

GREEN TREKS

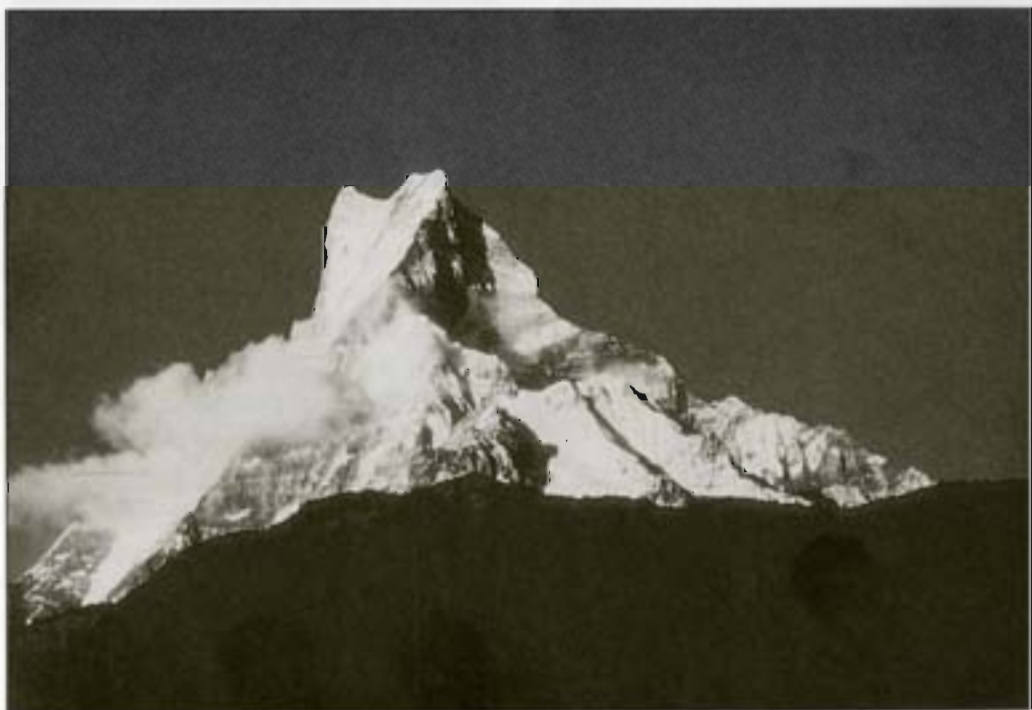
Ecotourism model in the Annapurnas

There are some ecotourism success stories,
but concerns still remain.

By Keya Acharya

In southern China, a tourist boom in the national parks makes it harder to see the shy giant panda. In Nepal's tiger sanctuaries, tourists

mainly see other tourists - they hardly get to see tigers. In Australia's Kakadu Park, white Australians attracted by tourism jobs now outnumber the lo-



Mt. Machhapuchhare - now a symbol of wholesome tourism

ICIMOD

cal aborigines whose culture brings in the tourists.

As tourists become more ecologically conscious, an increase in visitors to ecologically delicate areas like Tibet, Ladakh, the Sunderbans or the Sagarmatha National Park below Mt Everest create their own set of problems. Tourism, however ecological, has a way of fouling its own nest.

When the term was first coined in the 1980s, ecotourism sounded like a good idea. It meant visiting a place with a fragile ecology or an ecosystem for rare and endangered species so that the money could be ploughed into conservation.

Somewhere along the way, ecotourism has sometimes become an excuse to attach a green label to reck-

less mass tourism. In some places, ecotourism is hurting rather helping save fragile areas. Maybe there is no need to call it "ecotourism" - all tourism should be ecologically sustainable.

The Wolong Nature Reserve in China's Sichuan province was set up in 1975 to protect the shrinking habitat of the giant panda and the elusive snow leopard. A new hotel is bringing in more visitors to the fringes of the sanctuary. More tourists means more people employed in the hotel industry. The tourists may not have a large ecological footprint, but the tourism industry does.

But there are experimental schemes like the one in the Annapurna area of central Nepal that seeks to invest tourism receipts directly into the village economy for sustainable tourism and environmental protection. After ten years, the Annapurna tourism project is now regarded as a model for ecotourism.

Tourist arrivals in Nepal jumped from 52,930 in 1972 to nearly 500,000 in 1999, bringing in about USD 150 million a year. The government is committed to make tourism ecologically viable, the slogan for its Visit Nepal Year 1998 was: "Sustainable development through sustainable tourism." With loans from the Asian Development Bank, and support from the United Nations, Nepal has been ex-



Porters struggling up a snow-bound pass.
PANOS/Kunda Dixit

panding airports, building roads.

The government works closely with the non-government organisation, KMTNC (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation) to implement the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). The Annapurna conservation area is Nepal's largest nature sanctuary and the project tries to integrate environmental protection programmes and tourism administration, use tourism-generated revenue for health and education benefits for local people, promote alternative fuels to protect forests.

It all looks good on paper. But does this formula really benefit local communities and help preserve the environment? Results so far show that it does, and this has opened up possibilities of replicating the model in other areas of Nepal and in mountain regions elsewhere in the world.

Mountain trekking, in the form of walking through village trails, is regarded as the best way to spread the benefits of tourism to rural areas. Although there is some leakage of tourism revenue to urban areas to buy food and provisions, trekkers spend money locally on lodging, porters and food.

In Nepal, trekkers mainly visit the Mt Everest region but in 1999, some 70,000 visitors representing 60 percent of all trekkers in Nepal came to the Annapurna region. Trek routes criss-cross the mountains north of the town of Pokhara and run past among some of the most awesome mountain scenery on earth. For an additional fee, trekkers can venture across the mountains to the ecologically sensitive ar-

eas like Upper Mustang fringing the Tibetan plateau.

The 7,600 sq km covered by ACAP encompasses villages, wilderness and high mountain areas with a total population of 120,000. The terrain is vertical: it rises from only 800 metres above sea level near Pokhara to the summit of Annapurna I at more than 8,000 metres - all within a horizontal distance of 25 kilometers. This altitude variation and the heavy monsoon precipitation give the Annapurna region a very rich biological diversity. Within the project area there are over 100 species of mammals and 1,226 species of plants. Five of Nepal's six pheasants, along with the endangered and rare snow leopard, musk-deer, blue sheep and Himalayan *thar* roam the crags.

Before ACAP came along, trekkers would bring their own equipment and leave behind 'garbage and the begging disease'. Ghorepani, a high pasture with three cowsheds in 1975, had by the 1980s become an important tourist stopover because of its panoramic view of the Annapurna range. Forests started to thin and garbage piled up. Since ACAP began its activities in 1986, the forests are growing again and the trails are cleaner because of the participation of local communities who benefit from trekking tourism. ACAP has shown local villagers that without their own involvement tourism will not be sustainable and the environment cannot be protected.

ACAP divided up the area into ecological zones and gave local officials charge of environmental protection through Conservation Development



Ghorepani pass is more accessible.

PANOS/Padam Ghaley

Committees (CDC). The CDC worked with political bodies and elected representatives to improve forest management, soil and water conservation, and wildlife protection. The committees also train local nursery workers, forest guards and leaders, and promote alternative energy techniques.

ACAP's rural development programme takes up repair and construction of schools, bridges and trails, health clinics, family planning and sanitation methods such as pit latrines. Most programmes are targeted towards women and the economically deprived communities.

Within these development activities, the tourism management programme has formed local Lodge Management Committees that help standardise accommodation for tourists, teach lodge owners how to cook west-

ern meals with as many locally available ingredients as possible, how to maintain rooms and kitchens. The menu is also standardised as much as possible as are prices, to help eliminate unfair competition. ACAP has developed a special hotel management training package stressing environmental conservation. The Hotel Management, Training and Tourism Centre at Kathmandu provides more formal training.

In the kitchens, alternative energy methods such as kerosene, solar heaters, improved stoves with backboilers (low-wattage heater that uses surplus energy overnight to boil water for the morning tea) have been introduced.

Tourists to the region are provided information at check-posts about trekking and the minimum impact code. Brochures on the natural and socio-

economic situation of ACAP have proved to be a good method of making trekkers more aware of how they are benefitting the local community. ACAP says these activities have impacted on the economy of the region. A 1987 study showed that a tourist spent an average of three dollars a day during a trek, of which only 20 percent filtered down to the local economy. A similar study conducted in 1994 showed trekkers spending five dollars a day, of which half was retained in the local economy.

ACAP charges a fee of Rs 1000 (USD 15) for every visitor entering the project area. This money is funnelled directly to the villages. Trekking charges in Upper Mustang are USD 70 per day for a minimum of 10 days. This

goes to the government, with ACAP eventually receiving only three percent of the minimum \$700 (for 10 days) that tourists pay here.

There are problems that need to be ironed out. The government has overlapping jurisdictions due to the numerous agencies involved. For example, the Immigration Department issues trekking permits, but mountaineering permits are issued by two separate bodies, the Ministry and the Mountaineering Association. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation issues permits for national parks, but permits to enter the Annapurna sanctuary are issued by the KMTNC.

The Tourism Council functions at the highest level without any linkage



White water rafting - ecologically benign.

PANOS/Bhim Subba

to activities in the field, even less so with those, such as NGOs, that deal with development and tourism activities. Yet another gap is the absence of EIA (environmental impact assessment) procedures for developers.

The Nepali government recently set up a Tourism Board to coordinate activities in the visitor industry, promote marketing abroad and maximise the benefit from tourism to the local economy. The Board must act fast because pressure from tourism is mounting.

Pokhara, the starting point for most trekkers into ACAP territory, sees nearly 100,000 tourists every year, mostly from October to December. Overcrowded during the peak season, there is a strain on water and electricity supplies, and the proper disposal of garbage and sewage poses problems. There are also concerns with regard to environmental degradation and the absence of linkages to local and regional productivity. For instance, Pokhara needs 400 chickens every day during the season to feed its tourist population. Oranges and

vegetables are imported from India. Local producers have not yet cashed in on this boom, although tourism has contributed to the resurgence of local crafts.

But ACAP has notched some impressive gains. Satellite mapping has shown a dramatic increase in forest cover across Nepal's midhills. Nepali ecologist, Dr Tirtha Shrestha notes that foreign environmental consultants preparing a vegetation map of the Annapurna-Dhaulagiri area in 1969 had predicted that the region would be completely deforested in 25 years. In 1994, the same consultants admitted to the Nepal Botanical Society that the undergrowth had regenerated, most mature forests were intact and that wildlife stocks had improved. Shrestha also notes that although there are numerous lodges and service centres for tourists inside the Annapurna sanctuary, away from the main trails the environment had never been adversely affected by trekking traffic.

Nepal's tourism planners are now trying to replicate the Annapurna success in other areas like the Mt Kanchenjunga region in eastern Nepal and Langtang National Park north of Kathmandu. Dr Pitamber Sharma of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu suggests that



Imported fruit - selling oranges in Pokhara.

ICIMOD

the ACAP model needs to be adapted and improvised in various regions according to local conditions.

But there is still concern that Nepal is selling itself cheap. The Tourism Board, it is hoped, will help control both quality of services and not let prices slip. It costs as little as USD 20 a day for a "tea house" trek in Nepal, whereas visitors in neighbouring Bhutan are charged as much as USD 250 a day. What Nepal's tourism planners have to work out is whether at such low prices, tourism is worth the cost to the environment.

The Annapurna area has shown there is a way to maximise benefits to the local community by ensuring that tourism helps protect the environment. The same cannot be said of similar regions across Nepal's western border in India. The Badrinath circuit, a pilgrimage tour amidst very high biodiversity, sees over one million visitors annually. But local benefits are negligible. Imports are high and outsiders control nearly half of all trade. The environmental impact is adverse, especially on basic infrastructure. In Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh, a mountaineering, trekking, skiing, and pilgrimage destination, there is no linkage between natural resources and community development.

Further west in Pakistan, the Kalam Valley in the North West Frontier Province is a resort that sees approximately 100,000 visitors every year. Yet over 80 percent of the income leaks out and the



Firewood is still available, thanks to ACAP.
ICIMOD

environmental impact of visitors is high. The Hunza Valley, in northern Pakistan fares a little better, with about 50 percent of the tourism income staying in. Fairy Meadows, another favourite destination, has suffered heavy deforestation due to infrastructural demands from tourism.

Whether Nepal can achieve that balance between higher earnings and high domestic retention while minimising the environmental impact and ensuring active grassroots participation in trekking is still an open question. But the Annapurna project has shown it can be done, and has shown how to go about doing it.