

The Development of Sustainable and Responsible Tourism in Nepal

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Abstract



The paper focuses on the sustainable and responsible tourism development in Nepal. It covers generally the historical tourism development and sustainable tourism perspectives with the example of influences in tourism sector through the infrastructural development in rural hilly and Himalaya areas. However, the development is directly related with the livelihood of communities; and the then issues of these communities should be addressed while planning and developing the particular areas; in some cases, the economic benefits come hand in hand with negative environmental and social impacts, these should be minutely examined and

exercised to mitigate. Due to the manipulation and strong intervention, several regions have had to overcome disastrous environmental damage or the loss of their traditions and local culture in the infrastructural development that has directly impact on the growth of the tourism industry. In this regard, the paper has tried to provide some long-term economic operations practices, and the way to developing sustainable tourism development in Nepal on the base of the principles of sustainable tourism with pressures of commercialism of tourism sector. However, it is not the holistic approach for the sustainable development; and it has not covered all aspect of tourism development. Hence, further studies are required to address these all issues.

Keywords: *Sustainable Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Development, Environment, Destinations*

Introduction

This paper examines the history of, and the relationship between Nepal, tourism, sustainable tourism and development. It is important to understand the history of Nepal, tourism and the emergence of sustainable tourism and why there is potentially a developing conflict between those three sectors and 'Nepal'. It is only by understanding the development to date and reconciling it with the issues of the past 30 years that Nepal will be able to plan future tourism strategies that embrace all the interests of the shareholders under the umbrella of sustainable tourism. Nepal is at cross-roads where it now needs to decide whether it wants to become a Disney type destination or whether it wants to focus on quality tourism making sustainable use of its environmental resources and ethic cultures.

Development will take time, especially in a country like Nepal but it has to make a focused start, and that start needs to identify the direction in which this potentially large gross domestic product (GDP) contributor wants to take.

The development of tourism in Nepal

By the mid-1960s tourism was becoming an established source of foreign income for Nepal. Everest and the other 8000 m peaks in Nepal had been climbed and wide spread press coverage of these events was provided by the leading newspapers and magazines of the day. The early tourism pioneers of the like of Boris Lissanevitch, Jimmy Roberts, Jim Edwards and Toni Hagen all contributed to 'advertising' Nepal in their own ways. Nepal was beginning to attract visitors from around the world and in greater numbers.

The 'Hippy Trail' was a popular access route to Nepal established through the 1950s and into the late 1970s (Purcell, 2019) that offered freedom and enlightenment for travellers with little money but plenty of time. The availability and access to hashish and other drugs through Nepal government owned and licensed hashish shops in Jhochhen Tole (Freak Street) generated a certain lure and reputation among the hippy travellers wishing to visit Nepal (Radeska, 2017). Thousands of hippies, wanting to get as far away as possible from the capitalist societies of the west, sought places of "enlightenment and freedom." The overland route to Nepal usually started at a European capital, most commonly London and Amsterdam, and continued all the way through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey and from there to the Middle East. The final destination, Nepal, but sometimes with a prolonged stay in India, and many travellers were going even farther to Thailand and Vietnam. These journeys were usually completed in old ex-military vehicles offering little comfort but cheap and sociable travelling (Radeska, 2017; youtube, 2015).

At that time very few people paid much attention to the environmental, economic or the socio-cultural aspects of developing tourism, only the positive possibility of the potential financial impact could be clearly envisaged by the host nation, the negative impact, if any, was never recognised or considered.

A short history of sustainable tourism

Strictly, and from a historical point of view, some authors (Lane, 2009; Weaver, 2006) consider that the first ideas regarding sustainable tourism belonged to Jost Krippendorf from the University of Bern. In his book, "*The Landscape Eaters*", after identifying several negative impacts of tourism, he argues for an alternative – soft form of tourism (*sanfter tourismus*).

Since the early 1990s, the concept of sustainable tourism has begun to be used more often in academic circles and, to a lesser extent among tourism entrepreneurs. It is considered that the birth of the concept of sustainable tourism was the publication of the first issue of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism in 1993 (Weaver, 2006; Hunter, 2002; Dodds & Butler, 2009) which included six articles and two articles and a book review.

This new form of practicing tourism involved small companies or entrepreneurs, which aimed to support the community, preserving the environment and protecting local culture. One of the most prominent spokesmen of sustainable tourism, David Weaver, considers that the main difference between the old and the new form of tourism is moving the focus from the wellbeing of the tourist to the wellbeing of the host community (Weaver, 1998).

At that time, the concept had been highly debated, and it was received with hostility by the tourist industry, dissatisfied with putting any limits to growth and in turn considered it an "ivory tower" unrelated to the market. Sustainable tourism was also considered intellectually arrogant, expensive, elitist and useless (Lane, 2009).

This attitude was not only limited to the tourism industry. Governments and local authorities did not take seriously the concept, as the classical model of tourism was bringing them many lucrative benefits. Conventional mass tourism was generating jobs and wealth transfers from developed countries to developing ones. The mass - media did not pay much attention to the concept of sustainable tourism, considering that it is much easier to denigrate than to explain. In academic circles, there were researchers that considered sustainable tourism an impossible dream (Lane, 2009). This was best explained by Wheeler: On one hand, "we have the problems of mass tourism, which is recording steady and uncontrolled growth. And what is our response? small scale, slow and controlled development. It is simply impossible!" (Wheeler, quoted by Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005). Like sustainable development, sustainable tourism has been the central or secondary theme of conferences and international meetings during which experts in the field discussed the concept, but most importantly it caught the world's attention.

The most important institution for the development of sustainable tourism was the United Nations (UN). Since Agenda 21, resulted from the Earth Summit in 1992, tourism began to be considered as a tool for sustainable development: "We support the development of tourism programs that respect the environment and culture, as a strategy for sustainable development of urban and rural communities by decentralizing urban development and reducing disparities between regions (UN, 1992, Chapter 7)

Several UN departments have focused on tourism, in general, and sustainable tourism in particular. In 1999, in New York, the 7th Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development was held. The main topics of discussion were: consumption and production trends, seas and oceans, the development of small island states and sustainable tourism (UN, 1999: 1-2). For tourism, the Commission recognized the importance of this sector for the economies of countries, but draws attention to the impact that tourism activity can have. It also presented a number of challenges ahead for the tourism industry, national governments and the international community. For the tourism industry, the main challenges mentioned in the documents resulting from the meeting were: (a) sustainability is central to the whole range of forms of tourism, not only for niche tourism; (b) applying methods for waste management and other forms of pollution to minimize negative impacts of tourism activity on the environment; (c) involvement of all partners (customers, staff, other local entrepreneurs) in the decision making process and creating partnerships with the local community or the State to ensure the sustainable development of tourism (UN, 1999).

In 2002, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) launched the Sustainable Tourism - Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) program. This initiative was launched in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), WTO experts considering that tourism can be an alternative in many regions of the world. With its partners, the ST-EP initiative materialized in many developing countries, through the implementation of projects: tourism legislation, promotion of destinations, creating themed packages, assistance in national parks and protected areas, etc.

The next moment occurred in 2006 with the establishment of the International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism Development, subordinated to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2006). The main objectives and outcomes of the task force focused on several areas:

- Policy - recommendations on policies, standards and certification process, international

funding mechanisms;

- Best practices - collection, classification and dissemination of good practices;
- Education - development and dissemination of manuals and e-learning tools, focusing on sustainable tourism;
- Strategies and pilot programs - activities in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework for national and international development strategies and examples of pilot programs;
- Information, communication and networking - information dissemination, collaboration between web pages, sharing best practices and awareness raising activities.

The latest entry in the history of sustainable tourism took place at the RIO+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The final document, entitled “The future we want”, has a chapter for sustainable tourism, where the importance of tourism for sustainable development is recognized and the importance of funding sustainable tourism is emphasized. (UN, 2012: 25). In 2002 the WTO launched the Sustainable – Eliminating Poverty program. In 2006 the International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism was established by the UN which produced a policy which identified five areas on which the Program would focus.

Schyvens (2007) contributed to this paper (R10+20 UN) Conference on Sustainable Development and its final document ‘The Future We Want’. Schyven went on to observe that what was apparent from the history, as presented in the document, was that tourism had received special attention from the international community and numerous projects were trying to implement sustainable tourism in different regions of the world. However, some questions could be raised regarding the results of those projects and the industry's ability to replicate them elsewhere. He believed that some redundant proposals and advice offered by international institutions, with largely the same concepts but lacked the tools of coercion to compel the implementation of these proposals. He made a harsh critique (Schyvens, 2007: 134) “everything the UNWTO makes, except promotion, is just dust in the eyes of public opinion” (Bac, 2012).

The emergence of sustainable tourism in Nepal

Late King Mahendra, who was a strong environmentalist, began to have concerns regarding the developing tourism trend on ill prepared communities, vulnerable eco-systems and fragile mountain environments. In 1982 he established the King Mahendra’s Trust for Nature Conservation which later became known as the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC, 1986). The founder member-secretary, Dr. Hemanta Raj Mishra played a key role in bringing international donors to support the trust with its mission to conserve nature and the natural resources in Nepal while addressing the needs of the local people in a sustainable way (NTNC, 1986). Geographically, the trust’s activities spread from the sub-tropical plains of Chitwan, Bardia and Kanchanpur in the terai to the Annapurna and Manaslu regions of the high Himalaya, including the trans-Himalayan region of Upper Mustang and Manang (NTNC, 2020).

With the death of King Mahendra in 1972 the newly crowned King Birendra took on a more proactive role in developing ‘tourism’ with one of his main goals being to rid Nepal of its ‘freak and drug heaven’ image and to replace it with ‘adventure tourism’. After studying at

Eton (UK) until 1964, he returned to Nepal where he began to explore the country by travelling on foot to the remote parts of the country where he lived on whatever was available in the villages and monasteries (Daily Telegraph, 2001: 23 August). He enjoyed travelling in his youth, and went on trips to Canada, Latin America, Africa, many parts of India, and a number of other Asian countries. He was also an art collector, a supporter of Nepalese crafts people and artists, and learnt to fly helicopters. During these trips he became aware as to how other countries adapted to the impact of tourism (Crossette, 2001: 3 June).

Nepal, on the right lines

Within a very short period of time Nepal established its first Ministry of Tourism, its first National Park and Wildlife Reserve and its first Cultural Zone. This proactive approach gave Jimmy Roberts' new trekking initiative a boost as it began to promote Nepal as an 'adventure tourism' destination. Up to this point tourism in Nepal had more or less developed without proper planning and strategy, but from 1973 all that changed.

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) was established in 1986 to address these rising concerns. It undertook an innovative and successful approach to natural resource and tourism management in the Annapurna region. It practiced a multiple land use method of resource management, combining environmental protection with sustainable community development and tourism management.

The multifaceted problems of ACAP have been addressed through an integrated, community-based conservation and development approach, an experimental model which has been in the vanguard of promoting the concepts of "Conservation Areas" through an "Integrated Conservation and Development Programme" approach in the country and abroad. ACAP was first tested as a pilot programme in the Ghandruk Village Development Committee (VDC) in 1986. After being notified in the Gazette as a "Conservation Area" in 1992, ACAP's programme covered the entire Annapurna area.

Additionally, the ACAP was the first protected area that allowed local resident to live within the boundaries as well as their private properties and maintain their traditional rights and access to the use of natural resources. It was also the first protected area, which refrained from using army assistance to protect the dwindling natural resource base on which the region depends. Instead, it invested whatever financial resources available for community development and social capital building in the region. NTNC receives no regular funding support from the government for the operation of ACAP, but has been granted the right to collect entry fees from visiting trekkers. The focus is on local capacity building, both at the institutional and individual levels, to meet all the conservation and development aspirations of the people (NTNC, 2020). The natural and cultural features of ACAP have made it the most popular trekking destination in the country, drawing more than 60% of Nepal's total number of trekkers (Tourism Concern, 2014: 11 August). Tourism, over the years, has been firmly established as one of the most important and competitive sectors of the local economy. There are over 1,000 lodges, teashops and hundreds of other subsidiary services to cater to the thousands of trekkers, pilgrims and their support staff. All the proceeds from these visitors go towards the socio-economic benefits of the communities in which they are generated.

The soaring number of visitors into the ACAP region has exerted immense pressure on forest resources that are already stressed as a result of the growing local population and whose fuel wood consumption is twice that of the local people. Similarly, litter, particularly the wastes produced by trekkers and hoteliers, is another major concern. It is estimated that an average

trekking group of 15 people generates about 15 Kg of non-biodegradable and non-burnable garbage in 10 days trekking, producing tons of garbage in mountain regions annually. This has on many occasions brought local communities through their Buffer Zones into conflict with the central administration. In the ACAP region this has led to a situation where the local people want to abolish ACAP or at least seriously realign it so as it recognises the limitations the local communities believe it unfairly places on those communities, in part because they feel that the central government does not disseminate the finances gained from the permits and other taxes placed on the tourists. Consequently community-based approaches to decision-making in the management of protected areas are increasingly being implemented in many areas. However, information on the outcome of these approaches for conservation is often lacking. In the study 'effectiveness of community involvement in delivering conservation benefits to the Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal' the effectiveness of community-based approaches for conservation of biodiversity was examined in Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) (Nepal) through a combination of ecological assessments and social surveys undertaken both within and out with ACA. Forest basal area and tree species diversity were found to be significantly higher inside ACA than in neighbouring areas outside. The means the density of cut tree stumps was significantly lower inside ACA, associated with a decline in use of fuel wood as an energy source over the past decade. Social surveys also indicated that wild animal populations have increased inside ACA since the inception of community-based conservation. Observations of animal track counts, pellet counts and direct observations of selected species such as barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*) and Himalayan thar (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) indicated higher abundances within ACA. The community-based management has been successful in delivering conservation benefits in ACA, attributable to changing patterns of resource use and behaviour among local communities, increased control of local communities over their local resources, increased conservation awareness among local people resulting from environmental education, and the development and strengthening of local institutions such as Conservation Area Management Committees (CAMC) (Bajracharya et. al., 2005).

Broughton Coburn makes a strong case for change to the established system of management in his article 'It's time to restructure conservation area projects in Nepal' published on 20th November 2019 (Pant, 2019: 20 November, Wednesday)

A 20-year interlude in Nepal's re-structuring and the aftermath

The Maoist insurgency (1996- 2006) in Nepal was a completely new development in Nepal's political history, Nepal had not seen such a radical change in its political structure since the Gorkha expansion of the late 1700s. The new political doctrine had a major socio-economic and political impact on the conditions of Nepal, and in nearly three decades it has become a major political force with the capacity to change the state and the country's socio-economic structure. The Maoist movement and its associated political sectors have a wide range of domestic, regional and international support and along with ideological and material linkages it has been able to completely change the image and status of this once Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal.

In general, the people of Nepal were of a positive mind-set with the new political change and the prospect of a democratic system of governance in 1990. However, the change did not go as planned and eventually civil war broke out in 1996. After almost another ten years of political insurgency and then the intervening political rivalry the new constitution came into effect on the 20th September 2015.

The insurgency inadvertently played a role in facilitating neoliberal modes of rural financialisation in some areas of the country. In seeking to supplant traditional money-lending practices and landlord-tenant relationships, Maoist practices encouraged some people (in districts where parallel states were not effectively established) to travel to those district headquarters to borrow money from banks and other formal lending institutions (Upreti 2006). Since the Maoists came to power after the peace agreement in 2006, market entities especially the banks, contractors, and foreign companies have become more powerful and further mobilized the growing development desire in the insurgency context to deepen rural financialisation, what Paudel (2019) calls a period of 'red neo-liberalism in Nepal'.

With a young population, 42 percent of people in Nepal were under the age of 15 in 1991, the country's population continued to grow rapidly. The Ministry of Population and Environment (MoPE) projected that the population would reach 32 million by 2016, in fact it was only registered as 27.26 million (MoPE, 2016). In light of that increase, the prospects for economic growth and political stability appeared fragile (Population Reference Bureau, 2002: July 26).

In the article based on the study of the 'Rapid Urban Growth in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal' the researchers concluded that the cityscape changed dramatically between 1989 and 2016. This growth, the largest urbanisation in South Asia, came as a result of rural to urban migration and this 'push factor' was instigated not only by the belief of greater economic and lifestyle benefits but by the pressure brought to bear on rural communities by the civil conflict. It is estimated that over 500,000 rurally based citizens migrated to Kathmandu between 1996 and 2008. The capital city is the hub for all important socio-economic sectors, tourism, finance, industry, education, transportation and healthcare and as such controls the flow of all economic and financial transactions in Nepal (Ishtiaque et. al., 2017).

During the intervening years Kathmandu did not necessarily live up to every migrant's expectations, money and work were scarce and housing lacking. Many migrants saw the possibility of developing some form of tourism. Although they did not necessarily have a background in tourism, they were aware of the increasing opportunities it offered. Money was borrowed, agencies were established and in the fight for survival, many of the previous generations' sustainable development work was side-tracked. The advances Nepal made in sustainable tourism in the 1970s and 1980s were quickly forgotten in the name of commercialism and immediate financial gain. As the highly competitive supply side developed agencies were looking at ways to increase profits while possibly reducing expenditure. Sadly, this philosophy has got out of hand and there is an element of the tourism supply sector that has taken their focus on financial gain too far. This has manifested itself in more recent times in the form of the helicopter rescue insurance scam that came to light in 2017 (Skinner, 2018: 21 September). Many of the big players within the tourism sector have political connections and dubious practices are often spared investigation.

Today, May 2020 and Nepal is in the grip of the Corona virus pandemic. This will undoubtedly have significant consequences for the tourism industry. Reports have already emerged of illegal logging and poaching during the lockdown, long-term pressure on forests and wildlife could increase in the future. Nepal experienced amazing forest resurgence over the last three decades, attributed in part to out-migration, since migrants' households farmed less land and spent remittances on cooking gas, reducing demand for firewood from forests. If an estimated 1 million migrants return home en masse, the consumption of forest resources could increase. Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli has emphasized the need to focus on agriculture

and continue large infrastructure projects already underway. But besides some programs for food aid and debt postponement, initiatives that directly put cash in the hands of struggling citizens are lacking and several cabinet members are embroiled in corruption allegations surrounding health supplies procurement (Gili, 2020).

For at least a decade and more obtrusively in recent years, the problem of corruption has been at the centre of the political agenda in Nepal. It is recognized as one of the chief causes of Nepal's underdevelopment. It is very widespread, has different manifestations, and is practiced at all levels of society. The Nepali bureaucracy, politician, and the business sector are most seriously affected by, and inextricably involved in corruption. This is really a great challenge to the campaign of modern Nepal. The businesspersons, the politicians, government officials, so called academicians and even consumers are responsible for this. It is critical to continue a strong stance against corrupt practices during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-corruption procedures and systems of accountability will ensure that development aid is deployed to benefit those who need it the most. A wave of corruption-related incidents linked to the current situation underscores the importance of continuing and strengthening transparency and accountability efforts (Steingrüber, 2020).

This interlude in the tourism industry, like the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake is an ideal opportunity for Nepal to realign its tourism policies and strategies so as to provide a more sustainable future for this potentially long term financially lucrative industry. Sadly, those so focused on making money are already looking at other opportunities and, like the helicopter rescue fraud and the road building spree at present being undertaken in rural Nepal, which is not directly attributed to 'development' but rather financial gain by some people in power. The Nepali government is seeking to build roads to every village in the mountainous nation. But some warn the road boom could have high costs for communities and the environment, especially in areas where traditional livelihoods and trek tourism rely on unspoiled nature (Coburn, 2020: 2 January). The new focus of such people will set Nepal and the tourism industry back yet again.

Are the principles of sustainable tourism now giving way to the pressures of commercialism and maybe development?

It is extremely important that those in charge of developing not just tourism but sustainable tourism fully understand the expectations of trekkers and other visitor sectors that spend time in Nepal. Most visitors expect to see the local wild life, cultural architectures, a pristine environment and local customs and traditions, however this must be managed in such a way to also meet the expectations of the local communities – access to essential services, good communications and the opportunities to generate a liveable income from tourism. After all what is the point of developing tourism if it actually has a negative impact on the local communities and environment?

Although today the tourism' industry contributes only around 7.9% (World Data Atlas, 2018) to the national GDP its potential is far from exhausted. The grass-root operators and mountain communities see the value of tourism as supporting their financial sustainability but, in the vacuum, created by a lack of direction and monitoring from senior levels of administration they are often taking things into their own hands. However, these positive achievements are threatened in some cases by the current political and moral situation. In short, the communities hosting tourists are not getting the benefits that they expected.



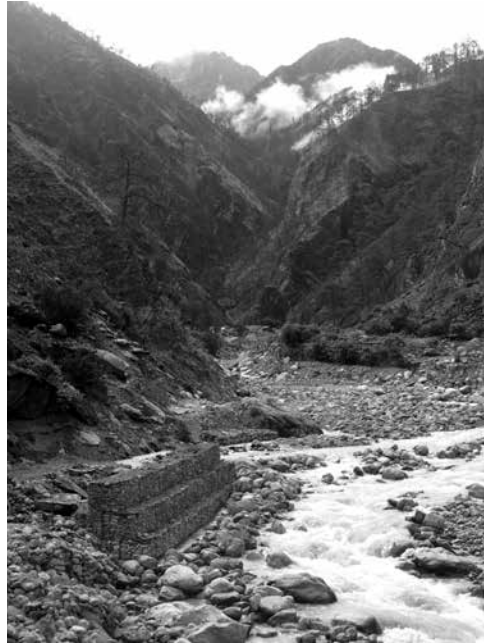
Picture 1: *Power tools are driven across fragile eco-systems to break up and destabilise the rock structure. It will take years for these eco-systems to recover, if ever changing the entire eco-system of the valley – Dolpa © Ian Wall*

Although systems are in place to manage a positive expansion of the tourism industry the rapid development accompanied by a lack of transparent monitoring by some of the major players of today has also allowed some dubious practices to enter into the industry and in many areas this is having a negative impact on Nepal reaching its sustainable tourism potential. This is especially so with regard to the environment and the impact of tourism on the wild-life.

As part of the major challenges facing any new administration in the mountain tourism sector attention must be given to a balanced approach to promoting the country as a tourist destination, developing infrastructure that opens up new areas for tourism, offers the opportunities for socio-economic development for the local shareholders and above all maintaining an environment in which wild life and eco-systems can live in harmony with both developmental sectors. Many countries have gone head-long into developing tourism that has ultimately caused great and irreversible damage to the environment from which there has been no recovery.



Picture 2: Hydraulic power tools using pressurized air-hoses are used to break up and destabilise the rock structure so that the man-power can remove rubble by hand. These machines require diesel fueled compressors, there is always a lot of spillage and ground contamination which often leaks into water courses or the water courses are ultimately destroyed. The young works are not provided with the appropriate protective clothing and many are seriously injured during the work - Dolpa © Ian Wall



Picture 3: The construction of road bridges changes the water course of rivers and ultimately results in pollution and erosion of the fragile environment and eco-system. The heavy machinery is often not well maintained and as a result suffers from mechanical failure at which time it is often abandoned. If bridges are not properly built, they often get damaged or destroyed during the monsoon, if there is no money for repairing them then the locals will return to their old ways leaving industrial waste in the environment - Dolpa© Ian Wall

The pay-off would be to what extent would an area lose its existing tourism trade from those wanting to visit a remote and so far relatively untouched destination as opposed to any new and different type of tourist who would be attracted to an area just because it is no longer 'remote' but because it has road access?

Whilst recognising that the remote communities need to be more included in mainstream Nepal developers must keep in mind the expectations of all shareholders and the impact on sustainable tourism (UNCRD, 2017: 14 March)

There has been a rapid expansion of rural road development over the last few years. The situation along the Annapurna Circuit has been well aired and verbally documented;



Picture 4: The new road to Lo Manthang linking Nepal's central districts with China has resulted in many vehicles plying the routes, however, once they break down or get involved in an accident they are simply discarded and left to rot where they stop. This pollution of a pristine community will result in fewer tourists visiting the area with the obvious negative effect of less financial income generation opportunities (Lonely Planet collection).

now there is aggressive road development in Dolpa one of the most unique regions in Nepal.



Picture 5: *New road development is often completed without the local communities understanding the full implications as to what they have signed up to. Not only is it easy for people to travel to Kathmandu but it is also easy for maybe the less-desirable element of the population to arrive in the remote villages. Several communities have reported local Gompas and shrines being desecrated and vandalised by unwelcomed visitors – Helambu, Ama Yangri Stupa ©Ian Wall*

Recent reports have highlighted the fact that the new roads would only be used for motor bikes and tractors taking goods to remote villages. But at what point will the first 4 x 4 head into Dolpa? The Helambu is criss-crossed by roads and many villages have had a total change in character, and many locals regret the modernisation that is affecting many remote hill communities (Lama, 2019: 18 October). In some regions conflict has broken out between local people and the contractors (The Himalaya Times, 2019: 26 October). The development of new roads will always impact on the environment and wild life. Over the years the balance might well be addressed but in the short term the negative impact on both the environment and wild life will be compounded by the probable loss of revenue from mountain tourism, the destruction and displacement of the very elements that trekkers visit these areas to witness.

To address these issues the first question that must be asked is ‘what is sustainable tourism?’

According to the UNWTO ‘sustainable tourism’ is the development of guidelines and management practices that are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments (UNWTO, 2005: 11, retrieved). Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance that must exist between these three dimensions to guarantee long-term sustainability.

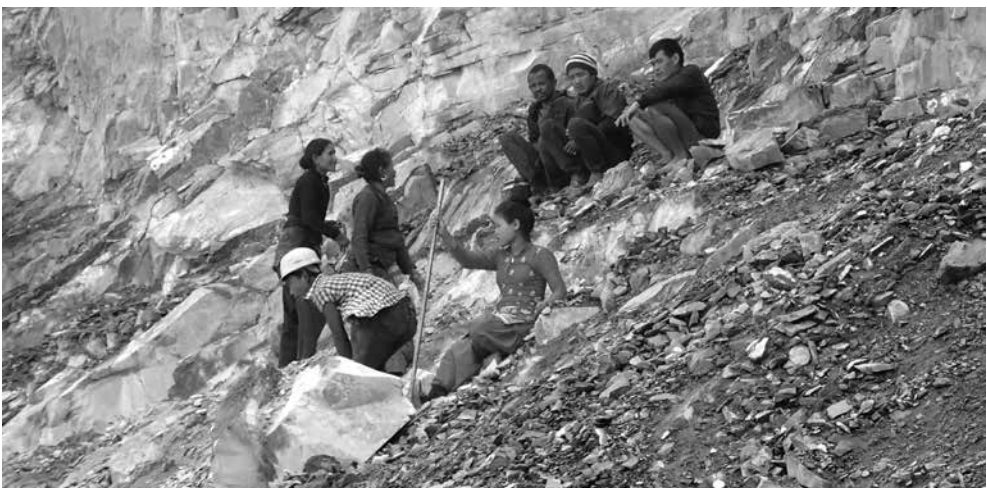
The second question to be asked is ‘Is Nepal’s approach to modern tourism sustainable?’ Data show that the tourism industry contributes 7.9% to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and that the actual economic contribution of the sector to the GDP has increased in recent years. It was anticipated that the sector would grow but without any pre-determine indicators, as opposed to recorded data, these advancements are difficult to monitor and the

published 7.9% contribution to the GDP has caused many to ask why? However, the government has now set a bench mark of two million tourists for 'Visit Nepal Year 2020', can this be achieved, is it sustainable, what impact will it have on the environment and above all will it be a quality experience for both visitors and the local communities? (Corona virus curtailed tourism in 2020).



Picture 6: Valley sides previously covered in vegetation are stripped thus the strength properties of the top soil are removed leading to greater erosion. This erosion will occur every year often leading to the total collapse of the more exposed sections of the road, many roads in remote regions never get repaired after a major collapse - Dolpa © Ian Wall

However, in the short term there are benefits. This image is of a complete family working on the road construction thus their joint earnings and short-term financial sustainability will have been greatly increased. Development is a necessity; however, it must be balanced with tourism expectations and considerations of all the other elements of sustainable development.



Picture 7: There are however, immediate financial advantages, this is one family who are all employed on the road building project. Many, if not all the laborers are unskilled and often not supervised, serious accidents and rock fall frequently happen – Dolpa - © Ian Wall

Ask any local person in any one of Nepal's tourist destinations, 'Are you getting what you expected from the developing tourism market in your area?' And the answer is nearly always 'NO!' If there is no long-term financial advantage from tourists visiting 'attractions' then tourism is not having a positive impact on that area.

Money taken in the form of business taxes, permit fees, tourism taxes and other related costs paid by the tourists don't always go to the related communities who then feel cheated. Schools, health and income generating activities, issues which local communities regard as being the benefactors of hosting the tourism industry do not always materialise. In economic terms although the country's GDP contribution is growing it has not reached a sufficient level for 'tourism' to be recognised at government level as a major area of income generation that should be heavily, sustainably and appropriately invested in within the near future.



Picture 8: Any new building in remote areas will always require the raw materials being sourced locally as this is often the most cost-effective way. Rock will be quarried locally leaving unsightly scars on the local environment which will take decades to cover over with ground hugging foliage - Khumbu © Ian Wall



Picture 9: All the new lodges built for tourists require open quarrying. The top soil is removed and eco-systems destroyed, erosion quickly wears the land away. Most high-altitude communities do not have killed workmen so these have to be brought on site from lower valleys. Temporary living conditions are not good, people become ill and worse and there are little attention paid to the polluting effects these projects have on the immediate locality-Khumbu© Ian Wall

The local players feel that they are not being supported from the senior administration level sufficiently to create a sustainable economic life style from tourism. While at the senior administration level the financial benefits from tourism are maybe seen as ‘disposable income’ rather than a resource to reinvest in the sustainable tourism industry.



Picture 10: Tourist arrive in fragile eco-systems with little knowledge or consideration for their environment and little realizing what their actions will have on local resources then conflicts often arise - Khumbu© Ian Wall

The environment, flora and fauna are under extreme pressure from tourism. Deforestation to make way for new airports, wider roads, creating productive subsistence agricultural land, developing new road networks, destroying natural water courses, building new lodges or other tourist facilities with little consideration for the delicate balance of the Himalayan environment are all contributing to a less sustainable industry.



Picture 11: Nepal's capital city has not escaped the effects of un-monitored development. The old communal water fountains of the valley are drying up due to the vast reduction of the ground water resource as a result of illegal and erratic, drilling of bore holes, building construction and new road development all within the valley © Ian Wall

Nepal must now consider the infrastructural development on sustainable tourism development

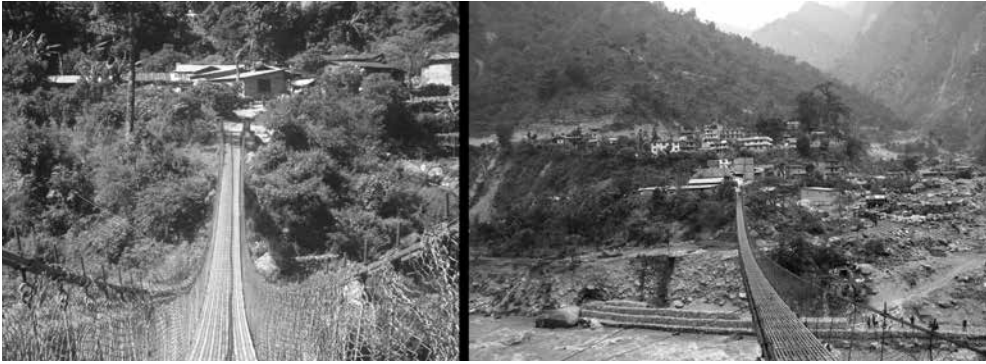
The Nepal government is well aware of the changing weather patterns and its effect on natural productivity and this is nowhere more obvious than in the present-day condition of the high Himalaya, the decreasing 'permanent' snow cover and potential reduction in water supply.



Picture 12: *New roads not only scar and weaken the upper hillside but the building of roads often follow existing trekking routes with little consideration for the many trekkers that visit the region and bring with them much needed financial support for the hill communities. This is not what trekkers want to experience and many will be turned off by the road development and look for new unspoilt locations - Helambu © Ian Wall*



Picture 13: *With the new roads pushing deeper into the National Parks serious damage is created to the environment. Roads often contour the hillsides and basically tear a line across the vegetation which supports the upper hillside. In the monsoon, this is highly likely to slip, not only blocking the new road but continuing down the valley sides and possibly forming a dam across the river which will then cause local flooding issues – Manaslu © Ian Wall*



Picture 14: *The same view taken 10 years apart. With the extension of the road deep into the National Park the road head community suffers as a result. With vehicular access materials that were once unavailable get transported in to the remote regions. Many of these materials are packed in plastic sheeting or covered by tarpaulins causing typical road head pollution, discarded tarpaulins building materials and an abundance of plastic waste. Now trekkers leave the jeeps and walk on to less disturbed villages. In a few years' time the road will progress again leaving behind a less that picturesque Himalayan community which will be avoided by those wish an authentic Nepalese experience*
- Manaslu © Ian Wall

The development of the tourism industry, in its present form has several major socio-economic and cultural consequences. Not all tourists are travelling from abroad and in Nepal there is a huge upturn in domestic tourism. Tourism may have many different effects on the social and cultural aspects of life in a particular region or area, depending on the cultural and religious strengths of that region. The interaction between tourists and the host community can be one of the factors that may negatively affect a community as tourist may not be sensitive to local customs, traditions and standards. The effects can be both positive and negative on the host communities.

Positive impacts from a well-structured sustainable tourism plan

- Local community can mix with people from diverse backgrounds with different lifestyles which through 'demonstration effect' may lead to the development of improved lifestyles and practices from the tourists' examples.
- There can be an improvement in local life through better local facilities and infrastructure (developed to sustain tourism) which could lead to better education, health care, employment opportunities and income. Tourism related business opportunities can be developed.
- The conservation of local and cultural heritage of an area and rebirth of its crafts, architectural traditions and ancestral heritage to meet client expectations.
- The income generated from permits and fees should be reinvested back into the local communities to strengthen capital development.
- The government would benefit financially from the taxes and other tourism related charges.

Without a good sustainable tourism plan there would be negative effects

- Existing infrastructure may not be able to cope with the greater stress created by influx of tourists.

- Local population's activities and lifestyles may suffer intrusion from tourists leading to resentment towards tourists.
- The local population may copy lifestyles of tourists through the 'demonstration effect' and the result could be a loss to local customs and traditions as well as lower standards of behaviour.
- Increased crime could develop through decline in moral values, leading to greed and jealousy of wealthier visitors.
- Traditional industries may be lost and local goods substituted by imported and mass-produced goods which lack authenticity but appeal to a mass market.
- Tourists may act in an anti-social manner which could cause offence to the local population. Unless sufficient information is provided by the host nation and tourist providers on the standards of behaviour expected in that area, local populations come to resent tourists and act aggressively towards them.
- Language barriers between the tourist and the host community which may create communication problems.

Present day overview

In general, tourism entrepreneurs, at local level do not believe that tourism as delivered in its present form will, in the long term, be sustainable. On the other-side of the coin, the tourists also have expectations, and they pay a relatively high price thinking that their financial contribution to Nepal's GDP will ensure a sustainable outcome. At national level and in general terms visitors have common expectations, to be safe, to have value for money based on their payments for permits and other services. They expect a litter free environment, efficient methods of transport, good customer care provision and exposure to Nepal's unique culture, festivals, architectural and ethnic heritage. There are then specific expectations based on, religious tours, mountain trekking, wild life safaris, bird-watching or adventure tourism, niche activities.

In the context of sustainable tourism development, it must be born in mind that Nepal has only been developing a tourism industry for the last nearly 70 years, for the mountain and remote communities this has been considerably less. As a developing nation it is unfair to expect that Nepal can provide the same standard of service and facilities as more developed tourism destinations, however, it must have a positive vision with pre-determine positive indicators to enable it to move in the right direction.

To understand exactly what is required to create a sustainable tourism sector it is worth considering the World Tourism Organisation's (WTO) definition of sustainable tourism and cross reference that to activities that are being played out in Nepal's tourism industry at the present time.

Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.

To develop a truly sustainable tourism industry

There are three key issues that need to be addressed:

1. There must be optimal use made of environmental resources, those that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
2. Respect must be given to the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their original and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
3. Viable, long-term economic operations must be ensured to provide socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and specific services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

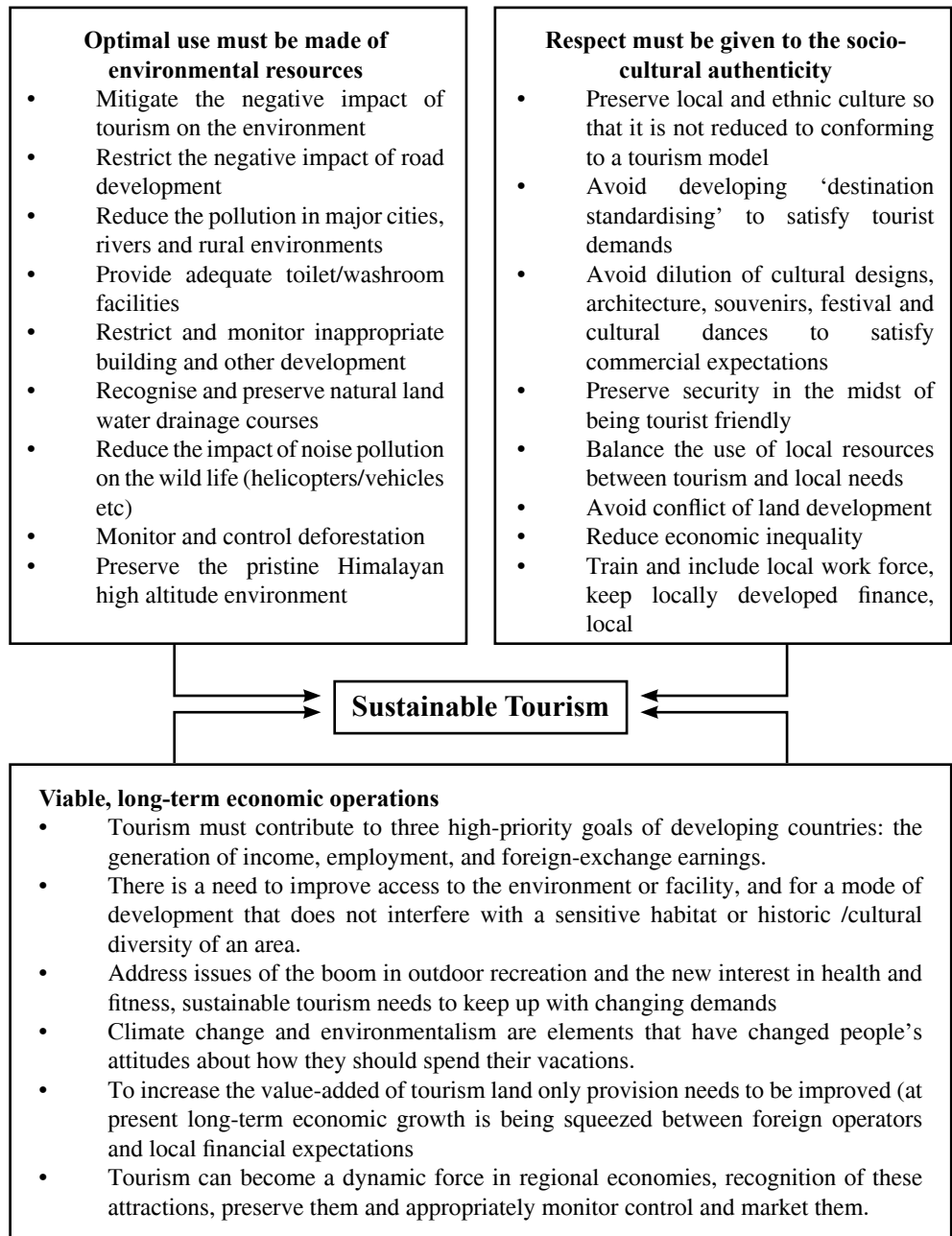
Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires the constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them.

It has been suggested by PATA, Nepal chapter that a tourism arrival goal for 2030 could be 5 million tourists. Within the next 10 years is it possible for Nepal to have sufficient infrastructure in place to meet all the criteria for a sustainable tourism industry? Several leading travel writers have already voiced their concerns.

Viable, long-term economic operations

- Tourism must contribute to three high-priority goals of developing countries: the generation of income, employment, and foreign-exchange earnings.
- There is a need to improve access to the environment or facility, and for a mode of development that does not interfere with a sensitive habitat or historic/cultural diversity of an area.
- Address issues of the boom in outdoor recreation and the new interest in health and fitness. Sustainable tourism needs to keep up with changing demands.
- Climate change and environmentalism are elements that have changed people's attitudes about how they should spend their vacations.
- To increase the value-added of tourism land only provision needs to be improved (at present long-term economic growth is being squeezed between foreign operators and local financial expectations).
- Tourism can become a dynamic force in regional economies, recognition of these attractions, preserve them and appropriately monitor control and market them.

The way to developing sustainable tourism



Conclusion

In the beginning, tourists visiting Nepal were 'adventurers', they had little idea as to how long their trip would last or even if they would return home. As tourism developed 'guides' were simply local people who knew all the local paths and 'guiding' was simply a means to try to escape the poverty trap.

During the early 1950s many expeditions arrived in Nepal to climb the 8000 m mountains, soon trekkers followed. Several, now famous foreign entrepreneurs saw a potential to develop tourism and the monarchy of the day supported their initiatives. With the development of the hippy trail the numbers grew. Meanwhile, at the highest level of governance in Nepal concern was growing as to the negative impact so many visitors were having on the fragile mountain environmental and ethnic sectors of the population and steps were taken to minimise collateral damage while at the same time trying to improve socio-economic benefits. Eventually the Annapurna Area Conservation Project grew from little acorns leading to probably the finest and most talked about trekking route in the world at that time.

Up until the early to mid-1990s, tourism was developing as a sustainable and flourishing industry that was contributing a significant amount to Nepal's GDP (12.1% in 1995) % (World Data Atlas, 2018). However, from 1996 to 2015 Nepal went through a period of prolonged political unrest which not only destabilised the development of tourism it also caused the development of Nepal to flounder.

During the term of the insurgency there was a large migration of people from the rural regions of Nepal into the capital city, living was not easy and the financial gains that were anticipated were not readily forthcoming. With the ease of borrowing money and with political support some of the migrants were able to get a foot-hold in tourism.

Throughout the early 2000 period, the commercial competition between agencies developed and some took a short cut to profiteering. Many of the policies for sustainable tourism that had developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s were side-tracked in the name of financial gain, in some quarters greed took over. Many of the political leaders had financial interests in tourism as well as other parts of the national infrastructure, in what we might call a relationship of vested interests. Health, travel, tourism, transport, road building, nothing escaped the eye of those looking to make a profit no matter what the cost.

Rural development is essential to develop an all-inclusive society and the government established a plan of developing road and domestic air flight connectivity. Many of these projects have potential for significant financial gain for interested parties. However, these are not all sustainable projects and there is now a developing clash between rural development and sustainable tourism, the form of tourism that takes into account the various stakeholders from within the environmental, financial, socio-economic, cultural sectors as well as understanding the expectations of tourists visiting Nepal especially those going to the remote regions.

Over the last five years, there have been periods of time when Nepal's tourism sector virtually closed down, in 2015 after the earthquake and Indian blockage and then in 2020 with the corona virus pandemic. These two unfortunate incidences provided breathing space for those in charge of tourism at government level to refine the Adventure Tourism Policy and Strategic Plan for Nepal. However, there seems to be indecision at the top level. Is tourism just an industry that provides the icing on the financial pie for some community leaders or is it to be developed into a high-end industry providing a quality experience back up by a quality service for both domestic and foreign travellers?

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