

Assessing "eco" in ecotourism in Nepal

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This paper evaluates the principle of "eco" embedded in ecotourism. An officially designated ecotourism area: Ghalekhara-Sikles eco-trek of the Annapurna Conservation Area is compared with another established trekking area: Annapurna Sanctuary Trail, in terms of environmental, economic and socio-cultural costs and benefits. Research data arise from surveys and interviews with local residents and the conservation area staff, and participant observation. The study shows that ecotourism appears to have less negative impacts on the environment and the socio-culture but it does not ensure adequate economic benefits to the local people.

Keywords: ecotourism, evaluation, comparison, impacts, Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal

Ecotourism has become an extremely popular word in recent years. It is one of the fastest growing sectors of tourism and has been promoted as an alternative development opportunity for government, industry, academia and even local communities. The main reason of its popularity is the principle of "eco" imbedded in it. This is to minimise negative impacts and maximise benefits for local people and their natural environment. However, some reservations are expressed about it with the warning that it has not yet been proved to be beneficial and that it might have detrimental impacts on fragile nature and culture.

The present paper attempts to find out if ecotourism reflects "eco" by evaluating ecotourism area with compared to an established tourism place in the Annapurna Conservation Area of Nepal.

The concept

The idea of ecotourism is not new. It was manifested in the late 1960s when the term 'eco-development' was used as part of a concern for the effects of development on water quality, wildlife, forests and other aspects of the environment (Nelson, 1994, p. 248). The concept was further built up when Budowski (1976) described the symbiotic relationship between tourism and the nature conservation. The modern form of the idea was seen when the Our Common Future report was published by the World Commission on Environment in 1987 and Ceballos-Lascurain put forward the first explicit definition in the same year. Then the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism grew as more environmentally and socially

compatible forms of tourism (Nelson, 1994).

As a result of such beliefs, the prefix "eco" associated with ecosystem, ecosphere, has been combined with tourism and a suitable phrase "ecotourism" has been synthesised (Orams, 1995, p. 3). The literal meaning of "eco" is "home". So the ecotourism should also incorporate people who are residing in these areas or nearby, not just the ecosystem (Wallace and Pierce, 1996).

In the present study, three components i.e. environment, economy and socio-culture have been taken as the themes to evaluate the "eco" in ecotourism in the Annapurna Conservation Area of Nepal.

The site

The present study compares the newly established ecotourism area, the Ghalekharka-Sikles eco-trek, with a well-established area, the Annapurna Sanctuary Trail (AST) that has experienced crowding. Although the history and volume of tourists and approaches to tourism development are different, both areas are very similar in terms of geography, people, and management system. The eco-trek area was established in 1992 as a first "eco" labelled tourism area in Nepal through the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation/Annapurna Conservation Area Project (KMTNC/ACAP) (Gurung and De Coursey, 1994). The number of visitors in the eco-trek area per year is around 1000 (Ghalekharka Visitor Centre, undated). Whereas tourism in the AST area has been started for more than three decades-long before the ACAP's

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establishment and number of visitors per year is between ten to twenty-five thousand (Nyaupane, 1999).

The seven days eco-trek circuit follows river valleys, small and large villages and natural forest. Most of the visitors come as organised groups, stay in community campsites and are catered for by trekking agencies. Importantly there has been only one community lodge built along the trail. While, the AST consists of eleven days trek up to the Annapurna and Machhapuchhre base camps and has altogether 111 hotels, lodges and tea shops, and few campsites to accommodate and cater the tourists.

The difference between the tourism product of these two areas are basic management principles and practices. Principles underlying the eco-trek area are: community ownership and demand creation. The AST, by contrast is demand led and private ownership (Thakali, 1995; Ghirmi, 1997).

Methods

Area surveys and interviews (194 questionnaire interviews with local residents), managers (22 self-administered questionnaire) and participant observations were the principle methods applied for this study. The qualitative methods involved interviews with the key local residents, managers and selected tourists; and observations to see how local residents behave with tourists and the tourists' behaviour. The same set of statements for each impact theme was given to local residents and managers to choose in a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Results

Eco-trek area is compared with the established trekking area in three broad themes of ecotourism: environmental, economic and socio-cultural costs and benefits.

Environmental costs and benefits

The indicators used to evaluate the environmental costs and benefits of ecotourism with reference to the established trekking include solid waste disposal, deforestation, sanitation and water quality, impacts of tourism infrastructure development, wildlife population and behaviour, soil erosion, support for forest conservation, and environmental awareness. Local residents and managers were asked to choose a point in a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for thirteen statements. Overall, the perceived negative impacts of tourism are less marked in the eco-trek area than in the established trekking area. Among the thirteen

statements, there is a significant difference in the four statements at 0.05 probability. The P level is bonferroni corrected as larger the number of statements, higher is the chances of significance. These are solid waste disposal problems, impacts of tourism development, supports of conservation of wildlife and support of conservation of forests.

There is a significant difference in the solid waste disposal problems between the two areas, $t(204) = -3.741$, $p < 0.004$. The main reported rubbish problems are non-biodegradable rubbish such as food can, used mineral water bottles, and chocolate, biscuit, noodles and other food wraps which is more evident in the established trekking area. Mineral water bottles have been identified as a big problem as estimated 2,20,000 bottles (2 bottles x 11 days x 10,000 tourists) are used in a year in the established trekking area, only a few of which are used by local residents as kerosene and oil container. By contrast, the problem of mineral water bottles has not yet been faced by the eco-trek as the number of tourists is less than ten per cent of the established trekking area. The other problem in the latter is rubbishing of public campsites and in base camps whereas the problem is limited only to the campsites in the eco-trek. In both the sites, Nepali staff those accompanying tourist groups make rubbish.

There is also significant difference in the impacts of tourism infrastructure development into the local landscape in between the two areas, $t(152) = -6.56$, $p < 0.004$. Recently built reinforced concrete buildings for hotels and lodges are only the reported development that does not fit into the landscape in the established trekking area. The buildings are constructed without the approval of the ACAP. The problem has not been faced in the eco-trek area as they do not have any private hotels and all community lodges are designed and constructed to fit in with the local nature and traditional design.

The other negative impacts such as deforestation, deterioration of sanitation and water quality, impacts on wildlife population and behaviour, soil erosion are not statistically different but the mean is consistently higher in the established trekking area than in the eco-trek. Hence, it is argued that the eco-trek area has not yet faced the negative environmental impacts.

However, there are less positive environmental impacts of tourism in the eco-trek than in the established trekking area. The significant difference occurs in the support of conservation of wildlife, $t(180) = 3.258$, $p < 0.004$ and forests, $t(180) = 3.798$, $p < 0.004$. The support for conservation of wildlife and forest is higher in the established trekking area

than in the eco-trek area. The other positive impacts include increasing support for conservation among local people, use of alternative energy instead of firewood, improving sanitation and solid waste disposal problem and increasing environmental awareness which is consistently higher in the established trekking area than in the eco-trek area although there is no significant difference statistically. The main reason for higher support is that the ACAP has initiated various programmes in the established trekking area since its inception in 1986 to minimise negative impacts from tourism, whereas in the eco-trek area, the programmes has been started after the designation the eco-trek in 1992 (Nyaupane, 1999).

Economic costs and benefits

The indicators used to evaluate the economic costs and benefits include inflation, unequal income distribution, additional costs to bear, seasonality, jobs for local people, income generation by selling local products, financial support for conservation and infrastructure development. Overall, both economic costs and benefits are fewer in the eco-trek area than in the established trekking area. Among the seventeen statements asked to evaluate these indicators, ten are found to be statistically significant. These include inflation, unequal income distribution, seasonality, additional costs, jobs for local people, tourism related trainings and financial support for conservation. Inflation in terms of goods price, labour costs, costs of land and houses are found to be very high in the established trekking area. However, the eco-trek area has not faced the problem of inflation nor the problem of unequal income distribution from tourism, unlike the established trekking area. This is due to the difference of ownership of tourists accommodation. In the eco-trek area, there are community owned campsites and lodges, whereas in the established trekking area, all the hotels and lodges are private.

There is also significant difference in the effect of seasonality, $t(117) = -3.243$, $p < .003$. The eco-trek area has not experienced problem of seasonality as there are not many people employed in the tourism related jobs. Similarly, local residents of the eco-trek area have fewer additional costs to be borne because of tourism whereas, local residents of the established trekking area reported that they have to maintain and clean the trails destroyed by donkeys.

On the contrary, the economic benefits of tourism, particularly employment generation is significantly fewer in the eco-trek area than in the established trekking area. In the eco-trek area, there are only a few local guides employed, whereas the established

trekking area has employed around 500 local people. This is related to the type of accommodation. The eco-trek area is characterised by campsites which do not employ any local people, whereas hotels, lodges, teahouses of the established trekking area employ many local residents as they own these accommodations. Financial support or conservation management is also significantly less in the eco-trek area than in the established trekking area, $t(178) = 5.421$, $p < 0.004$. The main reason for this is that both areas have the same visitor entry fees (Rs 1,000 = US\$ 15) and large number of visitors (more than 10,000 per year) visit established trekking area compared to the eco-trek area (around 1,000) (Nyaupane, Devlin and Simmons, 1998).

Socio-cultural costs and benefits

The indicators used to evaluate socio-cultural costs and benefits include negative effects on social life, increasing crime, negative effects on local architecture, support for local arts, crafts and cultural activities, enriched educational and cultural experiences for local people, enhanced quality of life, and local involvement and empowerment in planning, development and decision making. Among these, all the socio-cultural negative impacts and a positive impact, support of local arts, crafts and cultural activities are found to be significantly different while comparing eco-trek with the established trek. The main social changes occurring are the imitation of tourists' behaviour, food and fashion by young generations which is more in the established trekking area than in the eco-trek area. These include having long hair and ear piercing among local boys, wearing foreign clothes, drinking beer, over-familiarity between local boys and girls and decreasing respect for older people, more in the established trekking area.

Despite the fewer negative impacts, the positive impacts are not ensured in the eco-trek area. The latter has experienced less supports for local arts, crafts and cultural activities than in the established trekking area. The main existing arts and crafts in both areas are making wooden knife case, knitting traditional cloth made of fiber, woolen carpet and making bamboo baskets which are more supported by tourism. This is because there are more trainings available for local people and also more tourists visit the area in the established trekking area than in the eco-trek area (Nyaupane, 1999). Similarly, cultural activities are more supported in the established trekking area than in the eco-trek area. The cultural activities mostly reported are women's folk dances shown to tourists. Although the dances and songs are modified forms and imported from other parts of Nepal, local people's interest in dances and music

has increased more in the established trekking area.

Conclusion

While evaluating three components of "eco": environment, economy and socio-culture, ecotourism is found to be less harmful to the environment and local culture but is failed to provide adequate economic benefits to local residents. That is an equally important component. If the economic benefits are not derived from ecotourism, the support for ecotourism from local residents will be decreased and they will try to derive more economic benefits at the expense of wider resource management objectives. Eventually there will be no "eco" left in ecotourism. Hence, the most important implication of this finding is creating a balance between the economic benefits and environmental and social costs.

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