

Policy guidelines and planning towards sustainable ecotourism in the Kingdom of Nepal: Some aspects considered

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ABSTRACT

The Kingdom of Nepal (hereinafter referred to as Nepal) is a developing country with very limited natural resources. This means that it has to rely on development aid from other countries. Its greatest assets are a large section of the Himalayas and an abundance of cultural and historical sites within its borders. These assets, if properly managed, could form the foundation of a developing ecotourism industry which, together with foreign aid, could lead to increasing numbers of foreign visitors visiting the country, increased investments and job creation. A solid infrastructure, however, is important if Nepal wishes to attract foreign visitors to the country. In this article, the writer will look at the steps taken by the Nepalese authorities to attract ecotourists to the country, the reasons why tourists visit the country and the future of ecotourism in Nepal.

Keywords: Policy guidelines, planning, sustainable ecotourism, ecology, development, conservation, Nepal

I. INTRODUCTION

Public policy and sustainable ecotourism in Nepal will be considered in this article. At the outset, the meaning of keywords will be explained. Thereafter, the reasons for tourists visiting Nepal will be considered. A government will encourage tourism and ecotourism if there is a reason for tourists to visit the country. For this reason, some of the essential steps taken by the Government of Nepal to encourage sustainable ecotourism and the future of ecotourism in Nepal will be scrutinised. A conclusion and recommendations will conclude the article.

2. MEANING OF KEYWORDS

The following meanings are attached to the various keywords:

Different authors attach different meanings to the word 'policy'. Dye (1995, 3) regards public policy simply as whatever governments choose to do or not to do.

According to Nagel (1990, 3), the word 'policy' refers to something which guides governmental action. McLeod (1985, 510) sees a public policy as a plan, amongst other things. Cloete (1991, 80) asserts that a public policy is a declaration of intent to do something or to have it done by specific public institutions or functionaries. Van Dyke (1960, 78–79) believes that policies are rules. To him, a rule is a criterion that an actor follows in making decisions. Rules are guides to action and may specify the substance of a response (by a government) to some future situation.

Allen (1992, 910) defines the word 'planning' as a formulated and detailed method by which something is to be done, that is, an intention or proposed proceeding. For Cloete (1991, 209), planning comes to the fore once the mission, aims and objectives are clear, the budget has been approved, and one or more plans or programmes have been constructed that will give rise to action. Hanekom and Thornhill (1983, 165) believe that planning should be seen as a process by which one alternative is chosen which will give effect to broad policy guidelines.

According to Allen (1992, 319), development is a stage of growth or advancement. Urdang (1992, 94) believes that development refers, amongst other things, to growth, evolution, advancement, increase, expansion, enlargement, progress or improvement. Bray (1998, 2) regards sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In 1992, the Rio Declaration of Environment and Development published a number of principles relating to sustainable development. Principle 3 acknowledges the right to development; this Principle must be fulfilled in order to meet the developmental and environmental needs of both present and future generations. In terms of Principle 8, states should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption if they are to achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people (Bray 1998, 2). Bray (1998, 15) rightly states that sustainable development is the realisation that the conservation of nature and its resources (the environment), on the one hand, and economic and social development, on the other, are not incompatible, but rather mutually reinforcing goals. Sustainable development can only take place when each generation is both a *trustee* for the planet (with obligations to and for it) and a *beneficiary* with rights to use it. Sustainable development links economic development and the environment in the human context to social conditions; it thus aims to be in harmony or balance with the planet. To this, one must add sustainable yield – renewable resources (e.g. soil, forests, wildlife and fisheries) that must be managed so that they are never exhausted, but rather are replenished and able to serve future generations (Owen and Chiras 1995, 10).

Leopold (in Owen and Chiras 1995, 1) defines conservation as a state of harmony between man and the land. Humankind will only be able to devise creative environmental policies once it understands that it is impossible to 'outlaw' pollution; pollution should rather be seen as the cost of human activity (Dye 1995, 188–189).

There is also a relationship between *ecology* and *sustainability*. Ecology is the study of interrelationships between organisms and their environments (Owen and

Chiras 1995, 36). The world population must act in a way that preserves conditions essential for other life forms. A study of ecology can help human civilisation to adopt a sustainable course which is essential to sustainable development. Humankind needs to make social, economic, political and even personal changes to ensure the earth's long-term survival (Owen and Chiras 1995, 63–64).

According to the Ecotourism Society of Nepal, ecotourism is the purposeful travel to natural areas so as to understand the culture and natural history of the environment; ecotourists should, therefore, take care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, but should help develop economic opportunities to make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to the local people (Chand 2000, 251). Ecotourism can also be seen as developing tourism without interfering with the natural habitat (Chand 2000, 255) and should be undertaken in such a way that future generations will also benefit from it. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world (Ashley and Roe 2002, 1–2).

Ecotourism and sustainable ecotourism cannot be studied without also looking at Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT). Tourism traditionally emphasises the interdependence of development and environmental protection or sustainability; PPT, in contrast, considers the interests of the poor in the tourism industry, since tourists often visit those areas generally inhabited by the poor. PPT overlaps with both ecotourism and community-based tourism. PPT aims to deliver net benefits to the poor (i.e. reduction of poverty and active participation of the poor in product development) and to increase local people's involvement in tourism by unlocking opportunities for the poor at all levels of tourist operations. If Nepal is a poor country, what reasons are there for tourists to visit the country?

3. REASONS FOR TOURISTS TO VISIT NEPAL

A country needs a point of interest if ecotourism is to succeed – whether it is the natural environment, the country's culture or its natural history. Although Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of financial wealth, it is also one of the richest in terms of biodiversity. This is due to its geographic position and altitude variations. Within an area of 150 kilometres, its elevation ranges from 60 metres above sea level to 8 848 metres at the top of Mount Everest. Climatic conditions thus vary from subtropical to arctic with a variety of ecosystems. Within its borders, Nepal has a section of the Himalayas, tropical forests with a wealth of wildlife, rivers, forested hills and frozen valleys. The result is a diversity of sightseeing attractions and adventure opportunities. Added to this are more than 103 ethnic groups and 93 spoken languages (although Nepali is still the official language) (Kingdom of Nepal 2006a, 1–2). Nepal also offers 16 parks and reserves for the ecotourist (Kingdom of Nepal 2006b, 1).

Most tourists who visit Nepal, however, do so to scale the challenging peaks of the Himalayas (Chand 2000, 51) and to enjoy its rich cultural and natural heritage

(Chand 2000, 77). On 20 June 1974, Nepal hosted the World Heritage Convention and since then, has declared many of its areas and buildings as heritage sites (Chand 2000, 78).

Other forms of tourism encouraged or proposed by the authorities, which are also related to ecotourism, include cultural tourism, festival tourism, scientific tourism, village tourism (where particular villages are visited) and adventure, holiday and sports tourism (Chand 2000, 79). Nepal is also visited by many trekkers. Nepal offers a host of treks, such as treks to ancient sites, historical treks, mythical treks, fossil hunting treks, pilgrim treks, glacier treks, adventure treks and yoga treks. Raging rivers, steep gorges, icy glaciers, snow deserts, lakes, jungles, Jurassic fossils of marine animals and pristine desolate mountains are all available for the ecotourist to view (Kingdom of Nepal 2006b, 1–2.) Trekkers are tourists who walk (hike) the paths used by those involved in the long-distance salt trade in bygone days and are generally accompanied by large numbers of guides and porters, which creates job opportunities. Two very popular treks are the trails from Pokhara to the mountain regions of Mustang through Jomsom (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980, 198) and the Annapurna Circuit which can be followed from Pokhara, through Besishar to the Annapurna Base Camp (Stevenson 1999, 1–224.) Other popular trekking areas are those in the Everest region, Langtang area, Gorkha and Manaslu, to the West of the country at Dolpa, Humla and Jumla, Palpa and in and around the Kathmandu Valley (Kingdom of Nepal sa (b), 2–5).

4. SOME ESSENTIAL STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF NEPAL TO ENCOURAGE SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM

Nepal's independence was only recognised by the Government of Great Britain in 1923 (Blaikie et al. 1980, 31). Since then, the country has been under the direct feudal rule of the Rana family. As a country, it remained isolated and visitors were forbidden until 1951 (Bhooshan 1979, 14; 27). Other factors, such as the following, also had a negative impact on the development of the country: little accurate and dependable information, the location of the country, limited development of infrastructure, a largely unskilled and illiterate population, little or no planning experience, an unstable political system, and an inefficient and corrupt public administration (Bhooshan 1979, 62). The Government of Nepal has, however, since taken steps to develop the country and has worked hard to develop its ecotourism industry.

The Nepalese Government places a high priority on tourists and ecotourist industries for employment and as major sources of foreign currency. To this end, more than 100 peaks were recently opened for climbing and trekking in an attempt to attract more tourists. Public-private partnerships are encouraged as part of the Government's development of the tourist industry (Kingdom of Nepal 2002, 1). The other steps taken will be discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Legislation and aviation

To generate income, the Hotel Tax Act was promulgated in 1961. This tax is now paid by all hotel customers. To control unwanted social activities, the Hotel Management and Liquor Sale and Distribution Control Act was enacted in 1966, with the purpose being to control the hotel industry and to curtail the hours during which liquor sales could take place (Chand 2000, 70). The Tourism Act of 2021 allows Government to establish and maintain control over the tourism industry, to regularise the registration of travel agencies, and to make it mandatory for travel guides and operators to apply for licences to conduct their activities (Chand 2000, 72). Closely related to the Tourism Act of 2021 is the Fifth Amendment to the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act which became law in February 1996. The preservation of monuments is of the utmost importance as they have historical significance (Chand 2000, 119–120).

Permission for the first aeroplane to fly into Nepal was granted in 1949 and this led to the construction of the first domestic airfield at Gaucharan. In 1953, the first private airline commenced internal flights in Nepal (Chand 2000, 40–42). In 1954, the Nepal Air Commercial Agency was established, followed by a fair-weather internal air network in 1956 which linked Kathmandu to the larger towns of Nepal (Blaikie et al. 1980, 42). In 1957, the Departments of Transport and Civil Aviation were created. This was followed by the establishment of the Royal Nepal Airline Corporation in 1958 and the passing of the Civil Aviation Act in 1959. These steps should be regarded as historic moves in the development of tourism and ecotourism in Nepal (Chand 2000, 40–42). By 1979, Nepal had more than twenty-four airports, including short takeoff and landing airfields (STOL). During a recent personal visit to Nepal, the writer noticed that there are now fourteen private domestic airline companies and four international and regional airline companies in addition to the national carrier operating to and from Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The problem is, however, that these facilities cater primarily for the well-to-do class, tourists and Government officials. Criticisms have been levelled against the Government and developers that less expensive airstrips would have served the same purpose as the costly airports (Bhooshan 1979, 84).

The promulgation of the Nepal Aviation Authority Act of 2053 and the establishment of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal have been viewed as actions by the Government to encourage, amongst other things, safer air travel and ecotourism (Chand 2000, 107; 109). The goal of the Tourism Act of 2052 is to develop tourism by prioritising the development of an appropriate infrastructure so as to promote new tourist destinations. Officials hope that this will encourage village tourism, that is, get tourists out of the big cities and into the country. Religious tourism should also be encouraged because of the large number of temples and other religious spots in Nepal. Lumbini, for example, is listed as an international heritage site as it is reputed to be the birthplace of Buddha (Blaikie et al. 1980, 198). The Industrial Enterprises Act of 1992 identifies the tourism industry as one of Nepal's

eight core industries. As a result, the tourism industry enjoys certain privileges, such as a subsidised interest rate on loans and a mere one percent import duty on items used directly by tourism enterprises (Chand 2000, 84).

4.2 Development plans and government agencies

To give effect to some of the legislative measures mentioned above, various development plans were approved and implemented. These plans led to the establishment of various institutions which aim to further the goal of sustainable ecotourism. In March 1957, the National Planning Commission was formed. Since then, there has been a growing realisation that tourism will play a significant role in the economy of Nepal and that the private sector has to be encouraged to get involved in the tourist trade. This means that the private sector needs long-term credit. In 1957, the Nepalese Government initiated the Nepal Industrial Development Corporation (NIDC). Tourists were visiting the country and development funding was needed to build an infrastructure to accommodate them. The First Development Plan was instituted in 1956 and covered the period 1956 to 1961. One of the goals of this plan was the development of a 'travel profession' (denoting tourism) in a country blessed with, amongst other things, a great natural wealth. The Government soon realised that ecotourism could easily put Nepal 'on the map' and could be instrumental in earning foreign currency necessary for the development of the country. With this in mind, the Tourist Development Board, the Department of Tourism, the Hotel and Tourism Training Centre, the Nepal Rasta Bank (Central Bank of Nepal) and the National Planning Commission were established (Chand 2000, 66–67). The latter gives technical and financial aid to the tourist industry. In 1979, it was estimated that about 7 500 Nepalese were employed by the tourist industry (Bhooshan 1979, 87).

The Second Development Plan covered the period 1962 to 1965. In terms of tourism, the aim of this plan was to increase the total number of hotel beds in Nepal. For this purpose, the NIDC made loans available to the private sector. A feature of this plan was the formation of the National Travel Agency. For the first time, plans were also put in place to expand the tourism industry to Pokhara and Lumbini and, therefore, to increase the number of airports and airstrips. Although it cannot be stated unequivocally that Nepal's infrastructure was developed solely to accommodate the emerging ecotourism industry, it can be stated that the industry opened the way for tourists to visit the country. In the short term, these investments paid off – in the 1964/1965 fiscal year, earnings from tourism reached a total of US\$ 214 000. This total exceeded the total amount allocated for tourism and commerce combined in the First Development Plan (Chand 2000, 70–71). The rapid development of the country's infrastructure and rural development were some of the goals of the Third Development Plan (1965–1966 to 1969–1970), with agriculture and rural development being allocated 21 per cent of the budget and infrastructure development and power 50 per cent (Bhooshan 1979, 64). In the Fourth

Development Plan (1970–1975), the emphasis was on tourism as an ‘integral’ development sector. During this period, tourism was promoted by means of programmes developed by the Department of Tourism and those undertaken within the Master Plan (for tourism). The Master Plan basically anticipated the development of a favourable environment for tourism development by bringing, for instance, the monuments of historical significance to the notice of tourists, by promoting cultural exhibitions and by developing parks, lakes and safaris (Chand 2000, 72–73). The development of the air transport sector also boosted tourism (Chand 2000, 71–75). Nepal’s rich cultural heritage soon began luring tourists to the country (Chand 2000, 77). One of the goals of the Fourth Plan was to segregate tourism into five components, namely, sightseeing tourism, trekking tourism, recreational tourism, international pilgrimage and a ‘Nepal brand of tourism’ (for the locals) (Chand 2000, 73). In this way, ecotourism was able to take its rightful place in Nepal’s tourism industry. The Sixth Plan included a ‘Tourism Master Plan – Second Phase’. The plan focused on the Himalayan Region Mountaineering Development Project, research and study activities related to the tourist industry, and the Resort Area Development Project. Other approved projects included the construction and operation of a cable car at Shivapure, the development of the Remote Area Tourism Development Project and the establishment of a tourism directorate (Chand 2000, 80–81).

4.3 Development of roads, tracks and hiking trails

Prior to the First Development Plan, Nepal had 625 kilometres of all weather and fair weather roads, 80 kilometres of narrow gauge railway lines and 24 kilometres of ropeway (Bhooshan 1979, 83). In addition, there were several traditional mule and foot trails. By 1979, the total distance of roads, including all weather and fair weather roads, totalled about 3 000 kilometres (Bhooshan 1979, 83–84). When one looks at a map of Nepal, one sees that the largest concentration of roads is in the southern region of the country, that is, the less mountainous areas (Kingdom of Nepal 2006d, 1). Many roads in the south connect Nepal with India. A number of major and minor roads also connect Nepal to the Peoples’ Republic of China (China) – primarily to the autonomous region of Tibet. Of these, the Friendship Highway is the most significant (Kingdom of Nepal sa (a)). Many of the tourists who enter Nepal over land come via these two countries. Short-sighted priorities and investment in a few prestigious projects, however, handicapped the development of the transportation system. More jeep and mule tracks, foot trails and suspension bridges would have served the people better, as most Nepalese are dependent on their feet and animals for transportation (Bhooshan 1979, 83–84). This fact is borne out by research done as far back as 1959. When asked whether they wanted schools, health posts or roads, the Nepalese opted for bridges. This is still the case today. Nepal is not divided by mountains, but by its rivers. No other development project can, with such little money and in such a short period of time, directly affect so many people. Improved accessibility opens up remote valleys

and villages, and makes it much easier for inhabitants to get produce to the market; it also reduces the price of commodities imported from outside the country and makes it easier to get the sick to hospitals (*Nepali Times* 2006). From the Fourth Development Plan onwards, however, priorities changed slightly. A twenty-year highway plan was prepared and priority was given to existing projects. Attention was also paid to the construction of local roads, mule tracks, foot paths and suspension bridges with the aid of the local people (Bhooshan 1979, 83–84). The construction of the 190 kilometre Tribhuvan Rajpath (highway) with the aid of India should be seen as the main vein of Nepal's national economy, as it led to economic decentralisation (Chand 2000, 39). Presently, the capital Kathmandu is connected by road to most of the main centres and bigger towns. The more northern parts depend on animal, human and air transport to move goods (Kingdom of Nepal 2006d, 1).

4.4 King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation

In his definition of policy, Cloete (1991, 80) asserts that to execute public policy, a specific public institution has to be established and functionaries appointed to reach specific goals. The sincerity of the authorities to become involved in sustainable ecotourism is not only borne out by the steps already mentioned, but also by the establishment of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC). The Royal Family and other Governmental officials play key decisive roles in achieving the goals of the institution (Shahia and Smith 2005, 518). The KMTNC is a non-profit-making, non-governmental institution and its activities focus on four conservation areas. The Trust is presently involved in the Biodiversity Centre and the Central Zoo in Kathmandu (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005, 1).

The mission statement of the KMTNC is to promote, manage and conserve nature in all its diversity in Nepal. It aims to always ensure a balance between human needs and the environment so as to guarantee long-term sustainability; it also seeks maximum community participation so that the local people are recognised as both principal actors and beneficiaries. There should always be an economic link between environmental and ethical factors in conservation activities. Operations should be based on sound economic principles and quality should be a focus area for all activities. (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005,6). The main activities of the KMTNC in these conservation programmes are focused on human development and empowerment, the protection of the natural environment by the local population, and the protection of scarce animals such as rhinoceros, swamp deer and the (snow) leopard. The main source of research is the Biodiversity Conservation Centre (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005, 2–5).

Since 1986, the KMTNC has adopted a policy in protected area management whereby the local people of a region are not relocated for the sake of protecting biodiversity, but rather are made responsible for the conservation of all natural

resources within their areas of jurisdiction. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) adopted this principle and has proved that conservation and development can be mutually beneficial in terms of meeting both environmental concerns and the basic local needs of the population (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005, 2).

The goal of the ACAP is to achieve a sustained balance between nature conservation and socioeconomic improvement in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), while the objectives are to conserve its natural resources for the benefit of the present and future generations, bring sustainable social and economic development to the local population, and to develop tourism in such a way that it will have a minimum negative impact on the natural, socio-cultural and economic environment. It follows the philosophy of maximum community participation and sustainability, and facilitates the involvement of the local people in all aspects of conservation and development. At Manang, a Buddhist centre, for instance, the emphasis is on the management of controlled tourism (so as to not flood the area with tourists) on a sustainable basis and to promote heritage conservation. Community development programmes also play a pivotal role (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005, 1).

The ultimate goal of the KMTNC is that the ACAP be managed by the local people with minimal intervention from the Government and other institutions. The legal framework (policy) for the ACAP is provided for by the Conservation Area Management Regulations (CAMR), 2053 B.S. Under the auspices of the CAMR, the Conservation Area Management Committee (CAMC) is instituted in each village as a development committee. The latter is tasked with the responsibility of managing, utilising and protecting all the natural resources within its own area of jurisdiction (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 2005, 1). A practical manifestation of this can be gathered from the following example. Decades ago, traditional management of the forests maintained a balance between cutting and growth, but this successful system was disrupted by the 'nationalisation' of all the forest lands by the Government of Nepal. The result was that the villagers no longer cared. In theory, the police, who were not locals, monitored the cutting of the forests on behalf of the Government of Nepal. In practice, however, the scattered police force could not possibly control the exploitation of the forests and this system was abandoned in favour of the former successful system (Stevenson 1999, 151–152).

To assist visitors, local tourism management subcommittees were established which determine the prices of lodging and menus. Activities such as hunting, fishing, scientific specimen collection, mountain biking and documentary filming are controlled. Visitors are expected to conserve the forests, prevent pollution, protect wildlife and respect the customs and culture of the local population (Kingdom of Nepal 2003). Women, for example, who wear shorts in Nepal are frowned upon – although this is not against the law, it is regarded as culturally insensitive. The

KMTNC is involved in many training programmes in the tourist industry which prepare the local inhabitants for a career in tourism (e.g. courses in lodge management) (Stevenson 1999, 89).

4.5 Number of ecotourists visiting Nepal

The success of these measures should be measured by the number of tourists who visited Nepal in the past. A problem with calculating the number of tourists is that there is an open border policy between Nepal, China and India. For this reason, no statistics are available on the number of tourists entering Nepal from these countries through the land borders posts (Kingdom of Nepal 2002, 2). Annexure A gives general statistics showing the number of tourists who visited Nepal in the past. The statistics are, however, very fragmented. In some instances, only percentages of increases or decreases in the number of tourists are given. In other instances, the amount of money spent by the tourists is given.

Annexure A

STATISTICS: TOURISTS VISITING NEPAL

Month and/or year	Number of tourists	Foreign currency earned	Source
1959	3 397		Chand (2000, 71–75)
1962	6 179		Chand (2000, 74)
1966	12 000		Lall and Moddie (1981, 273)
1970	45 970		Chand (2000, 74)
1969/70		US\$ 1.3 million	Chand (2000, 71–75)
1974		US\$ 7 753 million	Lall and Moddie (1981, 273)
1975	82 440 92 440 plus 17 881 from India	US\$ 9 692 million	Chand (2000, 71–75) Lall and Moddie (1981, 273)
1975/76		US\$ 15.12 million	Chand (2000, 71–75)
1977	129 329		Chand (2000, 77)
1996	393 613		Chand (2000, 109)
1997	421 857		Chand (2000, 109)

Month and/or year	Number of tourists	Foreign currency earned	Source
*Jan 2003	16 053		Chinese market brings more hope (www.tripsnepal.com – accessed 11 October 2005)
*Feb 2003	9 823		Tourist arrivals up by 44% in February 2004 (www.tripsnepal.com – accessed on 11 October 2005)
*Jan 2004	22 552		Chinese market brings more hope (www.tripsnepal.com – accessed on 11 October 2005)
*Feb 2004	14 145		Tourist arrivals up by 44% in February 2004 (www.tripsnepal.com – accessed on 11 October 2005)
*May 2005	20 571		Nepal Tourism Board (www.welcomenepal.com — accessed on 4 July 2006)
*May 2006	18 550		Nepal Tourism Board (www.welcomenepal.com – accessed on 4 July 2006)

* Indicates arrivals by air at Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu, Nepal

The increase in the number of tourist cannot merely be attributed to institutional arrangements; rather, cognisance should be taken of the successful marketing strategy implemented by those involved in the tourist industry, the gradual recovery of the Asian economy and the additional infrastructure being built by the private entrepreneurs in the tourist sector (e.g. increase in the number of hotels) (Chand 2000, 109–110).

4.6 Impact of the steps taken by the Government of Nepal

During a visit to Nepal in April 2006 to get inputs from those involved in ecotourism (i.e. how they experienced the steps taken by the Government of Nepal to encourage ecotourism), it became clear that some Nepalese support the

Government, while others are critical of the Government. Interviews were held with civil servants, employees of trekking companies, hotel and guesthouse owners, and residents. It must be mentioned that the country faced strikes and road closures during the period of the writer's visit. This resulted in many civil servants, especially in the rural areas, not being at work.

In response to a question about the construction of roads by the authorities in support of sustainable ecotourism, the majority of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the roads being built. The majority of the respondents also felt that there was a real need for more and better foot paths, especially in the mountainous areas; some, however, indicated that they wanted more and better gravel roads. The majority of the respondents also either definitely supported or supported to a certain extent the construction of the road being built by the Chinese from the border of Tibet to the border of India through the Kali Gandaki valley. The majority of the respondents also agreed that the construction of airports, airfields, landing strips and heliports by the authorities in support of sustainable ecotourism was satisfactory, although some indicated that they would like to see more heliports, landing strips and airports being constructed especially in the mountainous regions.

In response to the question of which factors impede negatively on the expansion of sustainable ecotourism, the majority of the respondents mentioned the political situation, the road closures and the forced closure of businesses due to threats by the Maoist group. They indicated that they would like to see the King and the political parties come to an agreement on the normalisation of the political situation so as to bring about a democracy and improve the economy. They also stressed that they would like the Parliament to be reinstated. Others stated that relations with neighbouring countries should be improved.

In addition to this, some identified insufficient infrastructure and legislation to control the ecotourist industry. The majority of the respondents stated that the regulation of accommodation and food prices by the authorities are impediments to the development of a sustainable ecotourism industry. The majority of the respondents also agreed that free enterprise should be given a free hand to develop the ecotourism industry with a minimum of Government intervention. The majority of the respondents indicated that the steps taken by the authorities and the private sector in training those involved in ecotourism were sufficient. In response to the statement that the KMTNC positively impacts on the development of ecotourism, an equal number agreed and disagreed with the statement. The majority of the respondents supported the statement that the conservation area management committees play a positive role in the development of ecotourism. All of the respondents agreed that the poor are empowered to participate in the development of the ecotourism industry. The writer received a variety of answers to the question on what additional steps could be taken by the authorities to encourage sustainable ecotourism. Some respondents felt that more firewood and stock should be provided, that the entry fees to the ACA should be lowered, the political situation should be normalised as soon as possible, prospective tourists should be encouraged by 'word

and deed' to visit the country, that more funds should be provided to develop the ecotourist industry and that new places to visit should be introduced. Others felt that the infrastructure should be modernised and more jobs created in the ecotourist industry. It was also stated that the security of tourists and ecotourists should be a priority.

The question was also raised of what those from the private sector involved in ecotourism could do to develop the industry. This question resulted in useful suggestions. Some of the suggestions were that kerosene, rather than wood (to protect the forests), should be used in the kitchens of hotels and inns; that the training of staff should be a priority; that refuse should be deposited in proper landfills and not be discarded everywhere; and that attention should be given to health matters and sanitation. Others felt that more trees should be planted to supply firewood, that no hunting should be allowed and that steps should be taken to protect the local culture against outside influences. Another opinion expressed was that the private sector and the Government should cooperate in the field of turning out well-qualified staff for the ecotourism industry.

5. FUTURE OF ECOTOURISM IN NEPAL

Nepal's Himalayas are visited by large numbers of ecotourists each year. Although the gift of nature is unlikely to vanish or to be completely destroyed overnight, Nepal's fragile ecosystem will be in grave danger if it is not attended to seriously – this will have serious consequences for the country (Chand 2000, 249.) Although Nepal has plenty of water, the country's ability to generate hydro-electric power is limited and large parts of the country, including the capital city Kathmandu, experience water shortages. This situation is blamed on petty politics.

There are three schools of thought relating to the environmental destruction in the country. Supporters of the first school of thought blame the country's environmental problems on rapid population growth, particularly in the hills. Supporters of the second group blame the introduction of new technologies and believe that these advances have unsettled the ecological balance. Supporters of the third school blame the rapid and unplanned growth of ecotourism for the environmental degradation (Chand 2000, 249-250). Although tourism has contributed to the country's environmental problems, it cannot be blamed for the problem.

The problem could, however, be addressed by controlling the opening of new ecotourist venues in sensitive areas. In this regard, ecotourism should be looked at as that sector in the economy which is instrumental in opening access to new and virgin natural regions with the aim of conserving the natural vegetation and its inhabitants, while also considering the welfare and wellbeing of the local residents. The natural resources should be safeguarded, but should also be utilised productively (Chand 2000, 250–251).

A number of steps have been suggested to protect the environment. Among these are a proper inventory of the fauna and flora, the encouragement of rural ecotourism

as opposed to the building of ostentatious resorts and the incorporation of ecofriendly technologies. After all, ecotourism in simple terms mean developing tourism without interfering with the natural habitat (Chand 2000, 251–255).

Another factor to consider is that Nepal's deteriorating environment is being widely publicised in the global tourism market. Its forests declined from 7 million hectares in the 1960s to 5 million hectares in 2000. Some of the causes include the population explosion, the carpet industry which is contaminating water supplies at an alarming rate, vehicles which are contributing to the poor air quality, and the lack of a permanent dumping ground for waste disposal which means that litter is disposed of everywhere. Even the trekking routes are filthy. The well-known Sagarmatha Trail (Everest Trail) has been condemned by Sir Edmund Hillary as a garbage trail. This does not mean, however, that the trail should be closed down and that nothing should be done to address the problem. The trekkers contribute their fair share to the problem. The occasional cleanup is not going to attract those tourists who have already visited Nepal and have already seen the mess (Chand 2000, 114–118). The situation on the Everest Trail should be seen in perspective. The number of trekkers rose from zero to 17 000 between 1960 and 1996. There were almost 2 000 ascents of Mount Everest in 2003 alone (Mann 2005, 1–2).

Four out of five local households derive some income from ecotourism. Approximately 12 percent of the trail network is degraded and it is an estimated 17 tons of rubbish per kilometre of trail. About a quarter of the firewood used is due to ecotourism – the average tourist in Nepal uses six kilograms of firewood per day (Mann 2005, 1–2). The question should be asked: How much longer can the environment survive this impact?

Various unforeseen and tragic national and international events during 2000 and 2001 were also behind the drop in the number of visitors to Nepal. Of these were the activities of the Maoist movement and the fact that many people are now afraid of flying since the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. Other elements include the palace murders in the capital city of Kathmandu in 1991, the Nepalese bandits and the hijacking of an Air India airliner (Kingdom of Nepal 2002, 1-3). Lastly, although Nepal was not directly involved, the devastating tsunami and earthquakes of 2004 that hit South East Asian countries also impacted on tourism in Nepal (Pradhan 2005, 2). As for the Maoists, during a recent visit to Nepal by the writer, the trekking company who arranged the tour had to pay 1 200 Nepalese rupees as a form of 'war tax'. This can be regarded as an additional duty in order to trek freely and safely in the country. It is necessary to get a receipt for such payments in order to avoid paying again if other Maoists units are met on the way. These incidents contributed to a sharp decline of 40 percent in the number of tourists to the country.

One fact emerges from this article and that is that the problems encountered in the management of the ecosystem are of a social nature and centre around humankind's

impact on the natural balance. Unless ways are found to influence the behaviour of the population in the hills, all hopes of saving the rapidly deteriorating ecosystem will come to nothing. (Lall and Moddie 1981, 371).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Nepal spent much time planning and producing its different development plans. The question must, however, now be asked whether they were successful or not? The Master Plan delineated the vision, but the proposed agenda could not be expedited or the anticipated goals realised. The reasons for this include bureaucratic inefficiency and a lack of professionalism. As was the usual fate of most of the (development) plans in Nepal, the authorities concerned made no attempt to deliberate with, and seek the opinions of, those involved in the plans and programmes prescribed in the Master Plan. The Plan was never discussed with the people involved in the day-to-day execution thereof. The authorities seemed to have either kept it as a classified document not to be shared with anyone or simply disregarded it as unimportant.

The Master Plan did visualise the prospect of diversifying the tourism industry in terms of regions in the country and sectors within the tourist industry. Attempts were made to involve the private sector in the planning process. Most of the plans in Nepal, especially during the period of the First Plan, lacked effective machinery to expedite them. There were many plans and proposals to promote tourism in Nepal in the past. However, there was a lack of effective delivery mechanisms which could properly bring them into operation. This was also the fate of the Master Plan (Chand 2000, 81).

It is essential to control the number of visitors to any particular area to protect the natural environment and to combat erosion. This will also prevent shortages of food from occurring. Ecotourists will not, however, forfeit their luxury of a hot shower after a day's trekking in the mountains. Everything should be done to cater for them in the most conservation-friendly method possible.

The research project in Nepal has emphasised the need to employ people with a reasonable knowledge of at least English to communicate with the ecotourists at airports, hotels, guest houses and on the treks. The safety of the ecotourists should be of paramount importance. Political instability, strikes and road closures will permanently scare ecotourists away from visiting a particular country, as will crime. Political instability in Nepal has led to a decline of 40 percent in the number of visitors, especially trekkers and mountaineers. This, in turn, has led to the sorry sight of closed hotels and guest houses, the loss of job opportunities and the waste of large capital investments.

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