourist Growth by Decades

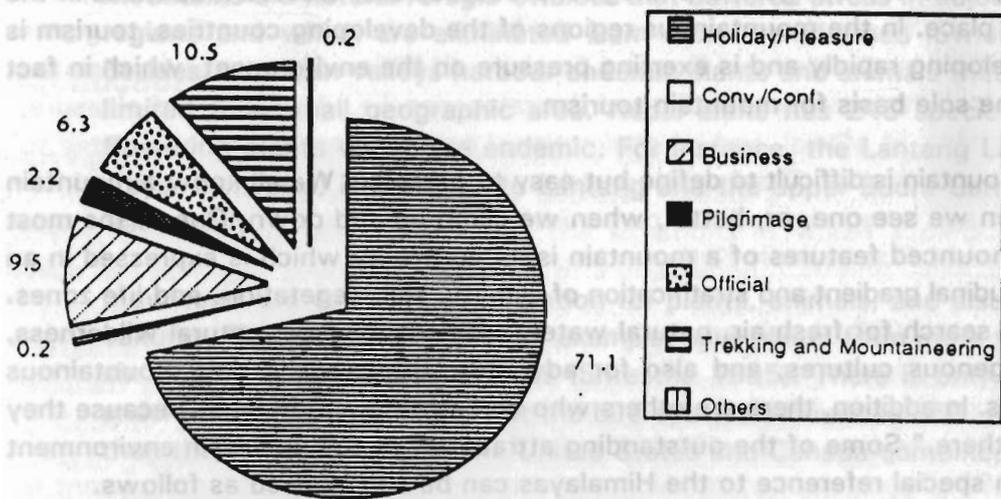
Year	No. of Tourist
1962	6,179
1972	52,930
1982	175,448
1992	334,353

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics 1992, HMG

Tourism Attractions in the Mountain Environment

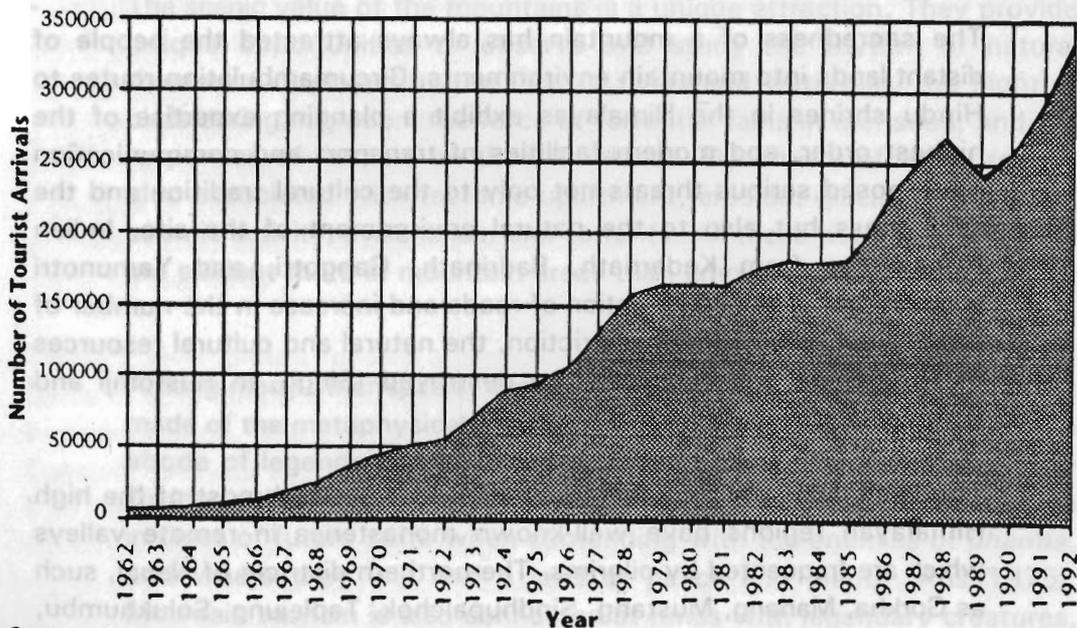
Mountains are important to all mankind since the fate of mountain ecosystems affects half the world's people. It has been estimated that about 10 per cent of the world's population depends on mountain resources (Keating 1993). It also means that the mountains depend on those 10 per cent to provide stability, to combat pollution, to preserve biodiversity and wilderness, and to safeguard human traditions and cultures. UNCED's Agenda 21, Chapter 13,

Figure 1a: Tourist arrival percentage by purpose of visit, 1992



Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 1992

Figure 1b: Tourist Arrivals 1962 - 1992



Source: Department of Tourism, Various Issues

identified tourism as one of the key activities for providing alternative livelihood opportunities to mountain people in the process of attaining sustainable mountain development. The pressure of the 21st century is more active than the pressures from geomorphological processes that created mountains in the first place. In the mountainous regions of the developing countries, tourism is developing rapidly and is exerting pressure on the environment, which in fact is the sole basis for mountain tourism.

A mountain is difficult to define but easy to perceive. We all know a mountain when we see one, or, better, when we climb up and down. One of the most pronounced features of a mountain is its verticality which is expressed in an altitudinal gradient and stratification of climate, soil, vegetation, and life zones. The search for fresh air, natural water, scenic landscape, natural wilderness, indigenous cultures, and also for adventure brings visitors to mountainous areas. In addition, there are others who come to the mountains "because they are there." Some of the outstanding attractions of the mountain environment with special reference to the Himalayas can be summarised as follows.

- Mountains have a mystic aura, not only for explorers, scholars, and mountain climbers, but also for the general public. One of the prime interests of a tourist is to expose himself/herself to a different environment and culture. This inherent passion, which is largely driven by curiosity, is generally satisfied by mountain tourism.
- The sacredness of a mountain has always attracted the people of distant lands into mountain environments. Circumambulation routes to Hindu shrines in the Himalayas exhibit a planning expertise of the highest order, and modern facilities of transport and communication have posed serious threats not only to the cultural tradition and the sacredness but also to the natural environment of the site. Indian experiences from Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri suggest that, if the construction of roads and increase in the number of pilgrims continue without restriction, the natural and cultural resources of the region will eventually be destroyed (Singh, in Rustomji and Ramble 1990).

The Himalayas are also the abode of Buddhism and most of the high Himalayan regions have well-known monasteries in remote valleys which are frequented by pilgrims. The northern districts of Nepal, such as Gorkha, Manang, Mustang, Sindhupalchok, Taplejung, Solukhumbu, and Sankhuwasabha, have a number of monasteries that were centres

of pilgrimage and which are now being seen as centres of tourist attraction. This is especially pronounced in the context of Mustang.

- Mountains are natural *refugia* of biota that suffered stress in adjoining regions and which are eliminated from more transformed lowlands. Besides, mountain valleys harbour endemic plants and animals that are limited to a small geographic area. Nepal alone has 246 species of flowering plants which are endemic. For instance, the Lantang Larch (*Larix himalaica*) is confined to Lantang and the upper Budhi Gandaki Valley only.
- Mountains are corridors of migration for plants, animals, and also for cultures. The Nepal Himalayas, for example, have plants from more than six phyto-geographical provinces (Shrestha 1985). There is only one endemic bird (Spiny Babbler) but the bird species amount to 850, more than the species extant in the United States and Canada combined.

Thus, touristic objectives of experiencing nature in terms of wildlife and wild plants are easily met in the mountain environment. Meanwhile, educational tourism based on biophysical diversity presents an attractive option in the tourist trade.

- The scenic value of the mountains is a unique attraction. They provide unique opportunities to observe and study the rhythm of natural dynamics displayed by the flow of rivers and waterfalls, the flight of birds during migration, the force of torrential rains in monsoon, and the responses of farmers on their farmlands. Dynamism of landscapes is also associated with tectonic upliftment, erosion, glacial movements, seismic activity, avalanches, and torrents. All these natural phenomena are evident more in mountain areas than anywhere else.
- Among many other special qualities of the mountains, mention is often made of the metaphysical aspects of the mountain environment as the abode of legends and lores, including the real existence of the many "hidden valleys" of Padmasambhava where the faithful will take refuge in times of future strife when contending with the enemies of *dharma*, and where they will find a land of peace and plenty (Aris 1975). Mountain tourism is also connected at times with legendary creatures, such as the *yeti*, and their mystical habitats.

Tourist Types

Tourists visit mountain areas for diverse reasons, and they come from various countries and continents. However, in the context of carrying capacity, it is convenient to categorise tourists on the basis of their purpose. Six categories recognised by the National Tourism Statistics (1992) will be taken here as the basis for further elaboration. Four of the categories, i.e., i) holiday and pleasure, ii) business, iii) official, and iv) conventions/ conferences, are mainly limited to Kathmandu Valley. The "trekking and mountaineering" and a fair share of the pilgrimage categories will fall purely into mountain tourism. However, almost all tourists first arrive in Kathmandu.

In the year 1992, the share of trekking and mountaineering in the total tourist arrivals in Nepal was just 10.5 per cent. However, the number of trekking permits issued for individual trekkers, agency-handled trekkers, and mountaineers amounted to 72,368 or 21.5 per cent of the total tourist arrivals in 1992. The impact of trekking and mountaineering on the environment is bound to be considerable in comparison to other types such as holiday/pleasure, business, and so on. Banskota and Upadhyay (1991) define "rural tourists" as those visiting the hill and mountain regions. Those who arrange for their own support staff and food have been termed Free and Independent Trekkers (FITS) and those handled by trekking and travel agencies have been termed Agency Organised Trekkers (AGTS). The FITS exert indirect pressure on the environment, whereas their impact on culture is more direct. They depend almost entirely on the availability of food and accommodation facilities in the area they visit. The AGTS on the other hand exert direct pressure on the environment (because of the demand for extra fuel to support a large staff) and cause garbage problems at the campsites. The mountaineering teams are more support intensive and cause great damage to campsites, especially at high elevations.