

Concept of Ecotourism

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An old Asian saying aptly warns: “Tourism is like fire; you can either use it to cook your food or burn your house down.” This is relevant in the tourism–environment discourse because they are intricately interlinked. Many studies warn us about the negative impact of tourism on the environment while others indicate win-win possibilities. The proponents of the latter propose tourism policies as a mechanism for improving livelihoods and enhancing environmental conservation. Such aspirations are evident in the concepts of sustainable tourism, ecotourism and community-based tourism.

Bhutan faces challenges in sustaining high economic growth and improving living standards while protecting its rich natural resources. Complex challenges of ecosystem degradation, biodiversity losses, and climate change need to be addressed to avoid higher economic and human costs, and ecotourism is a green solution to these problems. On the other hand, if not carefully planned or executed, tourism can destroy the very environment on which it primarily depends. Currently, the ecotourism sector in Bhutan is underdeveloped. Despite nature being one of the two main attractions for tourists coming to Bhutan (the other being culture), nature-based tourism¹ accounts for only about 12 percent of tourism activities.

This article discusses examples where tourism has positively or negatively affected environment and local livelihoods including attracting investments. This then connects to UNDP’s global work on sustainable tourism and a new national ecotourism initiative jointly proposed with the government.

Tourism is a Fire that Burns the House Down and a Bad Master for the Environment

While tourism depends on the quality of the environment, increased tourism activities can damage the environment it depends on. Environmental damage occurs when visitation levels are higher than the environment’s capacity to manage its use, either through increased visitation or creation of infrastructure. In other words, when the carrying capacity of an environment is exceeded, it exerts increased pressures on natural resources

¹Bhutan Tourism Monitor includes trekking, adventure tourism, birding, flora and fauna tours as sources of nature-based tourism.

and the scenic beauty. For example, the famous Boracay island of the Philippines and Maya Bay of Thailand recently succumbed to the toll of heavy annual tourism. Both were closed to visitors after thousands of visitors put increased pressures on the coastal environment and marine life. The former was re-opened recently after its rehabilitation, and the latter is still recovering.

Increasing tourists means overuse of water and increasing pressures on water availability through intensive use by accommodation, swimming pools, laundries, etc. For towns in Bhutan already facing localised water shortages, it is only evident that increasing tourist numbers will exacerbate water scarcity. We do not have to go far for such examples. In 2018, a hill station in India faced acute water shortages, leaving home taps dry for a week. During that time, hotels had signs that read: “We are in a water crisis; don’t come to Shimla”.

Bhutan is a veritable trekking destination. With increasing trekking intensity and numbers each year, there are environmental problems. Over 3,500 tourists trek on 23 trekking routes annually in the country, including the popular Jomolhari base camp and the Druk Path. These tourists generate considerable amount of waste, as they carry mostly packaged foods and drinks. Concerned agencies and volunteer groups have to carry out regular cleaning campaigns along the routes. Last year, a cleaning group collected over 80 sacks of litter at one time from the Druk Path alone.

In addition, transport animals (yaks and horses) are used with the ratio of tourist to transport animals increasing to as high as 1: 6² for long treks, trampling vegetation and soil along their way. The lessons of heavy environmental damage are visible not very far from here. The majestic and sacred Mount Everest is now turned into a dumping ground and is losing its mountaineering charm.

For a biodiversity-rich country like Bhutan, increased visitation increases pressures on biodiversity through trampling of vegetation and soil and cutting of trees and shrubs near campsites. Trekking usually occurs at higher altitudes, where plant growth is slower, putting more pressures on plant vigour. Trekking groups can also come into conflict with local users of natural resources and its biodiversity on which highlanders depend. Although not evident or common in Bhutan now, increased tourism can also result in

²Ecotourism as a mechanism for sustainable development, Rinzin et.al (2007)

poaching of wildlife or high-value plants. For example, there is a proposal to close Indonesia's popular Komodo island in 2020 because of wildlife smuggling which has resulted in the serious decline of its Komodo dragons.

Pollution is another problem of mass tourism. Noise pollution in natural areas can disturb the wildlife, particularly birds. Often, out of place tourism structures in the middle of natural settings -- those that do not blend with local structures and landscape -- can clash with and spoil the beauty of a place, an example of aesthetic pollution. It is only matter of time when Bhutan's authentic destination, the picturesque Phobjikha valley, may succumb to increased sewage and wastewater pollution. The sprawling of hotels in the valley without proper standards means its sewage and wastewater are draining into the valley, altering its wetland ecosystems on which the Black-necked cranes roost. It may be an irony that the hotels that attract tourists to the wetlands may make them disappear.

Mexico's Cancun city is a classic example that Phobjikha can learn from, where increased tourist activities in the last four decades have eroded its beaches. The Independent once called it "a beach holiday without a beach"³ as the city was battling with the environmental issue. Wildlife feeding is increasingly becoming common along Bhutanese highways, with increasing tourist and other traffic. There are many adverse impacts of wildlife feeding, including disease transmission to wildlife.

At the global level, increasing tourism is also linked to greater greenhouse gas emissions from land, water and air transportation, and accommodation. Recent studies confirmed that global tourism accounts for about eight percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, climate change will also have an impact on the tourism industry, with many destinations, such as coastal areas and high mountains, vulnerable to climate change. Carbon neutral tourism is, however, possible, with several options that the tourism industry could apply to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the World Travel and Tourism Council has pledged carbon neutrality by measuring its greenhouse gas emissions and taking measures to reduce or offset them. At the recent Startup Weekend Competition held in Thimphu, the Carbon Neutral Bhutan idea bagged the winning prize. Their idea was based on how tourism can help achieve Bhutan's carbon neutrality pledge.

³The Independent, 2010. The battle for the beaches of Cancun

Tourism can be a Good Servant to the Environment and Cook Food for Local Communities

If carefully planned, tourism can have a significant positive impact on the environment. Revenue generation from tourism has directly benefited environmental conservation in many ways. Most notably, park fees, concessionaries, and other forms of user fees make direct contributions to government revenue and environmental conservation efforts. The Galapagos National Park of Ecuador charges an entry fee of USD 100 (there were over 275,800 tourists in 2018), one of the highest, and these funds are used to finance the conservation of biodiversity and social services in the island. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, wildlife viewing generated USD 120 billion last year, significantly greater than wildlife trade.

The Bwindi National Park in Rwanda attracts around 20,000 tourists annually and its mountain gorilla treks cost USD 600 ⁴per permit, with super luxury tours rising as high as USD 4,000 to USD 6,000 per person. Although wildlife viewing is not feasible in Bhutan, high-end birding can be promoted. Bhutan also has the golden mahseer, which is considered a rare and the most valued game fish which can attract high-value angling tourism. Yeti-tourism can be another major nature-based expedition in Bhutan.

Tourism is an important component in creating and financing many protected areas, including incentives for the growth of private parks and community wildlife conservancies, particularly in Africa. In these natural areas, tourism also includes informative tours on wildlife and ecology by skilled naturalist guides and park rangers. Costa Rica is a very good example, where tourism has helped raise environmental awareness for both tourists and the locals. Costa Rican schools and Universities offer environmental and tourism courses, which see an increased visitation by locals to national parks and natural reserves.

Tourism brings people closer to nature, revealing the true value of the environment, which brings positive human behaviour towards the environment. Based on the lessons from negative impact of tourism on the environment, many new laws and regulations have been enacted to ensure the preservation of natural areas, and tourism is the main driver for

⁴Set to increase to USD 700 per permit from July 2020 as per web sources.

many of these. Costa Rica boasts that tourism is the factor that helps their tropical forests remain intact today. New regulations have protected many rainforests and coastal areas.

Tourism can also cook food for rural communities while protecting the environment. Tourism generates significant revenue for the local communities through both formal and informal employment. Tourism services and infrastructure, including recreation, create local employment opportunities and increasing tourist expectations create new businesses and procurement opportunities for local communities. When an area is exposed to heavy tourist traffic, the local communities may also benefit from improved services in the areas, such as transportation and medical facilities.

Concepts of Ecotourism and Bhutan's Experiences

Ecotourism is a tool that can make tourism a good servant–fire for positive impact on the environment and at the same time cook food for local communities. The fruition of ecotourism first introduced in early 1980s is often attributed to the tourist's conscious link to environment and communities -- it evolved from early nature tourism to the need to include consideration of local host communities and their culture.

There is a plethora of definitions and variance of ecotourism today. The International Ecotourism Society in 1990 defined ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”. The International Union for Conservation of Nature elaborates that ecotourism is “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past, and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples”.

There are several good examples of ecotourism and lessons to draw for Bhutan⁵. Costa Rica is often considered ecotourism's poster child, given the integration of ecotourism principles in the wider tourism market. Its astounding national parks attract most international tourists today. Similar to Bhutan, tourism is the most important foreign exchange earner and development pillar for Tanzania. In recent decades, the country is strongly

⁵Martha Honey's Ecotourism and sustainable development – Who owns paradise, 2008 provides a good overview of ecotourism practices around the world.

pursuing ecotourism, including nature-based travel and local communities' engagement in the tourism industry. Tourism revenues also fund the national parks through increasing park fees to discourage overcrowding. Kenya, which is a pioneer in wildlife and community-based tourism in Africa, provides several lessons and good practices for many others. However, greenwashing is not uncommon in ecotourism. Many travel industries tend to use ecotourism for mere greening of conventional mass tourism today.

While the concept of ecotourism burgeoned only in 1980s, Bhutan's onset of tourism based on "high-value low volume" policy in 1970s was already in line with the principles of ecotourism. This was apparently premised on the principles of Gross National Happiness, as indicated by a recent national definition based on earlier definitions⁶. It defines ecotourism as "high-value low impact" travel that supports the protection of natural and cultural heritage, provides positive and enriching experiences for visitors and hosts, assures tangible benefits to local people, and contributes to the Gross National Happiness⁷.

Bhutan's Ninth Five-Year Plan identified tourism as a priority economic sector and emphasised the development and promotion of sustainable tourism in the country for the protection and integration of Bhutan's unique culture and natural resources. As a new approach to tourism for improving services, promotion of seasonal and regional balanced development, and diversification of products for tourists, and increasing the involvement of local communities and benefit-sharing, the Department of Tourism⁸ conducted a pilot study to test the feasibility of developing community tourism.

In 2004, the pilot public-private partnership approach project, the first of its kind, was implemented in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (JSWNP) in the central part of Bhutan. The project covered 209 households with 1595 people from six villages, and accumulated USD 149,240 as revenue for the government and USD 21,357 for the communities. The model was subsequently replicated in Merak-Sakteng in 2011. Deemed as an exclusive destination then, followed by adequate investments and rigorous marketing, the Merak-Sakteng Trek received less than four percent of the total trekkers in the country in its first few years of operations.

⁶Ecotourism was earlier defined by Department of Tourism in 2001 and 2005)

⁷Department of Forests and Park Services, 2012)

⁸Currently Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB)

In 2011, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature initiated an ecotourism project in Phobjikha, the largest wetland in the country. The ecotourism activities in the valley are planned for livelihood development of communities, towards supporting wetland conservation for protecting the habitat of the Black-necked cranes. However, other commercial hotels are now sprawling in the valley, adding pressure to the valley.

Two recent ecotourism initiatives -- the CBST in Haa and My Gakidh Village in Punakha -- are showing early signs of successes, but not without challenges. Nature tours, which were conventionally based on trekking, are now diversifying to include other experiences with nature. There are approximately 23 approved trek routes in the country, which are basically traditional routes that connect rural settlements. Recently, several nature-based activities have been introduced, including bird watching, rafting, botany, mountain biking, butterfly, and other wildlife tours. A few festivals too have been developed to specifically promote tourism, with the objective of encouraging community benefits. These festivals include the Takin festival, Nomads festival, Rhododendron Festival, Mountain Festival, Bird Festival, Mushroom Festival, and Haa summer festival.

Despite efforts by the government, ecotourism has remained in a pilot phase for the last 15 years, with only a few success stories, and is still not scaled up to harness its full potential. There are limited tourism facilities available in protected and natural areas across the country, a lack of diversified tourism products and activities, and limited involvement of rural Bhutanese in the tourism value chain. Compounding these challenges, there are few opportunities for high-value private investment and public-private partnerships in tourism in protected areas, and areas rich in natural and cultural attractions. Furthermore, there is limited and fragmented application of sustainable tourism practices within the private sector, in part due to a lack of awareness, skills, and equipment.

A New Era of Ecotourism for Bhutan – Bhutan’s Golden Goose?

The government has identified tourism as a flagship programme in its 12th Five-year Plan with significant investments planned for tourism growth in the country. If not planned carefully, it is likely that Bhutan will find it difficult to invest adequately in pre-empting the adverse impacts on its environment of expanding tourism.

Bhutan's tourism is dominated by its cultural attractions (*tshechus*, *dzongs*, monasteries, etc.) which account for about 90 percent of the tourists. This indicates that the ecotourism and nature-based tourism are yet to be explored. Given the intact natural landscape and the significant global value of Bhutanese biodiversity, there is tremendous scope for ecotourism to provide long-term solutions for sustaining the protected areas, biodiversity, and community livelihood development actions. This provides a mutual opportunity for generating much-needed environmental financing, as well as a mechanism to engage communities in environmental conservation. Doing so will also support the realisation of Bhutan's development goals and GNH.

Tourism today is one of the most dynamic and largest economic sectors in this modern age. Recognising its global impact, it forms an integrated part of the Sustainable Development Goals for Agenda 2030, adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2016. Subsequently, the United Nations declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, to advance the contributions of the tourism sector to reaching the SDGs, including on climate change (SDG 13), biodiversity (SDG 15), eliminating poverty (SDG 1), and generating decent work (SDG 8).

This year, the Royal Government of Bhutan and its partners, including the United Nations Development Programme, are implementing a new-generation Ecotourism project. This is not to reinvent the wheel, but to get back on track, building on 15 years of ecotourism testing in Bhutan. Such an initiative is expected to unpack and implement Bhutan's ecotourism aspirations. In doing so, it will focus on national standards and safeguards to ensure environmental protection and benefiting rural livelihoods by mainstreaming environment into the tourism sector.

It will reinforce the interventions at the national level, including investing in regional circuits through improved product diversification and marketing. From economic perspectives, it will explore how ecotourism can be a "green product" based on Bhutan's natural assets, create potential for public-private partnerships through ecotourism concessions in ecologically rich areas, and encourage tourism operators towards environmental and social considerations. Initial estimates⁹ reveal that PPP concessions in Bhu-

⁹Preliminary estimates using international models and local rates and higher range of investments and PPP characteristics

tan's parks and natural areas can generate a capital investment of USD150 million (M), cumulative PPP fees of USD 5.2 M per year. If unleashed to its full potential, the impact on the local economy is estimated at 1,400 new jobs, with USD19.8 M in wages and benefits to staff annually, and local procurement value of USD3.3 M per year.

Bhutan's tourism policy provides a perfect platform to pursue and promote ecotourism. Bhutan has a great potential to build on its current strengths and lessons to create exemplary ecotourism projects, given the national priority to protect environmental and cultural heritage while promoting equitable socio-economic development through GNH. However, existing gaps and challenges need to be addressed to steer ecotourism development in the right direction.

Ecotourism in Bhutan was first started to address human-wildlife conflicts by offsetting or compensating the losses for farmers, but much remains to be done to converge the two. For Bhutan's rural communities, which bear the daily brunt of strict conservation policies in human-wildlife conflict, ecotourism holds tremendous potential to improve their livelihood. Lessons on ecotourism across the globe shows that it is not unusual to confront challenges and issues in the early stages. But with 15 years of experience in the field, significant changes to the system and meaningful investments in the tourism sector can transform Bhutan into a model ecotourism and carbon-neutral destination.