

Community-Based Ecotourism and Perceived Economic Impacts: A Study of Rural Settlements around Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal

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Abstract

Community-based ecotourism, as a subset of sustainable tourism, is advocated as a tool for community development in the mountain settlements. In this regard, this research adopted exploratory and descriptive approach to investigate the perceived economic impacts of community-based ecotourism in the local communities of Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) in Nepal. The settlements of Dhampus, Landruk and Ghandruk along the Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) are considered as a case to critically examine the economic impacts of community-based ecotourism development on local residents both residing along the major trail (MT) and off the trail (OT) in the ACA. Multiple methods of data collection such as questionnaire survey with households, key informants interview, participant observation, informal discussion with local entrepreneurs and residents, and archival research have been conducted. Research findings showed that community-based ecotourism has provided extensive economic benefits to local people, however in a varying degree. It has provided economic benefits to local communities and enhanced local economy, however not all residents receive benefits equitably. People living along the MT (i.e. mostly the tourism entrepreneurs) receive higher economic benefits than that of OT (i.e. mostly the farmers). The farmers, low-wage employees, and marginalized community receive lowest benefits but largely influenced by the inflation and tourism impacts. In addition, there seem economic leakages, weak integration of local products into tourism system and inflation. This study stresses on the inclusive participation of local people in the planning and decision making of tourism development as well as sharing of benefits while also reducing the economic leakages and strengthening its linkages.

Keywords: Annapurna Conservation Area, Community-based ecotourism, Community perceptions, Economic impacts, Rural settlements

Introduction

Ecotourism, specifically Community-based ecotourism (CBE) has been extensively promoted in the developing countries mainly to alleviate rural poverty and achieve sustainable development goals (Bhatta, 2019). CBE as a form of sustainable tourism is expanding rapidly and penetrating into the rural settlements and the protected areas (Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta, 2019). It aims to empower local communities to increase community involvement in decision making and make them aware of economic benefits of tourism and environmental protection activities. CBE has been widely accepted as a strategy for community development as well as conservation of resources specifically through responsible use of natural and cultural resources. Mountain and rural settlements in Nepal are the most popular destinations specifically for trekking, mountaineering, and exploring wildlife and diverse indigenous culture. Indigenous people are attracted towards ecotourism to receive economic benefits. Many settlements in the Himalayas have experienced tremendous changes in economic, social, cultural and environmental context with the development of tourism. The Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) is located in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA); the IUCN category VI conservation area encompassing more than 300 km of trail network passing through the highly varied and picturesque landscape in the Western Nepal. AST is one of the oldest trekking trails of the ACA leading to base camp of mount Annapurna and mount Machapuchhre (Fish-Tail) starting from the village of Dhampus and Birethanti (Bhatta, 2014). It is one of the major trekking destinations of Nepal and attracts majority of tourists from around the globe. Although trekking activities in the AST are believed to be existed since long ago; it received widespread attention only after the 1950s, when Nepal opened to outer world, and the mountaineering expeditions started formally in Nepal (Bhatta, 2014). Since the large numbers of indigenous people are living in or around the protected areas; rapid growth of tourism has affected their way of life. Several settlements around the AST have not only experienced transformation in terms of land use, shape and size but also undergone through significant economic,

socio-cultural and environmental changes (Nepal, 2003, Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004; Bhatta, 2019). In this context, this paper aims to critically examine the role of community-based ecotourism in the local economic development.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to explore the perceived economic impacts of community-based ecotourism in the case of rural settlements around Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) in Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), Nepal.

Literature Review

Community-based Ecotourism and Economic Impacts

Community based ecotourism considers local people as a key receiver of tourism benefits. The residents specifically rural, poor and economically marginalized invite tourists to visit their communities for stay and enjoy natural and cultural heritages. The community-based ecotourism is considered as a tool to reduce poverty in rural communities as it is supposed to provide multiple jobs than traditional livelihoods and opportunities to sell local products (Lepp, 2007; Lee, 2013). Community-based ecotourism (CBE) has been widely identified for its ability to improve local economies, and it has been introduced in many countries (e.g., Lepp, 2007; Lee, 2013; Dodds, Ali, & Galaski, 2018). CBE has been acknowledged as the vehicle of local community development (Hussin, 2006) and has the ability to enhance local economies (Lee & Jan, 2019). It is widely viewed as a strategy to receive economic benefits in terms of increased income, foreign exchange, employment and economic diversification.

Tourists generally contribute to sales, profits, jobs, tax revenues and income in the destination area (Gunn & Var, 2002). With the introduction of community-based ecotourism, local people living in or around the protected areas get enhanced opportunities to work in the different sectors of ecotourism industry such as accommodation, restaurants, tour operation, local creative enterprises (art and crafts), transportation, entertainment, retail trade and other tourism related services (Bhatta, 2014; Bhatta & Joshi, 2023a,b). Creation of jobs to local people to support their livelihoods is thus one of key benefits of ecotourism. These jobs, however, might be low, make a huge difference in rural economies (Lindberg, 2001; Bhatta, 2014). Increase in local employment is considered a major catalyst to motivate local people towards conservation of resources. It is marked in several examples, such as, one of the studies in Belize conducted by Lindberg et.al. (1996) revealed that ecotourism related benefits were the important basis for positive resident attitude towards the protected areas. However, if residents bear costs without receiving economic benefits, they may neither support ecotourism nor conservation but could develop anti conservation attitudes. Some of the key issues associated with economic impacts of community-based ecotourism development are discussed below.

Taxes, Fees and Expenditures

Ecotourism not only generates government revenue through business and other general taxes, but also from industry-specific channels such as payment of occupancy and departure taxes (Lindberg, 2001). It also makes fiscal costs in the form of, for example, funding for infrastructures (Bhatta, 2014). In an evaluation of ecotourism in Belize, Lindberg and Enriquez (1994) noted that ecotourism revenue covers specific tourism related costs such as tourism promotion, and maintenance of airport, and also generate net profits for the government. In many developing countries, the park authority charges entrance fee and taxes from the tourists, and proportion of it goes back to the conservation and development activities. Revenue from entrance fees and taxes is crucial for the maintenance of tourism resources and infrastructure (Bhatta, 2014; Chan & Bhatta, 2021; Bhatta, 2023).

Income distribution

Equitable distribution of income is crucial to promote sustainable development. However, in many destinations, tourism has created socio-economic disparity both between and within the communities and regions (Bhatta, 2014). Lindberg (2001) argued that, in some cases, tourism development

exacerbates existing income inequalities within destination communities, while in others it generates new financial elites. In this regard it is crucial to consider the inclusive involvement of local communities in the tourism-related entrepreneurial activities as well as sharing of benefits. Genuine participation from the different groups of communities may help enhance equitable distribution of benefits among the communities (Bhatta, 2014).

Revenue Sharing and Issues of Leakage and Linkage

The protected area (PA) authority in the less developed countries have declared policies that allow tourism revenues go back to the community development programs wholly or partially (Bhatta,2014). For example, Nepal's Wildlife Conservation Act provides the distribution of 30-50% of PA revenue to surrounding communities (Brandon, 1996; Weaver, 2001; Bhatta, 2014). Local residents in these destinations are believed to be benefited from revenue-sharing programs that either provides cash payments or funding for the community projects such as schools, community halls, health post, sanitation, drinking water, and other community infrastructure (Bhatta, 2014). Moreover, community-based organization such as 'mothers group', 'youth club', and 'conservation and development related committees' also collect fees from tourists, which is spent on the community development programs wholly or partially. Thus, the issue of increasing tourism revenue and its equitable distribution among communities is a crucial concern for sustainable ecotourism development. However, one of the biggest challenges to the rural destinations in less developed countries is the high level of leakage from tourism revenues (ibid).

Economic leakage is one of the main reasons that make tourism failure to produce desired level of economic development in the developing countries (Britton 1982; Dearden, 1991; Lacher & Nepal, 2010). It is often listed as a negative impact; however it is more appropriately viewed as the absence of positive impact (Bhatta, 2014). Rather than causing economic harm, it simply does not provide benefit of the foregone jobs (Lindberg, 2001). For instance, when the goods and services used in tourism industry are imported, it directly minimizes the benefits of local people. As such, to maximize the economic impacts of tourism, destinations should strive to increase the linkage between tourism activities and local businesses rather than depend on imported goods and services (Britton, 1982; Walpole & Goodwin, 2000; Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta & Joshi, 2023). Moreover, strong linkages between local economy and tourism system are crucial to produce more multiplier impact which is essential to produce substantial economic development (Cohen, 1982; Chan & Bhatta, 2013). It is thus argued that failing to promote substantial linkages and multiplier impacts may even cause resentment of the industry amongst local residents (Bhatta, 2014). In many cases ecotourism has also failed to deliver its promises of economic benefits to local people. Wells and Brandon (1992), with reference to the early analysis of 23 Integrated Conservation Development Projects (IDCPs) having ecotourism as major components, pointed that only few benefits went to local people or served to enhance the conservation. The tourism revenue that is often assumed to be received by the destinations of developing countries from the international tourists faces the problems of high level of leakage, and only a tiny portion of the total expenditure of the international tourists accrued to local communities (Lindberg et.al., 1996; Lindberg, 2001; Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Chan & Bhatta, 2013).

Two important considerations associated with tourism-induced local economic development can be drawn, the first is how much of the tourist expenditure goes to local areas, and the second is how much of this local expenditure actually remain within the destination. To explore the local benefits of tourism, it is crucial to identify the possible direct impacts, indirect impacts and induced impacts of ecotourism (Lindberg, 2001). In addition, benefits might be enhanced by reducing the potential leakages from the local destinations (Bhatta, 2023). Lacher and Nepal (2010) suggested some key reasons of high leakages from destinations, for example: (i) lack of capital; (ii) lack of local ownership; (iii) lack of local employment; and (iv) inability to link tourism to the local economy. One of the crucial aspects is that local people at rural destinations are not much educated about tourism, which hinders the level of local ownership and local employment, and also their ability to link local industries to tourism (Bhatta, 2014). Other studies have also advocated for mitigation of leakages by strengthening of tourism linkages with local economic activities. Scholars such as Britton (1982); Holder (1989); Freitag (1994); Telfer & Wall (1996); Lacher & Nepal (2010); and Chan & Bhatta (2013) have suggested three key factors responsible for the low level of linkages that needs to be addressed: (i) supply- related factors

(e.g. poor services and poor economies of scale); (ii) demand-related factors (e.g. tourist bad impression of destinations); and (iii) market-related factors (e.g. lack of skills, education, capital).

Community perceptions towards impacts of community-based ecotourism

The perceptions and attitudes of local people towards tourism depend, to a large degree, on the interaction with tourists and the possible consequences of tourism (Bhatta, 2014). Although several models have been used to examine community perceptions and responses towards tourism; the theoretical foundation for these studies is largely the social exchange theory, which was proposed by Ap (1992) to explain local attitudes towards tourism development. This theory contends that attitudes are influenced by the perceptions of benefits (positive impacts) associated with tourism development (Bhatta, 2014). It revealed that local people evaluate tourism in terms of expected benefits and costs obtained in return for their services that is social exchange (Lee & Back, 2006). Therefore, residents who perceive themselves as benefiting from tourism will most likely to view it positively; while those who perceive themselves as incurring costs will view tourism negatively (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Nevertheless, social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) has been widely used in evaluating local attitudes and perceptions towards tourism. This theory is most frequently confirmed by studies that link positive attitudes towards tourism development with economic benefits (Lee & Back, 2006; Walpole & Goodwin, 2001). However, understanding of local attitudes is not as simple as weighting up the perceived benefits and costs. In addition to stage of tourism development (Butler, 1980), local attitudes and perceptions are also influenced by several other factors such as demographic variables influence attitudes indirectly through values (Lindberg & Johnson, 1997). Attitudes are also related with individual's characteristics such as level of contact with tourists, length of residence at destination, ethnicity (Liu & Var, 1986), economic dependency (Milman & Pizam, 1988), education and many others. Once the perceived benefits of ecotourism outweigh the costs, local people may continue to support ecotourism development.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive and explanatory methods. The settlements of Dhampus, Landruk and Ghandruk along the Annapurna Sanctuary Trail are selected for detailed examination. Multiple methods of data collection such as questionnaire survey with households (n=199), semistructured interview with key informants (n=8), participant observation, informal discussion and documentation analysis have been used. The set of questionnaires were designed with open and close ended questions that provided respondents an opportunity to express their opinions and suggestions. Documentation consisted of collection of written documents from the official records, relevant publications, reports, photographs and videos. Extensive discussion and field notes were carried out in August-September 2013 and August 2018 through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal discussion. During the selection of survey unit, stratification criteria such as location of households, type of enterprise, use of the building and the household activities were used. Considering the spatial context, households were selected along the Major Trail (MT) i.e. major streets in the settlements as well as from off-the trail (OT) i.e. secondary or branch streets in the settlements. These were selected as survey units through systematic and stratified random sampling. The approximate distance of a peripheral household from main trail is supposed to be 500 meters (maximum). Households representing both the locations were selected specially to understand the perceptions and attitudes of households towards role and context of collaborative efforts in ecotourism development and its planning. In addition to spatial location, the type of use of the building and the engagement of households in specific activities were the additional criteria for selecting the households as a survey unit. Attempt was made to seek maximum responses from different people engaged in different types of tourism activities. Triangulation approach was used wherever possible in the analysis of findings.

Research Findings and Discussion

Economic impacts of community-based ecotourism in the AST

One of the prime benefits of ecotourism is the creation of employment opportunities for local people along with the economic diversification, and increased income to support community livelihoods (Page & Dowling, 2002; Nepal, 2007b; Saarinen, 2010). In the protected areas, ecotourism has been advocated as a viable strategy to alleviate poverty and contribute achieving the sustainable development goals in the developing countries. Although ecotourism is supposed to benefit local communities through their active involvement in ecotourism development activities; in many cases, it has been failed to achieve so, and criticized by many scholars (Wall, 1997; Butcher, 2011). In this regard, economic impacts of ecotourism have been examined with reference to the community perceptions and attitudes towards ecotourism development in the rural settlements around Annapurna Sanctuary Trail in the Annapurna region

Community-based ecotourism for enhancing employment opportunities to local communities

Since the adoption of open door policy in 1950s, Nepal has experienced substantial growth in tourism development, which is penetrating into the rural communities and bringing changes in their livelihoods (Banskota & Sharma, 1995; Sharma, 2000; Nepal, 2003; Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004). The increase in tourist arrival and their increased demand for tourism services motivated local residents to involve in tourism service sector, such as guidance in trekking and mountaineering expeditions, portering, supporting the expedition team, and working in the lodges, hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related services. Other employment opportunities generated by tourism in the AST include builders, carpenters, plumbers, and labors for constructing lodges, hotels and tourism related infrastructure. Essentially, tourism has considerably contributed to the socio-economic development of local communities. The perceptions of respondents towards employment opportunities in the AST are examined. Findings are presented with reference to the respondents in MT, OT and overall context of AST (MT+OT). Most of the respondents in AST (88.4%) perceived that tourism has increased the availability of jobs for local people. Comparatively, higher proportion of respondents in MT (91.7%) agreed with this statement than that of OT (84.6%). Similarly, most respondents in AST also believed that jobs are available for non-locals (89.5%) and women (87.9%) too. Nearly, equal proportion of respondents in OT (90.1%) and MT (88.8%) agreed with the availability of jobs for non-locals, but differs with regard to the jobs for women; it is 91.6% in MT and 82.4% in OT. The development of ecotourism is generally credited for generating new employment and income for the destination communities (Honey, 1999; Lindberg, 2001; Blamey, 2001). However, in the AST, only 39.2% respondents believed that tourism has increased their income, whereas 28.6% disagreed, and rest (32.2%) were unsure (neutral). Significant difference has been observed in the perceptions of respondents in MT and OT. For example, more than half of respondents (53.7%) in MT agreed that tourism has increased their income; while in OT only 21% does so.

With regard to the 'wage' of the workers, only 28.6% respondents agreed that locals get high wages in tourism-related jobs than other types of jobs in the region. Comparatively, higher percentage of respondents in MT (38.9%) agreed with this statement than that of OT (16.5%). Nevertheless, it is crucial that tourism has stimulated employment opportunities for both locals and non-locals including the women. Banskota and Sharma (1997), in a study of Ghandruk estimated that an average lodge provides employment to 7.5 people in a year. Currently, there are more than 400 lodges and tea houses in the AST, thus significant number of residents have been employed in this sector. The authors further pointed that every two FITs (Free Independent Travelers) visiting ACA usually hire one porter, and every two GTs (Group Travelers) hire three porters. Of the total tourists visiting AST, about 55% are FITs, and the rest (45%) are GTs (Banskota & Sharma, 1997). The new policy of NTB and TAAN now encourages GTs in the ACA to create more employment opportunities for porters and trek guides; however it may reduce the opportunities of local residents to receive direct benefits from FITs.

As Ashley (2000) pointed that tourism usually generates three types of cash income for rural households, for example: regular wages for those with jobs; casual earning opportunities from selling

of local products; and profit from ownership of tourism enterprises. In the AST, although small portion of households engage in permanent tourism jobs such as trekking and mountaineering guides; it provides large cash amount to them. These earnings in turn are partially recycled within local economy creating a multiplier impacts (Ashley, 2000). The craft makers, farmers, casual labors and others often sell their products or labor to tourists, tourism enterprises, and neighbors earning wages from tourism jobs. These residents earn much smaller amount than those engaged in full-time waged employment. This additional income however is most important for the poorer people who have few or no other options for earning cash in the rural areas. The owners of the local enterprises such as hotels, lodges, restaurant, and art and craft shop typically earn higher than the rest of the two groups.

As discussed in literature review section, community perceptions of tourism impacts are influenced by the several factors such as community typologies (Ap & Crompton, 1993; Williams & Lawson, 2001), the socio-economic factors (Liu & Var, 1986; Williams & Lawson, 2001; Harrill & Potts, 2003; Harrill, 2004), spatial factors (Harrill & Potts, 2003; Harrill, 2004) and their economic dependency on tourism (Harrill, 2004). Furthermore, it also depends on community attachment with the place and society, and their level of interaction with tourists and exchange of resources (Ap, 1992; Ap & Crompton, 1998; Harrill, 2004). In case of AST, residents along MT seem to have better socio-economic condition, more interaction with tourists, and higher dependency on tourism than residents along OT. The survey results revealed that they are more likely positive towards (eco) tourism development and its impacts than that of OT, specifically in terms of increase in job opportunities for locals, non-locals, and women and the income and wages for the local residents. Comparatively, less-involvement or partial dependence of residents of OT on the tourism might have made them less positive towards tourism impacts than that of MT.

In addition, most of the respondents in OT were found much concerned about the dominance of local elites and tour operators on the tourism development activities. Residents claimed that tourism related jobs, such as trek guides, porters, chefs and helpers in the mountaineering expedition have been now mostly occupied by the nonlocals. Essentially, tourism is a neoliberal agenda, and the decisions for providing employment opportunities in the tourism service sector such as in the tour operation as well as the hotels and lodges in AST depends largely upon the tourism market and the interest of private sector (tour operators) and the local entrepreneurs (hoteliers). So, in the recent years, non-locals are not only increasingly employed in tour management services but also in the local hotels and lodges. During the household survey, one of the respondents from OT commented that: "We used to work in the trekking and mountaineering expeditions especially as a porter, guide, and sometimes as trek-operator; however in the recent years these opportunities have been gradually lost due to competition with non-locals. With increase in popularity of trekking business and its potential profit, outsiders have been increasingly attracted towards tourism jobs reducing the employment opportunities for locals. In addition, local entrepreneurs also hire non-locals. Thus, it has disappointed local youths and residents who are interested to work in tourism sector in their own village".

The survey results illustrate that economic benefits of ecotourism have been mostly received by the tourism entrepreneurs concentrated along the MT. The current approach of tourism development has therefore accelerated economic disparity between and within the local communities. For example, most of the respondents in AST (83%) disagreed that jobs are distributed equitably among the locals. Reasonably, higher percentage of respondents in OT (88%) supported this statement than those of MT (78.7%). It is observed that only few local residents who have good network and communication with tour operators or local tourism entrepreneurs have been employed in the tourism service sector. In addition, the location of the households and its relative distance from the major trail also determine the residents' opportunities for receiving tourism benefits. It is true that closer the major trail, more will be the economic opportunities for the households. Residents in OT thus have fewer benefits of tourism than that of MT. One of the respondents from OT further stressed that: "*Tourism has actually benefited residents who are already in a better economic position, such as residents along the MT, while the farmers and lower caste people specifically in OT have been largely suffered from the inflation of costs considerably brought by the tourism development. In addition, tour operators do not usually hire*

porters and trek guides from the villages; they often invite those who can be readily available in the cities such as Kathmandu, and Pokhara and who can directly assist their team from the cities”.

Based on the findings, some important observations have been summarized. Firstly, since tourism-related enterprises are mostly operated by the specific section of the community usually the local elites or power holders; economic benefits are mostly accrued to them. Secondly, employment opportunities for locals, specifically the poor, to work in the tourism service sector have been largely suppressed by the tour operators who are usually non-locals, and profit-motivated. It is implicit that tour operators are one of the key stakeholders of tourism industry who are the first dealing with international tourists or their agents about the tourism services, essentially in a packaged-scheme. Once the agreement is fixed, tour operators then negotiate with the local lodge owners and service providers, especially for the lower price in accommodation, food and other tourism services. In addition, they also bargain with tour guides and porters and hire them in a lower wage as far as possible. This type of bargaining and networking approach has promoted enclave form of tourism, which has neither distributed equitable benefits to local communities nor would contribute to tourism sustainability.

On the other hand, several factors such as lack of direct communication, networking and interaction with tour managers and travel companies by the local residents (specifically the non-entrepreneurs) has further restricted residents' employment opportunities in tourism industry. Lack of proper skills and effective trainings for skilled jobs such as trekking or mountaineering guides or a member of an expedition team, and secondary jobs such as plumbers, builders, and carpenters have also reduced integration of local people into the tourism related employment opportunities. Another key concern is the increasing trend of migration of local youths to the cities and abroad specifically for better income and quality of life. The expectation to receive higher income in abroad has lured local youths, while their interest on trekking and mountaineering related jobs is decreasing. Surprisingly, when asked about their interest to work in local tourism market, most of the youths replied that they would certainly prefer to work in tourism sector in their own village if the proper wage is guaranteed for them. Given the inflation of goods, and commodities, local residents complained about lower wages in tourism industry which is not proper to survive their families. Nonetheless, the Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal (TAAN) has declared ensuring proper wages to porters and trek guides; however it has not yet been operationalized firmly.

While increasing the wage of tourism employee is one of the crucial concerns in the tourism industry; maximizing these opportunities to local residents especially farmers and lower caste minorities is the most critical to promote sustainability. The authority or the power to decide wage of the porters and trek guides in the AST is mainly associated with the private sector (the trekking companies). Decisions are also influenced by the market demand of the employee, as well as the bargaining skills of the porters and guides. The employees, besides regular wages, also receive gratuity from the tourists; however, given the remoteness and fragility of the destinations as well as the inflation of commodities, most of them complained that trekking companies are exploiting their labor by paying low wages. Thus, conflicts among employees and tourism companies also exist. Additionally, 'bargaining exercise' among the companies, hoteliers and employee as well as the growing competition, and play of politics and power within the highly globalized and networked tourism industry has mostly affected the lower level employee such as porters, helpers, and employee in the hotels and lodges. In this context, significant attention from the relevant stakeholders including both public and private sector should be given towards ensuring employment opportunities to local communities including farmers and lower caste minorities.

Community-based ecotourism for promoting local products and local entrepreneurship

Since the opening of first lodge in the Ghandruk village in 1976, steady growth of tourists particularly the independent trekkers has considerably contributed to the development of lodges, hotels, and tourism related enterprises along the AST (Nepal, 2003). The survey findings also corroborate with this fact, such as majority of respondents (74.3%) acknowledged that introduction of tourism in the AST has increased local enterprises such as hotels and lodges. Findings also revealed that respondents in MT (77.8%) are more likely agreed with this statement than that of OT (70.3%). These enterprises are

mostly owned by local people, primarily the Gurungs, and often operated by the family. Not only have they provided accommodation facilities to tourists, but also cater foods, local arts and crafts, and other tourism services such as body massage. Essentially, lodge and hotel business has become an integral part of the local economy which not only has encouraged tourism entrepreneurial activities but also provided new market opportunities for local farmers to sell their agro-products at the village level. The indigenous skills and knowledge of the residents, such as, weaving of traditional woolen cloths, bags, towels, scarves and mattresses, and production of bamboo handicrafts such as baskets, and wooden products such as Theki, Puche, have also received significant attention from the tourists. Of the total respondents, 38.2% perceived that preference of tourists to buy local arts, crafts and souvenirs has increased; while only 23.1% disagreed, and rest (38.7%) were unsure. Comparatively, higher proportion of respondents in MT (43.6%) agreed with the statement than that of OT (31.9%). It signifies that tourism development in AST has also brought opportunities for establishing local creative enterprises. Presently, however only small proportion of residents has been engaged in the production and selling of local arts and crafts.

The survey results also illustrate that majority of residents in AST are positive towards tourism's potential contribution for providing market opportunities for local products, and enhancing local entrepreneurship. For example, of the total respondents, majority perceived that there are more locally-owned enterprises than outsider owned enterprises (83.9%); local entrepreneurs (hotel and lodge owners) are able to compete with outsiders (80.5%); demand for local products has increased (93.5%); tourism service providers such as hoteliers, lodge owners and tour operators prefer to buy local products (91.4%); and farmers are getting more pay from their local products (86.9%). These findings confirm that residents in the AST, generally, have optimistic perceptions towards tourism's potential benefit for local people. Some differences however exist in the perceptions of residents in MT and OT, such as; residents in MT are more likely agreed with tourism's contribution in promoting local products and enterprises than that of OT.

Local products in the AST mainly include vegetables, chicken, potatoes, milk, raksi (local liquor), wheat and rice. Hoteliers and lodge owners also involve in farming activities, and produce local products themselves. More benefits are thus remaining with the hotel and lodge owners. During the peak seasons, hoteliers however face deficit of agro-products, and thus they prefer to buy products from the local farmers. The trekking groups specifically the camping groups also prefer to buy local products directly from the farmers. There is indeed a growing demand of local products; however most of hoteliers also responded that regular supply of local products from the farmers is difficult to achieve in the tourist peak seasons. Two reasons seem responsible for this. Firstly, majority of farmers in the AST do not have proper entrepreneurial skills, and are still engaging in conventional approach of farming which is generally less productive. In addition, most of them consider the selling of local products only as a bonus. Secondly, some farmers even do not prefer to sell their local products because of their traditional practice of giving foods free of costs to their neighbors. There are however some exceptions, such as some of the farmers have been engaged in commercial farming targeting the growing demand of local products in the tourism industry. They seemed quite positive and enthusiastic when asked about the availability of market and potential profits from the agro-products. One of the farmers expressed his experience as: *"I first took training about commercial farming that inspired me to actively involve in the agriculture sector. I realized that increase in tourism activities in the village will definitely stimulate more also prefer local organic products, so I started vegetable farming. My continuous efforts and interest in this sector has finally turned me into an entrepreneur. Now I am living happily with my family in my own village, and I haven't faced financial shortage since couple of years. I am happy that my work has also been appreciated by local people, and it has also inspired some local youths to involve in farming sector while most of the youths wish to migrate abroad for employment opportunities"*.

Interview with key informants further revealed that economic opportunities of tourism could also be available to the farmers and lower caste minorities in the peripheral regions, if they are empowered through skill development trainings as well as cooperation in terms of financial aspects. Besides few cases, tourism has not widely encouraged agro-based entrepreneurial activities in the AST. More

specifically, most of the local residents do not still consider farming as an entrepreneurial activity. Such a dilemma has pushed the AST towards dependency on the imported products. For example, almost all the respondents (98.5%) perceived that imported products have dominated the tourism market in their communities/village. Meanwhile, local entrepreneurs were much concerned about irregularity and insufficient supply of local products in the peak seasons which actually have forced them to import products from outside especially from Pokhara and Nayapool. It costs higher than the local products due to additional costs of transportation. Such dependency syndrome of AST significantly reduces the potential benefits of local communities from tourism industry. It has demonstrated an ironic situation, such that on one hand, tourism has expanded economic opportunities for the local communities; while on the other side, these are not fully grabbed by local residents because of lack of awareness, skills, and resources, and growing competition within and between the communities and non-locals. Capacity building and empowerment of local communities, specifically the farmers and lower caste minorities, to integrate into tourism entrepreneurial activities is therefore indispensable to promote sustainable community-based ecotourism.

Community-based ecotourism for providing equitable sharing of benefits

One of the overarching aims of ACAP is to promote ecotourism to provide equitable benefits to the local residents. However, findings revealed that tourism, in addition to providing some benefits, has also become an instigator of socio-economic disparity between and among the local communities. Majority of respondents (86%) perceived that tourism is one of the key reasons accelerating socio-economic disparities in the villages. Similar perceptions have been also found with the residents of MT (86.1%), and OT (85.1%). The increasing competitiveness in tourism service sector in the prevailing laissez-fair system has truly pushed poorer people aside making them unable to integrate into tourism entrepreneurial activities. The underlying politics, power, and vested interest of the tourism entrepreneurs to control tourism market is seemingly unfair to the weaker section of the community facing hardship to integrate into tourism. Here, economic benefits are mostly captured by the owner of the hotels, lodges, and restaurants, and full-time permanent employee in tourism industry; only minimal benefits reach to farmers and non-entrepreneurs.

Local people's perceptions towards tourism benefits can be categorized into two diverse but not mutually exclusive groups. For example, most of the residents along the MT believed that tourism has benefited the majority of residents either directly or indirectly, and if there is no tourism, livelihoods of local people would be even more difficult. Secondly, residents along the OT perceived that tourism has only benefited to local elites suppressing potential benefits of poorer people and pushing them further into the poverty. Unequal distribution of tourism benefits has affected residents in OT, especially the farmers and non-entrepreneurs. In addition, almost all the respondents in AST (99%) claimed that prices of land, housing, commodities and foods have been increased due to the introduction of tourism in their community. Majority of them (71.9%) also confessed that tourism has increased the cost of living which has overburdened their livelihoods. It is, however, crucial to note that besides tourism, other factors such as national and global socio-economic changes affect the inflation and costs of living. Nevertheless, relatively higher percentage of respondents in OT (86.9%) agreed that tourism is one of the key factors increasing the cost of living and inflation in the AST than that of MT (59.2%). It suggests that tourism has impacted peripheral residents (OT) more severely than that of MT.

The neutral response of most of tourism entrepreneurs, such as local hoteliers and lodge owners, on the tourism-induced inflation and cost of living also indicate that they are not much affected by the inflation. As entrepreneurs generally receive higher economic benefits than others; they could easily bear the impact of inflation. The value of land also increased along the major trail, specifically in the particular locations which have higher potential for the development of hotels, lodges, and commercial activities. Conversely, value of the cultivated land in the peripheral areas (OT) decreased not only because of tourism growth along the MT but also by the outmigration of people to the cities and foreign countries. Similarly, price (or rent) of the house/building along the MT has increased whereas it is

decreased in the OT. On the whole, findings of the survey and onsite observation revealed that tourism in the AST has become one of the key elements inducing disparity between the entrepreneurs (residents in the MT) and nonentrepreneurs (farmers in the OT).

Community-based ecotourism for enhancing tourism skills, knowledge, and educational awareness

Integrating local communities into tourism service activities, and empowering them economically is crucial for the long-term development of local communities as well as the ecotourism. The enrichment of the capacity of local communities through skill development trainings and educational awareness about tourism service industry, such as the operation of indigenous enterprises, exploration of potential market for local products, appropriate use of indigenous knowledge and skills, and proper hospitality to the tourists is instrumental to promote sustainable community development. The policies of ACAP also strongly highlight on skill development trainings, and educational awareness programs to enhance capacity of local residents; however community perceptions show that only limited numbers of residents, specifically lodge owners and hoteliers, have been benefited from these programs. For example, of the total respondents, only 29.1% agreed that local people are provided skill development trainings and educational awareness, whereby more than half of the respondents (52.8%) were not aware of these programs (neutral), and rest (18.1%) were fully disagreed. Comparatively, higher proportion of respondents in MT (37%) agreed that trainings were provided to the local residents than that of OT (19.8%). The ACAP's strategies for skill development trainings and educational awareness tended to focus on the management of current tourism enterprises rather than promoting new enterprises and creating employment opportunities for local residents. While the skill development trainings were provided in the early period of ACAP; there are hardly such trainings conducted in the recent years. Additionally, although considered as important assets of local communities; promotion of indigenous skills, knowledge, and production of local arts and crafts is not given specific priority from the government and other stakeholders. It signifies that ACAP, in the recent years, has not paid much attention to provide trainings to the unskilled residents neither have thought of creating new job opportunities for them. Meanwhile, almost all the respondents, both in the MT and OT, believed that there is an urgent need of effective trainings and educational awareness of the tourism industry and hospitality to the local communities.

Community-based ecotourism for increasing financial revenue

One of the significant contributions of tourism in the AST is the generation of financial revenue from increasing numbers of international tourists. ACAP collects entrance fee with NRS 2000 (about US \$23) from each international tourist, part of which (up to 50%) should be invested back to the community development and conservation activities. The survey results however show that only less than half of the respondents (44.7%) perceived tourism revenue has been invested back to community development and conservation programs, whereas 23.1% respondents disagreed, and rest (32.2%) were unsure. Significant difference has been observed in the perceptions of residents in MT and OT. For example, more than half of the respondents (55.6%) in MT believed that revenue was invested back to the local development programs while only 31% agreed in the OT. Interview with the key informants also demonstrated that significant amount of tourism revenue is being used for administrative purpose of ACAP whereas only small amount goes to the community development activities. In its initial phase, ACAP firmly invested back the tourism revenue (30% to 50%) to the local communities; however in the recent years there has been a sharp decline in this trend. The Chairman and the Secretary of the Annapurna Sanctuary Tourism Committee commented that: *“During the first decade of ACAP, it firmly invested back the tourism revenue on the community development programs such as construction of school buildings, health post, drinking water, bridges, and community infrastructure; community awareness and training programs; and maintenance of trails. Local communities strongly supported the programs, thus development activities took place smoothly. However, during the insurgency period (1996-2006), development projects were affected by the Maoist's movement, for example, the office building of ACAP at Ghandruk was destroyed, its staff were threatened to be killed, and not allowed to work in the place by the Maoists. The fear and insecurity of the ACAP staffs directly affected the development work. The tourism revenue was also decreased sharply due to decline in the international*

tourists' arrival. Such a critical situation made local people and tourism entrepreneurs more frustrating. Nevertheless, with the restoration of peace in 2006/2007, tourists' arrival has increased, ACAP has reestablished its offices, and development activities gradually rejuvenated. However, in the recent years, ACAP has become very selective in providing funding to the local projects. Direct investment from ACAP, and its overall working spirit and responsibility towards local community development has decreased nowadays".

Certainly, significant amount of tourism revenue is generated from the tourist entry fee; however it has not been properly invested on the community development and conservation activities. Moreover, most of the tourists also responded that the entry fee for the ACA is appropriate, and they would like to visit the region again. However, most of them were conscious about the fee charged by the TAAN office. In addition to ACA, the TAAN also charges fees to the trekkers. The TAAN, although aims to invest this amount to the welfare of trekking related employee (porters and guides), marketing and publicity of tourism, as well as conservation and community development activities; some tourists seemed sarcastic with the double payment of entry fee to the two different organizations. Besides the entry fee, tourists also contribute to the development of community infrastructure and social services such as construction of schools, drinking water, health post, and hydroelectricity specifically through financial donations and volunteering. Moreover, although tax from tourism entrepreneurs is often assumed as a key benefit of tourism; local entrepreneurs in AST generally do not pay the taxes to the government (or the PA authority). On the whole, findings reveal that local communities, although, have been receiving some financial support from tourism revenue and tourist donations; the lukewarm tourism policies and management approach have foiled the local communities from receiving financial benefits to the fullest extent.

Conclusion

One of the key driving forces behind the development of ecotourism is its potential contribution to the local economy of the rural destinations in the developing countries. Assumed as a benign approach, ecotourism is supposed to generate economic benefits in terms of increased income, foreign exchange, employment, and economic diversification. As tourists generally contribute to sales, profits, jobs, tax revenues, and income in the destination area (Gunn, and Var, 2002); with its introduction to the PAs, local people could have better opportunities to work in the diverse sectors of ecotourism industry such as accommodation, restaurants, tour-operation, local creative enterprises (art and crafts), transportation, entertainment, retail trade, and other tourism related services (Lindberg, 2001). In the case of AST, tourism development has not only stimulated economic opportunities for the local communities but also induced negative consequences. Significant differences have been reported in the perceptions of residents in MT and OT. In general, residents in MT are found more likely positive with the tourism impacts than that of OT. Positive impacts are noticed with regard to tourism's contribution to the employment opportunities for locals, non-locals and women in the village. In addition, its contribution in the revenue generation, availability of market for local products, promotion of local entrepreneurship specifically the hotel and lodge business, development of community infrastructure and services are well appreciated by the locals. Residents in MT are most firmly convinced that there are more employment and business opportunities due to tourism development than that of OT. On the other hand, local residents also perceived tourism as one of the key agents for socio-economic disparity in the villages. Generally, residents in OT are more likely agreed with this argument than that of MT. The increasing dependency of tourism on the imported products along with the inflation of price of the goods and land value are perceived as negative consequences of tourism, and viewed as one of the key hindrances for sustainable ecotourism development. In addition, despite the availability of market opportunities for selling local products at the village level, local residents have not yet been fully engaged in commercial farming. With few exceptions, most of the farmers still assume these opportunities as a bonus, but not as a profession. Moreover, indigenous skills, knowledge, and production of local arts and crafts have not been given specific priority by the stakeholders including the government. While asked about the skill development trainings and awareness programs initiated by the ACAP; most of the residents specifically in OT were found unaware of such programs.

The seasonality of tourism has also affected the community benefits of tourism. On the whole, it is noteworthy that although residents perceived both positive and negative impacts of tourism, most of them would like to see further growth of tourism in the AST. It suggests that the potential benefits of tourism have been well understood by the local people, and they expect its positive contribution in their livelihoods in the future.

As stressed in theoretical framework of ecotourism planning, two issues are considered crucial to enhance local economy, first is how much of the tourist expenditure goes to local areas, and second is how much of this local expenditure actually remain within the destination communities. As widely acknowledged by the scholars, one of the biggest challenges to promote local economy in the developing destinations is the high level of economic leakage from tourism revenues. Thus, on one hand, it's important to influence tourist's spending at the destination, while on the other side, minimization of potential leakage of tourist's spending specifically through strengthening and maximizing the linkage of local skills, services, goods, and production system with tourism activities is indispensable (Lacher & Nepal, 2010). Certainly, while the effective integration of local products, skills and knowledge with tourism system maximize local benefits and local economy; the provision of better services, facilities, and infrastructure for tourists could also help sustaining ecotourism development as it would not only encourage tourists to buy local products and services but also increase their amount of spending and length of stay. Based on above discussion, it is arguably concluded that the planning and management of ecotourism in the AST essentially demand for specific focus on the use and marketing of local services and goods to the tourists (e.g. Lindberg, 1991; Sherman & Dixon, 1991) while also reducing the economic leakage through enhancing linkages of local products, skills and services into tourism system (Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Bhatta,2023a). It calls for developing small-scale, locally-owned enterprises that can offer greater direct economic returns and local control of resources, and also contribute to sustainable development (Echtner 1995; Lordkipanidze, Brezetzl, and Backman, 2005). Above all, it identifies the need of inclusive participation of local communities in the planning and management of the ecotourism destinations and products specifically to promote sustainability of the communities and the tourist destinations (Chan & Bhatta,2021, Bhatta & Chan,2023; Bhatta, 2023b).

Conflict of interest

Author declares no conflict of interest.

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