



## Eco-tourism in Nepal

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### Abstract

*Eco-tourism involves visiting unique natural habitats with the purpose of aiding conservation efforts and observing wildlife. There are several benefits of eco-tourism which include the conservation of the environment, a rise in funding by the government, cultural exchange, and support for local businesses. The principal tourism activities in Nepal are mountain climbing, trekking, visiting religious and cultural sites, rafting, bungee jumping, rock climbing, jungle safari, and so on. Ecotourism in Nepal depends on coordinated policies, integrated conservation, and sustainable community development, requiring international and grassroots collaboration to maximize benefits while conserving natural beauty. Various projects have been organized to develop eco-tourism in Nepal. Some of the major projects that have been organized are Ghalegaon-Sikles Ecotourism Project, Annapurna Conservation Area Project, Kanchenjunga Community Based Ecotourism Project, Manaslu Nature Based Ecotourism Project and Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project.*

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### Introduction

Ecotourism entails traveling to delicate, pristine, and largely untouched natural environments, aimed at providing a sustainable and typically smaller-scale alternative to conventional mass tourism. Its purpose may differ, to educate the traveler, to provide funds for ecological conservation, to directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, or to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights. Since the 1980s, ecotourism has been considered a critical endeavor by environmentalists, so that future generations may experience destinations relatively untouched by human intervention. Several university programs use this description as the working definition of ecotourism. (Pradhan, 1998)

Ecotourism primarily involves exploring the living components of the natural environment. It emphasizes responsible travel, personal development, and ecological sustainability, often taking travelers to destinations celebrated for their biodiversity, cultural heritage, and natural beauty. The goal of ecotourism is to educate tourists about human impacts on the environment and to cultivate a deeper appreciation for our natural surroundings.

Responsible ecotourism initiatives aim to reduce the harmful impacts of traditional tourism on the environment and uphold the cultural authenticity of local communities. This approach not only assesses environmental and cultural aspects but also emphasizes practices such as recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and the support of economic opportunities for local residents. Therefore, ecotourism frequently advocates for both environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

The term 'ecotourism', like 'sustainable tourism', is considered by many to be an oxymoron. Tourism as a whole relies on and promotes air travel, which greatly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. These emissions are released high into the stratosphere, where they actively contribute to the greenhouse effect responsible for global warming and climate change.

Ecotourism is a pressing topic and one of the most rapidly growing segments within the global tourism industry today. This trend is particularly pronounced in developing nations such as Nepal, where ecotourism is seen as a strategy for achieving sustainable development goals. The paper focuses on the current prospects for ecotourism in Nepal, a country where tourism is expanding quickly but has also brought about diverse negative effects in certain regions.

Nepal has an abundance of opportunities in the ecotourism industry. But its effective practice and implementation are not promising due to the lack of commitment of governmental policy and planning strategy with a combination of integrated conservation and development. Thus, to run an ecotourism project, proper principles and theories of ecotourism must be considered a major base while making its policy and planning. Policy must be integrative, collaborative, and comprehensive to achieve the real outcome of ecotourism, realizing the importance of environmental, social, and economic imperatives. (Bhattarai, 2002)

## **Methods and Materials**

The main objective of the study is to find the benefits of ecotourism, the principal tourist activities, the determinations of ecotourism, and give recommendations. Relevant reports are collected from different sources. All collected relevant documents are reviewed.

## **Benefits of Ecotourism**

### **Conservation**

Ecotourism's primary aim is to counteract the negative effects of human development. City residents commonly decide to visit untouched jungles, mountains, and beaches to admire their natural beauty. It mostly minimizes the depletion of the environment and culture and it should improve the socio-economic status of local people, providing them with economic benefits through employment or the sale of locally made produce and services (Lama and Sherpa, 1995). When local communities recognize that their natural resources can generate income from tourism, they often become more motivated to safeguard these resources. In such instances, community members may take on roles as tour guides and realize that their livelihoods hinge on preserving the local environment.

### **Rise in Government Funding**

As ecotourism expands within a region, local governments frequently acknowledge its economic benefits and strive to sustain its growth. In numerous locations, the popularity of ecotourism has prompted the establishment of multiple national parks and reserves, which have created protected wildlife corridors. Consequently, governments need sufficient funding to manage these parks and prevent access by hunters, poachers, and loggers.

### **Support for Local Business**

In addition to tour guides, various local enterprises benefit from ecotourism. Artisans, lodge operators, and restaurateurs all offer services that enable tourists to explore local attractions. Numerous studies indicate that communities experiencing economic growth from ecotourism often see a reduction in tree-cutting activities as residents become more occupied with other pursuits.

### **Cultural Exchange**

Eco-tourism uplifts cultural exchange. Tourists get to learn about the culture of the places they visit. Similarly, people learn about various things from tourists. At the same time, local residents receive financial resources and opportunities to further their education, enhancing their comprehension of global issues such as environmentalism through cultural interaction. This mutually beneficial exchange benefits both parties involved.

### **Principal Tourist Activities in Nepal**

Nepal is a "playground" for tourists with different activities which are described below briefly:

#### **Rural Tourism**

Nepal is a rural village based country where the majority of people are residing in very remote villages with various ethnicities where tourists can get a real sense of the unique lifestyle and culture. (NTB, 2008).

#### **Mountain Climbing**

Nepal is famous for its unique mountain landscape and because of this many tourists visit Nepal. Out of 1792 mountain peaks, as many as 1310 of them are above 6000 meter high, but only 326 peaks are open for climbing (TAAN, 2008)

#### **Trekking**

Nepal boasts some of the world's most iconic trekking experiences, including the Annapurna Circuit Trek, Annapurna Base Camp, Langtang Valley region, and the Everest Base Camp Trek. These journeys offer diverse landscapes, breathtaking mountain views, encounters with local cultures, and the challenge of traversing high-altitude terrains, making them sought-after adventures for trekking enthusiasts worldwide.

### Visiting Religious and Cultural Sites

UNESCO has designated ten cultural and religious sites in Nepal as 'World Heritage Sites,' including Kathmandu Durbar Square, Bhaktapur Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square, Changu Narayan Temple, Swayambhunath Stupa, Boudhanath Stupa, Pashupatinath Temple, Lumbini - The birthplace of Lord Buddha, Chitwan National Park, and Sagarmatha National Park (NTB, 2008).

### Rafting

Nepal boasts numerous rivers, including swift-flowing ones ideal for rafting. Rafting allows tourists to experience both the natural landscapes and cultural richness of the country.

### Bungee Jumping

Nepal offers numerous exhilarating bungee jumping locations, with the Bhote Koshi site being the primary destination for this adventure sport. Additionally, there are a variety of other activities such as rock climbing, mountain biking, jungle safaris, paragliding, hot air ballooning, mountain flights, museum visits, shopping for indigenous products, and meditation. These activities are largely associated with ecotourism, focusing on nature, wildlife, and cultural tourism. However, ensuring proper management of all these activities is crucial for the successful practice of ecotourism in Nepal.

Arrival of tourists for different purposes:

Year	Holiday Pleasure	Trekking & Mountaineering	Business	Pilgrimage	Official	Conv./ Conf	Others	Total
2010	2,63,936	70,218	21,377	1,01,335	26,374	9,629	1,09,998	6,02,867
2011	4,25,721	86,260	17,859	63,783	24,054	10,836	1,07,702	7,36,215
2012	3,79,627	1,05,015	24,785	1,09,854	30,460	13,646	1,39,705	8,03,092
2013	4,37,891	97,309	30,309	40,678	39,881	15,992	1,35,595	7,97,616
2014	3,95,849	97,185	24,494	98,765	32,395	13,432	1,27,999	7,90,118
2015	3,86,065	9,162	20,876	14,996	21,479	9,038	77,354	5,38,970
2016	4,89,451	66,490	24,332	82,830	21,310	12,801	55,797	7,53,002
2017	6,58,153	75,217	Na	1,41,033	Na	Na	65,815	9,40,218
2018	7,03,843	1,87,692	Na	1,69,180	Na	Na	1,12,357	11,73,072
2019	7,78,173	1,97,786	Na	1,71,937	Na	Na	49,301	11,97,191
2020	1,39,202	28,530	Na	35,893	Na	Na	26,460	2,30,085

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2020

### Determinations of Ecotourism Development in Nepal

Nepal has long experienced the need of ecotourism since there has been an increased flow of tourists and its adverse impacts started to be felt in different fields. So, Nepal aims to develop ecotourism as

a key vehicle supported by different national and international agencies focusing on environmental conservation and poverty alleviation. There are various national and international organizations such as Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) mainly involved in developing ecotourism and other international agencies like World conservation Union/ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development(ICIMOD) have also been persistently supporting the development of ecotourism in Nepal (Pradhan, 1998). In 1973, Nepal introduced the Natural Park and Wildlife Conservation Act. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) is a significant agency overseeing a network comprising 9 national parks, 3 wildlife reserves, 3 conservation areas, and one hunting reserve, along with 11 buffer zones around national parks. Together, these areas cover a total of 28,999 square kilometers, which accounts for 19.70 percent of the country's total land area.

The exact origins of ecotourism are unclear, but it is widely believed that its importance became evident following the implementation of Nepal's National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973. This legislation led to the establishment of various protected natural areas aimed at conserving ecosystems and fostering integrated development within communities and other sectors. Additionally, the formation of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), which coordinates networks of protected areas and ecotourism initiatives, significantly advanced ecotourism promotion in Nepal. Subsequent efforts, such as the establishment of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project in 1986 and a dedicated focus on ecotourism in the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), further contributed to the growth of ecotourism within Nepal's tourism industry. ACAP is one of the most successful ecotourism projects in the South Asian region that support nature based ecotourism with other various conservation and development programmers efficiently (Thapa, 2009). The Industrial Enterprises Act of 1992 and the Environmental Protection Act of 1996 play crucial roles in raising awareness about environmental conservation and sustainable practices. Yet, further efforts are needed to fully implement their objectives within Nepal's tourism industry in the future.

### **Annapurna Conservation Area Project**

This project was established in 1986 covering a vast area of almost five districts of western development region of the country. The project, supported by many national and international organizations, is well known for its outstanding model for natural resource conservation and community development (Gurung and Couresy, 1994). Its principal objectives are:

- Sustainable resource management
- Maximizing participation of local communities
- Promotion of alternative energy to mitigate tourism's negative impacts
- Poverty alleviation through integrated agriculture and livestock development
- Environmental education for both host communities and visitors
- Agroforestry initiatives and community development
- Conservation of cultural heritage while managing tourism
- Development of self-sustaining tourism practices

**Ghalegaon-Sikles Ecotourism Project (GSEP)**

Established in 1992 through collaboration between KMTNC and ACAP and funded by the Asian Development Bank for tourism infrastructure development, this project stands as one of the country's successful ecotourism initiatives. Its primary objective is to support the conservation of natural resources and foster local community development through responsible tourism practices. The project has undertaken numerous critical activities in nature conservation, including constructing foot trails, implementing forest zoning, training in river management, sustainable forestry practices, and promoting the use of alternative energy devices such as solar panels, micro-hydro projects, and fuel-efficient stoves.

The project is engaged in a wide range of activities including sustainable infrastructure development, educational programs in schools, community sanitation initiatives, tourism-related training sessions, vegetable cultivation, and leadership training. It emphasizes capacity building among locals, encouraging active participation in promoting local cultures and preserving the environment. According to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, the project also funds research endeavors to identify significant and rare flora and fauna, non-timber forest products, socio-economic surveys, and biodiversity conservation research using revenue generated from tourist entry fees.

**Kanchenjunga Community Based Ecotourism Project**

The project began its main strategy in 1998 with 84 tourists. However, it faces overcrowding issues due to trekkers who leave behind significant amounts of waste. Therefore, managing waste and preserving the natural environment are key responsibilities of the project, involving extensive participation from local communities. In the area, there two major projects, the Kanchenjunga conservation project and Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation program which are working together for sustainable development of infrastructure, nature and culture conservation, ecotourism development, agro-forestry, and capacity building for local people (Thapa and Gurung, 1998).

**Manaslu Nature Based Ecotourism Project**

Established in 1999 with a specific focus on conservation and community development, the project is now overseen by KMTNC. It aims to replicate the Annapurna Conservation Area Project model to effectively manage the region for responsible tourism, ensuring significant local engagement for maximum benefits to the community. To conserve the area and promote ecotourism within the park, the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program focuses on environmental conservation, involving local participation, boosting the local economy, developing infrastructure, and supporting marginalized gender and ethnic groups.

**Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project**

Established in 2000, its primary objective is to sustainably manage tourism to preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage. The project emphasizes enhancing the capacity of local residents to actively participate in planning, managing, and monitoring activities, thereby improving their quality of life

and protecting the local environment. ACAP provided essential support in various aspects to ensure the project's success. Key accomplishments of the project include:

- Providing training to local residents to improve skills in planting, wildlife management, survey methods, and organizing biodiversity databases.
- Raising awareness about the significance of ecosystems and cultural heritage, as well as promoting cleanliness.
- Offering training in responsible tourism practices to generate income.
- Promoting mutual respect among tourists and locals towards the local environment and culture.

### **Maximum Local Involvement of Local People Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP):**

Funded by prominent international organizations like UNDP, DFID, and SNV, the project aims to combat poverty in Nepal through sustainable tourism development policies. It focuses primarily on disadvantaged and marginalized groups including women, lower castes, and ethnic minorities. The program emphasizes grassroots participation in policy formation to ensure maximum benefits for local communities. The project strives to establish exemplary tourism models in various tourist destinations, promoting sustainable development by boosting the local economy through initiatives such as training local guides, promoting local products, establishing homestays, and supporting cottage industries. It has achieved success in several tourism sites such as Pokhara and Chitwan National Park, where local residents are actively engaged in income generation activities.

### **Simikot, Humla Development Project**

The project focuses primarily on preserving Buddhist cultural and religious heritage sites and natural resources in the northwestern region of the country. This area includes a trekking route to Mt. Kailash and Mansarovar Lake, which are significant pilgrimage centers. Financial support for the initiative comes from the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) and local networks in Humla. The project oversees various critical tasks such as trail maintenance, waste management, sanitation, drainage improvements, and the enhancement of lodges and religious sites. Additionally, it provides training for village guides, porters, and local lodge owners to increase community participation.

### **Others**

There are numerous additional ecotourism initiatives that actively support ecotourism either directly or indirectly. Projects such as Makalu Barun Development Package, Tansen Development Package, Dolpa Development Package, and The Partnership for Quality Tourism Project operate across various natural and tourist sites, effectively promoting ecotourism.

Established in August 2012, the Tourism Development Society (T.D.S.) is a young Destination Management Organization focused on fostering sustainable and responsible tourism development in the Far-West region. Its goal is to enhance the well-being of local communities and conserve the delicate environment. Developing the Far West as a tourist destination also aims to increase income and employment opportunities for local residents, thereby promoting socially balanced economic growth.



## Conclusion and Recommendation

Ecotourism in Nepal holds immense promise for conservation, cultural exchange, and local economic growth. However, its full potential relies on cohesive policies, integrated conservation efforts, and sustainable community development. Collaborative initiatives between national and international agencies, alongside grassroots participation, are key to maximizing ecotourism's benefits while preserving Nepal's natural beauty for the future.

### Recommendation:

- International ecotourism planning and policies should be coordinated across national and international borders, focusing on resource management and visitor movements.
- Ecosystems should be managed as appropriate units, even beyond protected area boundaries.
- National leadership should demonstrate consistent vision and objectives through interdepartmental collaboration.
- Ecotourism planning and policy should align with sustainable development goals.
- Developing an inventory of tourism assets and conducting research on biodiversity threats and endangered species should be integral to ecotourism and broader planning efforts.
- Training is crucial for building local capacity, enhancing employment opportunities, increasing product value, and boosting local business capabilities.
- Tourism planning and policy should encompass all resources and involve multiple sectors and departments, especially in protected areas.
- Integrated strategies for air and water should be included in coastal area planning and management.
- Collaboration between tourism and culture sectors is essential.
- Tourism and protected area planning should prioritize clear goals for community development.

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