

Transboundary cooperation for mountain tourism in the Kangchenjunga Landscape

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The Kangchenjunga Landscape has huge potential for increased tourism, mainly due to its pristine nature, aesthetic value and rich biodiversity. A transboundary initiative conceived in 2012 is investing in redefining the opportunities that tourism can provide for marginalized rural communities. Measures include jointly developing unique products that reflect the shared heritage of Bhutan, India and Nepal, as well as engaging in landscape conservation at the nexus of science, policy and practice.

Mount Kangchenjunga, third-highest peak in the world (N. Chettri)

The Kangchenjunga Landscape spreads across eastern Nepal, Sikkim in India and western Bhutan. It is home to the third-highest mountain in the world, Mount Kangchenjunga (8586 m asl), which is considered sacred by the diverse ethnic communities in the area. The landscape contains the headwaters of vital rivers such as the Meechi, Teesta and Toorsa, and harbours exceptional biodiversity. The ethnic communities, including the Kirat, Lepcha, Bhutia, Brokpa and Dukpa, are linked through strong religious and traditional practices such as marriage, herding, foods and festivals. This combination of rich natural resources as well as cultural and aesthetic value make the region a unique destination for tourism.

A total of 7.2 million people live in the 25086 km² area. There have been few alternatives to the main livelihood strategy of agriculture. Between one-fifth and half of the population live in absolute poverty [1]. Despite the huge potential of tourism, access has been limited due to the region's remoteness, poor infrastructure, lack of attractive products and market linkages, and different national strategies to promote tourism. Tourism is a key economic sector of Nepal, India and Bhutan and contributes between 8 and 10 percent of the countries' GDPs, but often it is concentrated in cities and some protected areas. This leads to unequal opportunities, especially for women, and increases disparities.

In 2012, the intergovernmental organization ICIMOD, in agreement with the three national governments, initiated the idea of promoting conservation and development in the transboundary Kangchenjunga Landscape through regional collaboration. A feasibility assessment helped to identify opportunities and challenges. The science-based and participatory assessment process involved local communities, experts from different disciplines, development partners and policy-makers [1]. Subsequently, a systematic and consultative planning process integrating the local, national and regional levels resulted in the endorsement in 2015 of a Conservation and Development Strategy and Regional Cooperation Framework for the next 20 years [2].



"India, Nepal and Bhutan are uniquely connected through culture, tradition and geography: tourism could bring us closer through our shared, rich heritage."

Dr Amita Prasad, Additional Secretary,
MoEF&CC, Government of India

The first five-year plan was operationalized in 2016 with the support of Austria and Germany. Nepal, India and Bhutan each designated a focal implementing agency. They jointly identified tourism, particularly the development of community and nature-based tourism, as a common area of interest and a means for poverty alleviation in the remote communities. They also pointed to the conservation of the sensitive but diversity-rich Kangchenjunga Landscape as a way of enhancing the countries' overall economy. Accordingly, the focal agencies identified nine pilot areas in remote regions (three in each country) and engaged in five broad fields of intervention:

1. Diversifying tourism products and making each pilot area unique for tourists, potentially lengthening stays and packaging these as a regional product.
2. Fostering the skills of women, youths, the private sector, development agencies and policy-makers that are needed along the value chain, with the aim of offering better services and unique products. This is particularly important considering the competitive tourism market.
3. Developing tourism-related, community-based livelihood opportunities rooted in traditional practices. This would enable more people to benefit than only those directly involved in the tourism sector.
4. Ensuring long-lasting tourism by developing a common brand and jointly marketing the Kangchenjunga region as a tourist destination.
5. Facilitating policy processes to develop and agree on a joint roadmap and gain the needed policy support for ensuring the viability and sustainability of the efforts.

By connecting these five fields – or “dots” – the programme has contributed to a holistic and integrated development in the Kangchenjunga Landscape, so far benefiting about 500 households directly and about 2 500 indirectly.

Tourism is currently extremely hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout its value chain. Transboundary cooperation for coping with this situation is inevitable and the three countries have already started focusing on the domestic tourism market to stimulate demand in the Kangchenjunga Landscape. However, in the post-COVID-19 scenario, greater emphasis must be put on diversifying tourism products in rural areas to focus on nature, culture and health.

- The government-owned participatory planning process was instrumental for identifying and developing a joint strategy and enhancing regional collaboration and sustainable development in a remote transboundary landscape.
- Identifying tourist destinations and developing related products, as well as improving services and market linkages, resulted in finding “the lost glory” of villages and revitalizing their culture and traditions, enhancing their economic development and conserving the landscape.
- The inclusive development opportunities for marginalized communities including women contributed to enhancing equality. Positive results through synergies in turn led to further government support and co-financing of common projects by the governments of Bhutan, India and Nepal.



Table 1. Achievements of the community and nature-based tourism programme in the Kangchenjunga Landscape

Action areas	Key interventions	Results
Uniqueness in tourism product development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Identification of new tourism products in seven out of nine pilot areas with unique branding, e.g. Lepcha cultural hub in Sikkim, Sacred Lake in Mai Pokhari, Nepal – Participatory planning and implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Seven new destination management plans – Inclusion of management plan in local and national development interventions
Enhancing tourism services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Training on homestay and culinary issues and as nature guides – Exposure visits for cross-learning between the three countries and at different levels (e.g. among tourism entrepreneurs or government agencies) – Soft loan for service quality improvements (toilets, bed-sheets, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improved service quality and better sanitation – Visitor numbers up by 10%
Linking with ancillary services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promotion of, and training in, organic farming – Capacity building on mushroom cultivation – Waste management training – Promotion and training in handicrafts and handloom use – Exposure visits for cross-learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Income up by 15% – Better waste management – Wide range of ancillary products including traditional foods – Improved community organization (e.g. formation of self-help groups, committees)
Linking with markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Media visit to pilot destination – Tour to showcase new tourism products to travel agents – Outreach through festival organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Uptake by numerous media – More visitors attracted by showcasing products at festivals – Wide dissemination of information through festivals
Policy support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facilitating local and regional networking by providing platforms for discussion, planning and action – Policy review and recommendations – Promoting dialogue among policy-makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Local network strengthened – Policy support for local implementation – Co-financing by local government agencies