

# Ecotourism Development in the Kangchenjunga Landscape: Potentials and Challenges

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*Ecotourism is widely assumed to be inherently sustainable because it incorporates objectives of environmental and cultural conservation and emphasises economic benefits for local communities.*



## Introduction

The Kangchenjunga landscape located in the lap of Mount Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, has always been a prime destination for tourists. The magnificent, diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage within this landscape have attracted tourists, pilgrims, naturalists, explorers, trekkers, mountaineers, and adventure travellers over the last couple of decades. In view of the limited industrial growth in this remote landscape, tourism is becoming a source of employment generation for local people. Since 1990, there has been a tremendous increase in tourist numbers (Rai and Sundriyal 1997; Maharana et al. 2000a). The landscape has been visited by renowned naturalists and explorers, making it a priority area on the itinerary of many nature lovers. Darjeeling has been promoted as the ‘Queen of the Hills’

and the state of Sikkim is evolving as an ideal destination for ecotourists (Sharma et al. 2002). The recently developed Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) and Jumolari in western Bhutan have been progressive in promoting tourism (Anonymous 2002; Gurung 2006). Most of these initiatives are city centred, however (Gangtok, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and so on) and very few are in the wilderness (Yuksam-Dzongri, Sandakphu, and others).

The recent advocacy and facilitating role played by ICIMOD in developing transboundary conservation landscapes and corridors, discussed in previous papers, have brought about enormous insights into the potential of ecotourism development in the landscape. In addition, the initiatives taken by SNV and ICIMOD with regards to developing a Great Himalayan Trail, for instance the South Asian Sub-regional Economic Cooperation's (SASEC) tourism working group have brought attention to the potentials of regional tourism and its potential for benefiting countries in the region (SNV and ICIMOD 2006). These initiatives have opened up new avenues for tapping the potentials of transboundary ecotourism in the landscape.

In the global conservation scenario, alternative forms of tourism have occurred simultaneously with increased recognition of the need to implement the concept of sustainable development and effective conservation (Secretariat of the CBD 2004). In some instances, ecotourism is assumed to be inherently sustainable and conservation oriented, although few attempts have been made to verify such assumptions (Maharana et al. 2000a, 2000b; Nyaupane and Thapa 2004; Bajracharya et al. 2005). Therefore, in principle, ecotourism incorporates the objectives of environmental and cultural conservation and emphasises economic benefits for local communities. Ecotourism could be a vehicle for sustainable development and act as a vehicle for realising tangible benefits for local communities as well as for conservation. It also has the potential to be more environmentally damaging than mass tourism since it occurs usually in fragile environments and opens up previously undiscovered destinations to the mass market (Wall 1997). The challenge before us is to balance the twin objectives of conservation and sustainable and pro poor development.

The tragedy of mass tourist spots digging their own graves and the emerging global market for ethnic and unique experiences has given rise to enterprises operating under the banner of ecotourism in various parts of the world. Its increasing importance as a business opportunity and its phenomenal growth within the larger tourism industry has made the concept of ecotourism quite popular in developing countries. Notwithstanding, although economic benefits from ecotourism include foreign exchange revenue, employment opportunities, improved awareness of conservation objectives, and stimulation of economic activities, there are still many challenges to overcome to achieve conservation of wilderness areas (Chettri et al. 2002; 2005a; Kruk and Banskota [in press]). There is still a big gap in the marketing sector as well and private enterprises and other stakeholders need to play an increasing role. In this paper, we will discuss some of the opportunities and challenges discovered in the Kangchenjunga landscape during a participatory planning process for developing a transboundary landscape and corridors connecting the existing protected areas in order to address the twin objectives.

## The Evolving Scenario

Tourism is the world's largest growing industry, with 691 million international tourist arrivals worldwide, generating \$US 523 billion per year (WTO 2004), and an expected annual growth rate of 4.1% over the next 20 years (Lama and Sattar 2002). It is estimated that mountains have approximately a 15-20% share of the global tourism market, generating between \$US 70 and 90 billion per year (PAIA 2005). After coastal regions, mountains are thought to be second in global popularity as tourist destinations (Walder 2000). The need to address mountain concerns and the potential contribution that tourism can make to mountain communities are increasingly being recognised. Agenda 21 of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) stated that the fate of the mountains may affect more than half of the world's population, and it acknowledged mountain tourism to be an important component of sustainable mountain development and conservation (UNESA 1992).

Research has shown that tourism does not necessarily lead to development and conservation unless deliberate efforts are made to link the industry with development concerns in the mountains – specifically poverty alleviation, environmental conservation and regeneration, and the empowerment of local communities (Banskota and Sharma 1998; Kruk and Banskota [in press]). Even in the highly successful model of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), the benefits of tourism development are said to go mainly to lodge and restaurant owners, with subsistence farmers and poorer or lower classes benefiting only to a limited extent (Gurung 1998; Nyaupane and Thapa 2004; Chettri et al. 2005b). The main reason why the poor seem to have been unable to benefit much from tourism is that the linkages between tourism and the local production system are weak, and supply side planning and management have been poor and in some cases even completely ignored (Banskota and Sharma 1998). In spite of all these, tourism in South Asia increased from 3.2 million international tourist arrivals in 1990 to 6.8 million in 2003 with an average growth rate of 7.7%. This figure is projected to more than double by 2010, reflecting the growing strength of China, India, and Bhutan (ADB 2004). The challenge is to balance resource and conservation factors to make mountain and tourism development sustainable, so that the positive impacts on mountain communities and environments are maximised and, at the same time, negative impacts are minimised as much as possible.

## Ecotourism Initiatives in the Kangchenjunga Landscape

Over the last two decades many sustainable tourism models have been developed for the eastern Himalayas (Sharma et al. 2002; Bajracharya et al. 2005) and their impacts on conservation and socioeconomic development have been assessed (Banskota and Sharma 1998; Gurung 1998; Maharana et al. 2000a, b; Chettri 2002; Nyaupane and Thapa 2004). What these models have in common is the aim to limit adverse impacts on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income and employment for local communities. The concept of ecotourism in the Kangchenjunga landscape is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

As a result of the pilot experience and the positive idea gained by Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism initiatives (Sharma et al. 2002), the Government of Sikkim identified tourism as an important instrument for reduction of poverty, and it has been actively planning its tourism industry. The Sikkim Government, along with Tata Economic Consultancy Services, developed a fifteen-year Master Plan for Tourism Development for the State of Sikkim. The plan contains short, medium, and long-term phases (TECS 1998). The initial phase was perceived as a consolidation phase in which emphasis was given to providing new infrastructure and upgrading existing attractions and infrastructure. New legislative measures were taken to protect both the natural and man-made environment. Recently, to supplement the initiatives, rural cultural heritage sites with vast ethnic populations of Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalese were identified as potential factors in diversifying from existing tourism products (Kruk and Banskota [in preparation]).

Similarly, the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and Bhutan have also made impressive progress in promoting ecotourism as a vehicle for conservation and sustainable development (Anonymous 2002). The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and Government of West Bengal are working rigorously to identify and promote natural and man-made tourism products both within and outside protected areas. Emphasis is being given to diversifying tourism in rural and protected areas and minimising concentration on the towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. These initiatives are instrumental in conceptualising ecotourism development in the region. In addition, many entrepreneurs and development organisations, such as Help Tourism-Siliguri; TURISTA-Kolkata; Darjeeling Ladenla Road Prerna (DLR Prerna), and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) – Darjeeling, are coming to the forefront and helping the government promote ecotourism in the area.

## Potential Ecotourism Products

Recent trends indicate a surge in the number of visitors to ecotourism destinations, mainly located in the mountains. Hiking, camping, rafting, mountaineering, rock climbing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, and other forms of non-consumptive recreation are in growing demand (Nepal 2003). The potentials for tourism development in the Himalayas are substantial. The number of visits in the Himalayan region has grown in recent years (Figure 1), but the data on tourist inflows into the region are not properly recorded and maintained; although the contribution to the mountain economy appears to be quite significant (Sharma et al. 2002).

The Kangchenjunga landscape, comprising the Himalayas of Sikkim and Darjeeling together with the adjacent neighbouring areas of eastern Nepal and western Bhutan, has been an attractive destination for adventure tourists (trekkers, mountaineers, white water rafters, and bikers), naturalists, and academicians as well as for health conscious people over the last century (Dozey 1989). Visits are usually limited to a few and inadequately equipped destinations, however. Realising the potential for economic development through tourism, several new initiatives have been established to institutionalise tourism as an alternative livelihood option in the region (TECS 1998; ADB 2004; ATREE 2006; Kruk and Banskota [in preparation]).

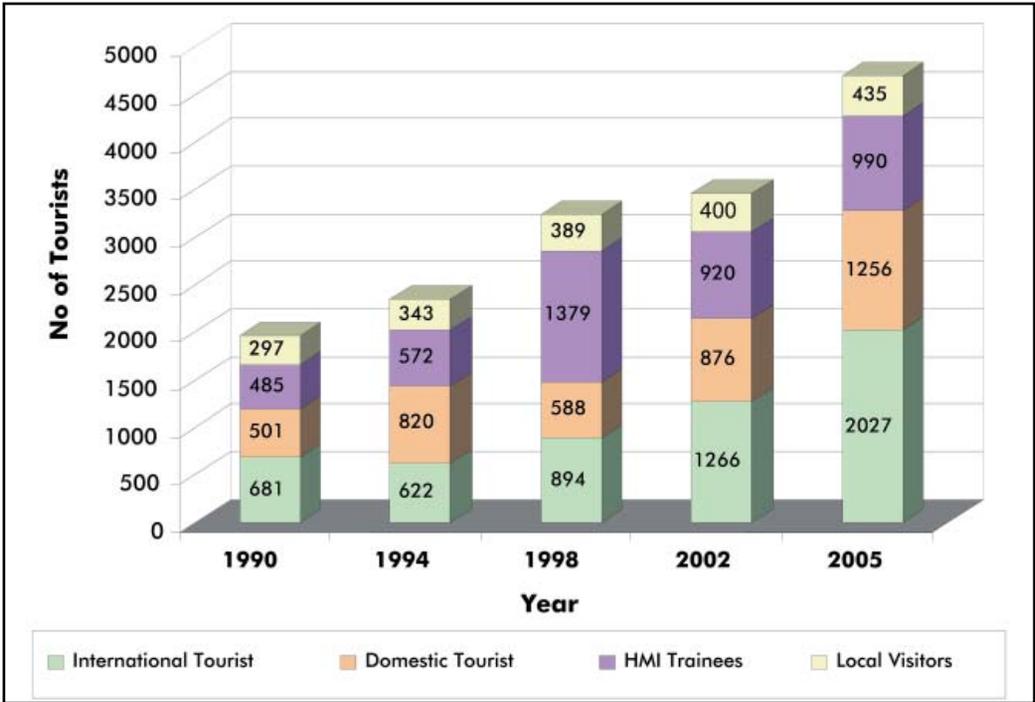


Figure 1: Trend of Tourist Arrivals in KNP

Adventure tourism in the form of trekking along routes such as the Manebhanjyang-Singalila-Falut trek in Darjeeling; Yuksam-Dzongri-Goecha La trek in Sikkim, and Jumolari trek in western Bhutan are Kangchenjunga landscape routes that have gained in popularity in recent years. Similarly, tremendous efforts have been made by the Governments of Nepal, India, and Bhutan as well as other stakeholders to develop new products and new trekking routes: Buddhists circuits, homestays in rural environments (Box 1), and wildlife tourism in protected areas (see TECS 1998; ADB 2004; SNV and ICIMOD 2006; Kruk and Banskota [in preparation]).

To add to these initiatives and to promote incentive-based conservation of the landscape, ICIMOD and its partners identified six conservation corridors and developed comprehensive participatory plans for eastern Nepal, Darjeeling, and western Bhutan. These plans also recommend various eco-friendly tourism products such as village tourism, homestays, and new trekking routes as alternative options for economic development and conservation. Some of the actions recommended are alternative treks to Sandakphu through Ilam, homestays in some of the village development committees (VDCs) in border areas; village tourism in and adjacent to protected areas and corridors, and wildlife tourism in Hangeham, Ilam (Table 1). Being a transboundary complex, the potential for developing trekking trails across the border along the Singalila ridge and the Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Bhutan triangle was recognised and facilitating tourist flow across the landscape with cooperative understanding between the Governments of Nepal, India, and Bhutan was recommended.

### **Box 1: Homestay as a tourism product**

Homestay is a form of tourism that develops micro-enterprise and employment opportunities through household-owned and operated accommodation, as well as through related-guide services and interpretation that would enhance a visitor's experience of villages and their surroundings. With good numbers of tourists flowing into the area, there is a high potential for the people to provide accommodation and facilities, which is environmentally responsible and which promotes the local economy. For example, a homestay would include fuel-efficient cooking and heating, and indigenous composting toilets that are hygienic, as well as other resource-efficient and environmental friendly services.

The homestay practice also provides an opportunity to strengthen the local culture and tradition in terms of hospitality, use of decor, cuisine, and buildings, while encouraging cultural and environmental conservation. On the other hand, it is a good opportunity for visitors to learn about local mountain cultures through local guides and from the experience of staying with a family. In addition, through nature guide and interpretation services, the community would be able to focus on their natural wealth, such as the snow leopard and its role in the maintenance of natural heritage.

Such conservation-based entrepreneurship is gaining impetus in many villages of Sikkim and Darjeeling and also has great potential in the proposed corridor areas.

## **Prevailing Challenges**

Traditionally, the chief occupations of the people of the Kangchenjunga landscape are agriculture, agroforestry, horticulture, and animal husbandry. Agricultural practices in these hills are mostly subsistence, characterised by low input, low risk, and low yields. The geometric progression of the human population exerts pressure on traditional practices and leads to the fragmentation of landholdings. Hence, there is an urgent need for diversified income-generating activities to limit the pressure on forest resources and protected areas used by wildlife as habitats.

In recent years, Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Bhutan have received increasing numbers of tourists. One of the reasons for this growth could be the political instability in neighbouring Nepal. This increased dependency on tourism for their livelihoods has forced the people of this region to play marginal roles as commission agents, menials, cooks, drivers, and porters. Moreover, most of the destinations located in wilderness areas are visited less than other places due to lack of information, lack of skilled professionals, and inadequate accommodation facilities. On the other hand, convenient (with comparatively better visitors) amenity destinations are overcrowded. All these factors have led to promotion of tourism in organised groups, which results in less spending by visitors at the sites visited.

Tourism development planning should be integrated with other community development and conservation plans in order to promote diversification of livelihood opportunities in mountain areas, rather than being overdependent upon tourism per se (Rai and Sundriyal 1997; Banskota and Sharma 1998; Lama and Sattar 2002). Keeping this as a principle, the Governments of Nepal, India, and Bhutan are rethinking strategies and developing attractive products for

**Table 1: New ecotourism products envisaged by the local people in different corridors of the Kangchenjunga landscape**

Country	Corridor	Product
Nepal	1. Ilam-Panchthar-Taplejung corridor	Village tourism New trail to Sandakphu Bird watching Promotion of Nepali paper Skilled human resources
India	2. Singhalila National Park-Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary corridor	Village tourism Homestay Skilled human resources
	3. Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary-Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary corridor	Village tourism Homestay Skilled human resources
	4. Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary-Neora Valley National Park corridor	Homestay Skilled human resources
	5. Neora Valley National Park-Toorsa Strict Nature Reserve corridor	Wildlife tourism Bird watching Skilled human resources
Bhutan	6. Toorsa Strict Nature Reserve-Jigme Dorji National Park corridor	Promotion of monasteries Homestay Skilled human resources

tourists. Emphasis has been given to eco-friendly products linked to conservation targets. Most of the planning has taken place through a top-down approach without people’s participation. The participatory plans developed by ICIMOD and partners for promoting conservation corridors revealed that there is great potential for diversifying tourism in the identified corridors. It also became clear that planning should be done with the communities using an innovative approach that addresses local people’s aspirations for economic well-being. To achieve this, the entrepreneurs, governments, and developmental organisations concerned have to come forward and facilitate the engagement of communities living in these areas.

Although the Governments of Sikkim and Darjeeling, Nepal, and Bhutan are promoting the area with various trademarks, there is still a lack of initiative in terms of making products regional entities and benefiting from the vast landscape. Government tourism planners should work with neighbouring jurisdictions so that appropriate plans can be made to promote transboundary tourism as a unique attraction and bring about benefits on a regional scale. Even though many community-based initiatives, such as ‘homestays’ and ‘village tourism’, are found in some areas, they are still lagging behind simply due to lack of political will. Hence, these initiatives have not received due credit.

The Kangchenjunga landscape has numerous tourism products to cater to the varied interests of tourists. It is rich in wildlife, culture, scenic beauty, and pilgrimage centres. These potentials have not been realised through appropriate marketing strategies and policy support from the governments concerned to attract the special interests of tourists. The countries sharing this landscape need to work together and promote ecotourism products in such a way that they cater to the various market segments. Market research on tourist arrivals needs to be carried out on a regional level. Currently most of the destinations and visitor activities are city centric

and many promising areas with ecotourism potential have been neglected. The various departments and agencies involved in tourism should create programmes and strategies to diversify tourism areas for the benefit of poorer sections of society. In this respect, it is important to establish a proper benefit-sharing mechanism to ensure that benefits not only accrue to outside tour operators and service providers, who tend to exploit marginalised mountain communities. Mechanisms should be put in place so that fair benefits are ploughed back to local communities and a portion reserved for conservation activities.

## Conclusion

The Kangchenjunga landscape is an important trajectory area for tourists interested in visiting Nepal, India, and Bhutan. The landscape has diverse existing as well as potential products to cater to the ever-increasing tourism flow. Diversifying the products would definitely reduce the crowds and concentrated tourism flows in selected destinations and also give the rural populace living in the corridor area incentives for remaining in wilderness areas and conserving the rich biodiversity. Emphasis must be given, however, to developing quality products at village level by strengthening planning and management skills and linking products with demand and supply; and for this the active participation and facilitation of the private sector is essential. Apart from these, to tap the potential of ecotourism for rural people and to offer them direct benefits from wilderness areas, the various community-based and non-government organisations and government authorities have to come forward and facilitate communities who are offering to diversify such products, especially in areas such as human resource development, development of low capital businesses such as homestays, and village tourism and link them to the mainstream tourism market. More importantly, a mechanism is needed to take advantage of geographic and ecological contiguity across the landscape and facilitate cross-border tourism with policy support and cooperation from the countries sharing the common landscape.

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