

Book Review

Tourism in Mountain Regions: Hopes, Fears and Realities A Critical Review

This 110 pages brochure book is published by the Department of Geography and Environment, University of Geneva, the Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern, and the United Nations Environment Program in 2014 and edited by the editors: Bernard Debarbieux (UNIGE), Mari Oiry Varacca (UNIGE), Gilles Rudaz (OFEV), Daniel Maselli (SDC), Thomas Kohler (CDE), Matthias Jurek (UNEP).

The publication has been made with a clear purpose of informing the sustainable tourism development situation to the concerned stakeholders of sustainable tourism entrepreneurs and policy makers around the globe.

Martin Dahinden (Director General SDC) and Dr. Martin Ledolter, (Managing Director of ADA) very aptly synthesize the much coveted and feared sectors of sustainable development aspects of the world where countries and communities vie and interact for tourism development as a tool for national and community level economic opportunity. In their *Foreword* Mr. Dahinden and Dr. Ledolter bring out the hopes and fears enveloped in ground realities in the following words:

The economic potential tourism holds, for many – although not all - mountain communities, is quite clear: in most mountainous regions of the world, people have limited possibilities for generating income. Agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry form the backbone of local economies, but these contend with shallow soils, harsh weather conditions, and low market competitiveness. Therefore, diversification of livelihoods is often not a choice, but a necessity for mountain households.

The writers seem to have addressed Nepal's own acutely felt mountain tourism experiences.

Mountain ranges offer possibilities to all kinds of tourists: sport fans come for hiking, climbing or skiing. Others come simply to appreciate beautiful landscapes. In remote valleys and on mountain peaks, many endemic plants invite visitors to discover unique biodiversity. Those interested in cultural heritage find compelling destinations along Andean Inca trails, in the rock churches of Ethiopia, or at sacred Buddhist sites and ceremonies in the Himalayas.

These words speak the minds of the people of the tourism industries who have long felt the necessity of immediate efforts to execute appropriate mechanisms of sustainable development works in the tourism sectors but somehow lack the effective coordinating factors at the local and policy making levels. The result is dissatisfaction at all levels. The book is an effort to respond the anomalies felt and bring both the entrepreneurs and the policy makers at the front to make them aware of the situation.

This review work is limited to its debate focusing particularly on Nepalese concerns for tourism in the mountains. As the book has tried to encompass almost all the continents in bringing most of the nagging issues and also highlighting brighter sides of tourism so as to disseminate the high and low of possibilities to the concerned stakeholders.

The book is divided into six evenly-spread-out chapters which cover 28 thoroughly studied

scholarly yet practically discussed issues which have market and policy driven ideas. The review section, however, covers the main six papers from chapter two simply because the other remaining papers are case studies which in many ways are repetition of the ideas expressed in the second chapter works. All the ideas represent the authors' own experiences and the editors' well balanced critical reviews of the relevant sectors. All the chapters are headed by succinctly prepared introductory remarks which show the editors' hard work gone in to the preparation of the publication. These introductory discussions briefly summarize the papers in the particular chapter and offer critical reviews as well. In overall perspectives the authors seem very well aware of the sustainable tourism development situation. They believe:

...tourism carries risks of harming ecological goods and services, compromising cultural identities, and increasing social inequalities. Tourism is not a "one size fits all" solution, as there are various factors and conditions that need be considered if tourism development is to be a lasting success. These range from favorable weather to reliable transportation infrastructure, from diverse and high quality services to social and political stability, and include minimal administrative requirements, such as means for issuing visas and other permits. (5)

The ideas obviously express the hopes and fears in the sectors but they also are equally aware of the realities of developmental and administrative loopholes and obstacles that hamper the path. Nepal's present situation cannot express itself better than this globally felt tourism phenomena. The concerned authorities like the two scholars in their *foreword* have voiced the highs and lows of tourism sectors even in the developed regions, "Switzerland and Austria have both experienced the bright as well as the dark sides of tourism" (5). Hence they might have felt the necessity to bring out a work that could argue well and set forth agenda pertinent to all the burning issues of various sectors in sustainable development of tourism, "This is why the decision was made to jointly finance a publication that addresses and explores the key issues and opportunities of sustainable mountain tourism at a global scale" (5).

This book sheds light on mountain tourism by focusing on the economic, ecological and social dimensions which constitute the pillars for sustainable development. In seeking paths toward sustainable mountain tourism, the text explores important case studies from all over the world which suggest both attractive examples and mistakes to avoid.

Once again Mr. Dahinden and Dr. Ledolter set out their views, "Our hope is that this publication will inspire both policy makers and practitioners to move towards sustainable tourism development in mountain regions, benefiting local communities while inspiring visitors from around the world" (5).

In line with the views expressed in the foreword, most writers have viewed the various sectors of tourism with hopes and fears. In the first introductory chapter "Challenges and opportunities for tourism development in mountain regions", the three writers Bernard Debarbieux, Mari Oiry Varacca, Gilles Rudaz debate that the abundance of protected natural areas in mountain regions, while providing a solid foundation for tourism, is not a guarantee of sustainability. Admittedly, such areas can contribute to the responsible management and protection of environmental resources, and they are often tourist attractions in their own right. But protected areas are also subject to a number of threats: overuse, antagonism from local residents who may receive little economic benefit and may even deny access to visitors. It is also important to keep in mind that, although tourism, in the best of worlds, is an important motor for economic growth, the redistribution of wealth, and the social development and empowerment

of local populations, this activity is particularly vulnerable to a number of factors: climate change, political and economic crises, internal instability, and competition for resources (11).

The second chapter which introduces six papers which are the primary concerns of this brief review is titled 'Cultural diversity and social change' and it highlights the globally experienced common factors that tourism is associated with and supposed to have affected: communities and their cultural aspirations. The pros and cons experienced have their own stories of success and failures. Debarbieux argues that the diverse impacts of tourism on culture and identity are perceived locally as bringing both possibilities and dangers (15). Nepal has a significantly experienced cultural effect during the 1960s when international visitors had started pouring in for various purposes and Hippies had their own special interests. Till today the footmarks are visible in the heartlands of Basantapur Durbar Square and *Jhanchhe* or popularly known as the *Freek Street* where the Hippies had created and felt their own haven. Economic growth is very clearly visible but the cultural erosion experienced among some very traditional Newar host communities in terms of loose and open physical behaviors, open dress patterns, and personal or self-gratification through toxic substances like hashish and opium consumption understood as western identities have had negative impacts. High mountain trekkers and mountaineers have had their own impacts onto the Nepalese highlanders like the Sherpas and other communities. Again social and cultural acculturations have been felt with both socio-economic and cultural impacts.

Nigerian northern mountains and local sustainable tourism is the concern of the first paper 'Tourism and the Tuareg in the Air Mountains of Niger' by Marko Scholze. Marko argues that if the locals have to remain in tourism business then the traditional format must be followed. He argues that in the Air Mountains, tourism provides opportunities for Tuareg men and women of diverse social strata to diversify their sources of income. Beyond the economic benefits to individuals, tourism helps generate taxes for the communes. Camel tours (*meharees*) are especially suitable for tourism development in the region, as they are consistent with local cultural practices and appropriate to the fragile natural environment. Security will have to be restored to the region if tourism is to enjoy a renaissance. When that occurs, it will be important to foster an ongoing process of professionalization and training of the Tuareg involved, be they the owners and staff of the travel firms, or the artisans, smiths and merchants who produce and sell handicrafts to tourists. In this way, sustainable, equitable and culturally appropriate tourism practices may be promoted and extended (19).

Be the Nigerian camel tours or Nepal's Chitwan and Bardia's elephant rides in the national parks, both entertain some traditional means of transportation which otherwise are exotic for the Europeans or American visitors.

The next paper 'All-terrain vehicles and Mother Earth: tourism, identity and the Dakar Rally in Bolivia' is an argument on the ambivalence of tourism product like Dakar motor rally vs economic perspectives and environmental issues. Yuri Sandoval and Sébastien Boillat who have produced this paper for their academic purpose bring out these dual facets of modern form of tourism product. They mention that in January 2014, for the first time, two stages of the Dakar Rally were disputed in Bolivia. The Bolivian government was very active in promoting the event, paying a 2 million dollar membership fee to ASO, the French company organizing the rally, and investing in infrastructure to enable the event to take place. The economic benefits of the rally to Bolivia, however, remain unclear. The largely off-road long-distance rally, which currently entails hundreds of cars, motorcycles, trucks and all-terrain

vehicles crossing principally Argentina and Chile, was promoted in Bolivia to boost tourism in the Southern Altiplano, a high-altitude arid region inhabited mainly by indigenous people, and home to the emblematic Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat and one of Bolivia's principal attractions (20).

This is one of the most unusual experiences which runs against the very notion of eco-friendly or sustainable approach to tourism activities. The local government's support to such event is a lesson to the rest of the global partners.

'Pilgrimage in the transboundary Kailash Sacred Landscape' is the first work that mentions Nepal and highlights the importance of high mountain tourism in the form of pilgrimage touristic destination. The authors Marjorie van Strien and Rajan Kotru discuss that the remote south-western portion of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, together with the bordering districts of Nepal and India, is a global 'cultural hotspot' of historical and spiritual significance. The area represents a sacred landscape for over one billion people in Asia and around the globe, and is considered holy by a number of religions, including Hindu, Buddhist, Bon Po, Jain, and Sikh. As hundreds of thousands of visitors come to this unique landscape to pay homage and their visits return abundant economic opportunities to the local and people enroute who support in the logistic management to the visitors. But because of such heavy frequency of outsiders' encroachments to this holy high mountain negative impacts have become visible. The authors opine that its deep and rich cultural diversity has become threatened in recent years by the impact of poverty, globalization, and unregulated development, challenging the sustainability of local livelihoods and ecosystems. This situation is now further complicated by perceptible climate change, which is likely to worsen in the years to come, thereby placing further demands on practices and policy to adapt (22).

Taking considerable insights from such experiences, the researchers conclude that the initiative seeks to improve communication between the corresponding country partners, for example, by facilitating a mentorship program featuring joint visits to other landscapes featuring international cooperation, and by working to deepen ownership of an agreed set of principles for project planning and implementation, including good governance. Transboundary cooperation requires a conducive political atmosphere; it must grow organically within the framework of what is, at times, a fragile balance. Responsible tourism, a widely shared interest, has proven a promising vehicle for international cooperation, communication and action in the Kailash Sacred Landscape.

The fourth paper 'Agrotourism and the development of multiple professional identities in the Austrian Tyrol' is a much favored area of tourism development sector as it's a worldwide available form of work and yet less concerned entrepreneur product. But author Markus Schermer has researched on one of the successful stories. He reports that over the past fifty years, tourism has played a pivotal role in sustaining farming as a livelihood in the mountainous region of Tyrol, Austria. The most complete integration of tourism into the economy of a farm is probably reflected in the offering of farm stays, or vacations on a farm. Currently about one third of the 15,000 farms in Tyrol offer on-farm accommodation, and about 400 have specialized in this activity, forming part of a professional association called 'Holidays on the Farm' (24).

This Austrian experience can be an upfront and inspiring source of information to a country like Nepal which primarily boasts as a country of plains and mountain-farmers and thus agro-tourism could be an organized sector to boost an eco-friendly and sustainable tourism area.

The fifth paper 'From electrometallurgy to outdoor recreation in Vicdessos (Ariège, French Pyrenees)' offers an opportunity to the concerned stakeholders' knowledge how one closure opens up another avenue. Pierre Dérioz explains that for the small mountain territory of Vicdessos, the closure of the Pechiney metallurgy plant in Auzat, in 2003, brought to an end a century dominated by industrial activity. The closure has led to a new economic project based on tourism development. The shift from aluminum electrometallurgy to outdoor recreation will entail a far-reaching change in local cultural identity, seen as key to the success of the project and the employment opportunities it envisions based on new economic foundations. This is a lesson to the policy makers how a premeditated effort can transform one aspect of development to another even more worthy enterprise.

'Heritage policies and the renewal of local communities in the Carpathians' is a work that ignites hopes in the regions that prides itself as a home of heritage grandeur. The writer Zbigniew Niewiadomski mentions that in the Carpathian Mountains of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, an international Convention is helping to advance sustainable development, environmental protection, and heritage preservation.

The Carpathian Mountains, a region of high cultural and biological diversity, extend into the territories of seven states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, and Ukraine. In 2003 in Kiev, Ukraine, these states signed the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention). Among the Convention's many goals is the strengthening of local communities in this mountain region and finding synergies between sustainable tourism development and heritage preservation. The richness of local cultures in the Carpathians, a melting pot of Roman and Byzantine rites, developed from interactions and exchanges between various nations and ethnic groups who migrated and settled along the range between the 13th and 17th centuries (28).

The last sixth paper 'Cultural routes: serving tourism, local economies and landscape' mentions Nepal as well for its experiences in cultural route and tourism. The writers Guy Schneider and Werner Paul Meyer report that in recent years, the concept of 'cultural routes', developed in Switzerland, has attracted interest not only in European countries but also in the Himalayan region. In May 2010, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), based in Kathmandu, invited ViaStoria, a Swiss entity dedicated to protecting and promoting historical transport routes, to share its experiences. One of the most nagging issues was brought up to the front where adventure lovers lamented for this very popular trekking trail's loss.

The decline of the formerly attractive Annapurna round trek is a notable example of how this kind of ill-planned or destructive development can undermine the economic opportunities that trekking provides local populations. Interest in trekking in the Himalayas, which offer exceptional opportunities to experience culture, history, and vistas that include the highest mountains in the world, is increasing. The implementation of a network of 'Trans-Himalayan Heritage Routes, analogous to the Swiss Cultural Routes, combined with well-directed poverty alleviation measures, could have several benefits: preservation of historic routes and their associated monuments as a valuable cultural good; and preservation of the cultural landscape.

The book's third, fourth and fifth chapters deal more or less the similar experiences discussed above. The remaining works are individual case studies of different countries which have

dealt with all the available traditional forms of tourism activities yet one or two stand out as exemplary experiences because of their dedicated efforts.

The conclusion part is the last sixth chapter ‘Moving from hopes and fears to sustainable realities’ by Bernard Debarbieux, Matthias Jurek, Thomas Kohler, Daniel Maselli, Mari Oiry Varacca. The writers have come to understand that the initiatives to develop sustainable tourism presented in the case studies correspond to relatively recent endeavors, many with short track records. Monitoring and comparative analysis will be crucial for future development-oriented research, which should aim to further identify relevant practices and lessons learned, while refining policy advice for genuinely sustainable tourism development.

The book is undoubtedly a commendable effort on the part of the organizations involved to disseminate the commonly experienced yet not very vocal in the international arena for real time planning and execution of tourism sectors. Mere benevolent remarks alone won’t be sufficed to bring the needed result to the concerned communities as such. Hence this effort is to gear up them to move forward with stories to share with one another’s success and pitfalls. Once realities are realized then fears may pave the way for hopes.

Kumr R. Bajracharya
Tribhuvan University, Nepal

References

Debarbieux, B., Oiry Varacca, M., Rudaz, G., Maselli, D., Kohler, T. & Jurek, M (eds.). 2014. *Tourism in Mountain Regions: Hopes, Fears and Realities*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNIGE, CDE, SDC, pp. (108).

<https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/about-sustainable-development-goals#ourwork>