

Ecotourism in a Nepalese National Park

*Rudra Pd. Upadhyay**

Abstract

Ecotourism is a logical component of economic development. It is a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon. It has a tremendous role to play in the interpretation of nature and natural resources, as well as its interaction with the rural environment in the understanding of human history and the diffusion of environmental awareness knowledge. Ecotourism respects the environment and while promoting the well-being of local people. It has not to be confused with adventure sports or amusement parks etc., which in fact might have a negative impact on the environment. Eco-tourists like to go around in a 'low impact way'. Adventure tourists are not necessarily eco-tourists. However, ecotourism certainly needs a spirit of an adventure. It emerges as a phenomenon with an increasing tendency to draw the attention of many people, because it is a form of nature tourism that facilitates nature conservation maintaining natural values and improving host communities. Thus, it brings about economic benefits for the host communities and contributes to conservation activities and efforts.

Introduction

Ecotourism is a new concept. It is becoming quite popular in tourism literature and as tourism activity at present. It is also becoming popular among academics, researchers and practitioners in different parts of the world ever since the concept was introduced in the early 1980s. Ecotourism is interrelated with the overall growth of tourism in the world today. Ecotourism as a sector of tourism industry is still in its infancy, but an analysis of the market where it has made strong inroads indicate that developing countries, with their variety of physical attractions, have most of the natural qualities necessary to position ecotourism as a prime offering of their tourism industry (Hawkins; 1994)

Sustenance of tourist flow is the indicator of a nation's sustained peace, harmony and environmental balance. A nation can count on tourist economy only when tourist destinations are free from conflicts, wars, social disharmony and environmental pollution. When Nepal opened its frontiers for foreigners soon after the advent of democracy during the early 1950's it was a paradise for nature loving tourists and culture admiring scholars. Poet laureate Laxmi Prasad Devkota's Nepal as being beautiful (*Sundari*), peaceful (*shanta*) and

* Dr. Upadhyay is an Associate Professor at the Central Departments of Economics, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu

vast (*Bishal*) was on display for every visitor, scholar, explorer and mountaineer.

History tells us that it was pilgrimage quest that led Nepal to be an important destination for travelers. Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha was visited by the Indian Emperor Ashoka in 249 B.C. i.e., 2,257 years ago. It was followed by Fa-hien in 430 AD and Hiuen Tsiang in 636 AD. Similarly the Japanese Buddhist scholar Ekai Kawaguchi visited Nepal during late 19th century (1899 AD).

Pilgrimage history of Hindus and Buddhists in the Himalaya goes back to antiquity. Explorers for plants, animals, minerals and mountains have been visiting Nepal since the last two centuries. However, tourism in the modern sense took its first flight ever since Mt. Annapurna and Mt. Everest were climbed in 1950 and 1953 respectively. Karna Shakya, an enthusiast in tourism development in Nepal identifies six epochs in modern tourism industry. The first period (1950s) was marked as diplomatic tourism when Nepal threw its open arm to diplomatic relation to the rest of the world. It was soon followed by a crowd of European and American youngsters who wanted to escape from western lifestyle and who wanted to experience peace through instant means such as taking soft drugs like marijuana. That was popularly called Hippie Tourism in the 1960s. The next decade (1970) was that of adventure tourist with more of mountaineering, whitewater rafting, rock climbing, canoeing and so on. This was followed by trekking tourism in the 1980s and the advent of ecotourism in the 1990s. The start of the 21st century has been termed as the age of Endemic tourism. Political instability and unrest in the streets with unprecedented strikes and *bandhs* has seriously jeopardized tourism. Nepal's tourism industry which has had a long and glorious history may not have a bright future if peace is not restored and security is not guaranteed. Issues like environmental conservation and cultural preservation will also account for tourism promotion in the coming decades (Grandon, 2007).

The Term Eco-tourism

A Greek word "*Oikos*" was the sources for Ernst Haeckel to coin the term Ecology (*Oikos*= house; *logos*=study) in 1869 AD. *Oikos* meant a house i.e., living space. Hence Ecology meant the study of the house where we live in. In the same way Economy (*Oikos*=house) (*nomos*=manager) stood for the study of house management. Ecotourism has a lot of grey area between ecology and economy although it is preached to be too close to ecology.

Ecotourism is defined in different ways. The Adventure Travel Society defines it as 'environmentally responsible travel to experience the natural area and culture of a region while promoting conservation and economically contributing to local communities (Kachon-dham, 1994).

'Purposeful' travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizen.

Ecotourism has been defined by the World Conservation Union as environmentally responsible travel and visits to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features- both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local population.

Thus, ecotourism is a nature-based product. Environmental cost of ecotourism has to become a central theme. Its contribution to conservation and local economy should be properly monitored and assessed in order to bring about sustainability. Ecotourism should not be used loosely just to catch sight of clients but to ensure a harmony between man and nature.

Principles of Ecotourism

"Caring for the Earth" is the main principle behind any nature based or ecology based activities. Key principles which are fundamental to ecotourism may be summarized as (i) nature-based, (ii) ecologically sustainable, (iii) environmentally educative, (iv) locally beneficial, (v) supportive to conservation, (vi) tourist satisfaction, and (vii) international brotherhood.

Similarly, Jane Dermer has identified the chief principles of ecotourism as:

- a. Avoid negative impact that can damage or destroy the integrity or character of the natural or cultural environments being visited;
- b. Educates the traveler on the importance of conservation;
- c. Direct revenues to the conservation of natural areas and the management of protected areas;
- d. Brings economic benefits to local communities and directs revenues to local people living adjacent to protected areas;
- e. Emphasize the need for planning and sustainable growth of the tourism industry and seeks to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental 'carrying capacity';
- f. Retains a high percentage of revenues in the host country by stressing the use of locally owned facilities and services; and
- g. Increasingly relies on infrastructure that has been developed sensitively in harmony with the environment minimizing use of fossil fuels, conserving local plant and wildlife, and blending with the natural environment. (Dermer, 2002)

Ecotourism in Nepal's Perspective

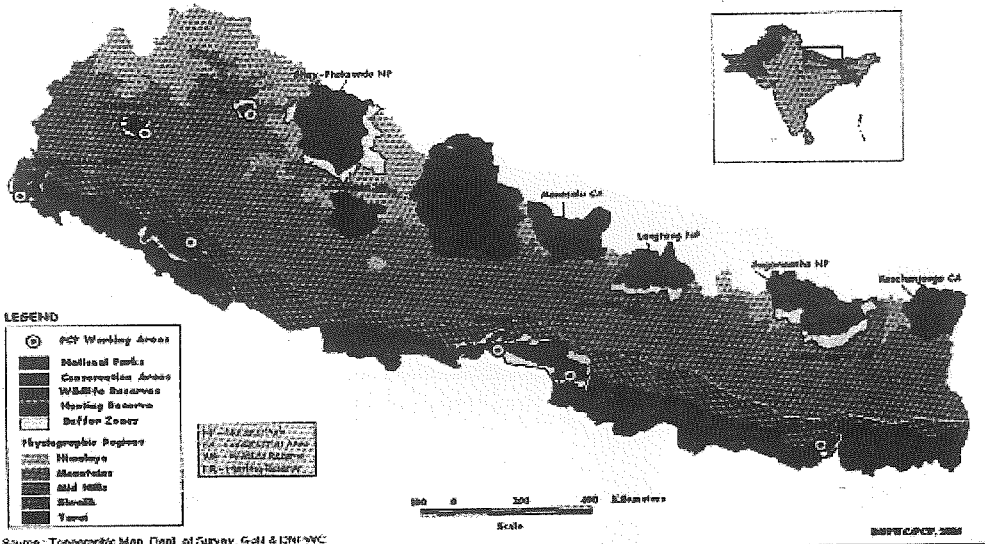
Nepal is well known for its diverse topography, its ecological diversity and rich biodiversity. The conservation and sustainable use of these natural resources could contribute

significantly to improving the livelihoods of people who have depended on them for generations. Around 21.4 percent of total land area of Nepal has been converted into parks and protected areas. Such a large portion of area in such a small country obviously requires special focus and attention.

Government of Nepal has made several efforts in this regard. The establishment of protected areas is one notable effort. While there has been spontaneous tourism development in some of these areas, ecotourism development in the protected areas has been emphasized and in the fiscal year 2006-07 the gross foreign exchange earning in convertible currency from tourist stood at US \$162.8 million, which represented an increase of 9.7 percent over the year 2005 (MoCTCA, 2006).

Nepal offers unique opportunity to develop a vast array of nature-based products from parks and protected area to white water rafting and high altitude mountaineering or wilderness trekking. Nepal has a well developed protected area system that cover almost 21.4 per cent of its territorial area when bufferzones are included. Of them the Chitwan National Park (CNP) is the highly frequented park by tourist number with 86,433 in 2007 alone (Upadhyay and Shrestha, 2008). It is desirable to examine the status vis-à-vis tourism development and biodiversity conservation.

Protected Areas of Nepal



Source: DNPWC, 2007

Chitwan National Park: Nature-based Product

The CNP was designated as the first national park of Nepal in 1972 as Royal Chitwan National Park and was inscribed in the World Heritage Site under nature category in 1984. Sultry and tropical jungles with savannah grasslands and ox-bow lakes, fresh water rivers and riverine forests, made Chitwan a perfect home for large tropical mammals like One-horned Rhinoceros, the Royal Bengal Tiger, the Gaur Bison, the Asiatic Elephant, a variety of deer (Barking Deer, Spotted Deer, Swamp Deer), Sloth Bear, Leopards, and Wild Boars. Besides, it has a rich variety of avian fauna (526 species of birds) both migratory and residential. Lakes, rivers and other water bodies harbor crocodiles (Mugger and Ghariyal) and Gangetic Dolphins beside a rich assemblage of fish species (12 species), reptiles and amphibians (49 species). Pythons, Cobra and other snakes and lizards enrich the forest habitat while a hoard of butterflies (156 species) and spiders fill other niches. Thus the CNP has been a prime habitat for prestigious wildlife and game animal. History illustrates that in one hunting event during the year 1938/39, as many as 120 tigers were shot dead, 38 rhinoceros were killed and a large number of reptiles and birds were also killed. Why there were plenty in the past and why wildlife and wilderness have gone scarce nowadays is explained very simply in terms of habitat loss and human encroachments. The habitat of wild animals has now shrunken to a point that the national park represents itself as a shrinking island in the ever expanding sea of men and women (242,000 population in the Buffer Zone). Can ecotourism bring some hope for conservation in this unique property or it will help to slaughter the goose that lays golden eggs is something to be considered more seriously than just letting things happen the way they go.

Ecologically Sustainable Chitwan National Park

The key protector of the wildlife and their wilderness in the Chitwan Valley was the mosquito before the malaria eradication program begun in Chitwan in the early 1960s. These days protection is not hundred percent even with a battalion of armed forces. 37 well equipped armed posts, sufficient number of people deputed by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) including warden. Ecological sustainability is threatened not only from the people in the vicinity who let their cattle to graze; collect firewood, fodder and non-timber products from the park; illegal fishing and hunting still continues, poaching rhino horns and tiger bones has not yet stopped, and above all the development process has gone anti-ecological.

A number of industries like brewery, beer factory, bottlers, steel and paper mills pollute water bodies. As a result endangered Dolphins have now gone extinct from the Narayani River, Gharials are very rare and fishes have become too scarce. New roads and bridges have mounted great pressure on the park. A 68 Km long thoroughfare road and the Rapti Bridge are viewed as a serious threat to World Heritage Site.

Tourists infrastructures and services such as 61 hotels and lodges in the park vicinity, 7 hotels within the park, about 170 elephants at tourist service and park management, about 50 jeeps and other vehicles within the park plying over a road network of about 300 km in

the park, would surely lead to serious consequences if we fail to manage the park properly. There is a significant number of regular personnels at service at hotel staff, elephant mahouts, armed guards and park staff. The number is estimated to be just over 1,700 persons. In total 697 people are employed by hotels inside the Park of whom 25 are female. Beside over 100,000 visitors enter the park in a normal year (1998/99). Therefore, the ecological sustainability of CNP has to be carefully examined in the context of ecotourism, national development and international obligations.

"All the 61 hotels, lodges and camps in Sauraha are operating individually as competitors. They are not acting but reacting, fighting against each other. They are just waiting for guests and are depending directly on foreign travel agencies. They are unable to acquire new tourists by their own. They are unable to influence the decision how long the guests should stay in Chitwan. The average number of overnights is 2-3 nights, because it is fixed by other travel agencies but not by the people of Sauraha. But Sauraha offers more chances. New target groups should be acquired: relaxing guests for one week, young families with little children of others. But to reach these potential target groups, it is necessary to act as a tour operator, selling own Nepal tour packages, able to influence the tourism market directly. It is necessary to offer Sauraha as a whole destination. It is necessary to make destination management and destination marketing as we see in many other countries which are working professional. If just one wheel is running in the wrong direction, the vehicle "Tourism" cannot go forward. So the vehicle has to be managed by a 'driver' bringing it forward.

There is a need to arrange trainings and seminars for all people working in tourism to optimize their knowledge and understanding for specialities of the tourism industry, perform festivals and others to make Sauraha more attractive (like Elephant Race or Food Festival), promote Sauraha on fairs in cooperation with Nepal Tourism Board and operate as an official tour operator for Nepal" (Sigismund, 2007).

Environmentally Educative

Book of nature is open to all but it needs careful planning to learn more from simple touristic visits. In a world where natural areas are fast shrinking ecotourism provides opportunity to learn about the dynamics of nature, living system of biota in an ecosystem and above all the process of co-existence between different species.

The CNP has several features that are unique to this part of the world. A glimpse of a Rhinoceros with its prehistoric look or an encounter with the Royal Bengal Tiger or just a quiet evening with passers-by flight of birds bring a lot educating feeling to a visitor. Therefore, it is very important to provide information to a tourist about what he or she is going to see and feel, about what park is planning to preserve and about how the park is contributing to the global resources of biodiversity and the assets of nature.

The CNP has a visitor center at Sauraha which is the main gateway to the park. Similarly a small museum is maintained at the park headquarter in Kasara. The crocodile breeding

center in Kasara is also very educative to the visitors and the first RCC building of Nepal is located at Kasara inside the park. Similarly community run Tharu Cultural Museum at Bachhauli, Sauraha offers visitors a glimpse of Tharu culture and traditions they performed that are fast disappearing in the Tharu community. The museum harbors a mosaic of cultural traditions of the Tharu people during the three period of their lifecycle- pre-marital, marital and post marital. It offers visitors a unique opportunity to view existing Tharu community along the way to the museum, where the museum showcases culture and traditions as a replica. These facilities have been updated by the support of donors and NGOs like IUCN, WWF, NTNC, etc. However, serious deficiency lies in the fact that the park management has not owned them fully and the dearth of literature, booklets, awareness materials, promotional activities are felt by visitors and local residents alike.

Support to Conservation

A four-bed tented camp in the deep jungle of Chitwan in 1962 may be viewed as the precursor of current pressure from tourists in the park. The park raises over 50 million Nepalese rupees in a year from direct sources of the revenue and about 30-50 per cent of the revenue is allotted to community development in the buffer zone. This has immensely enhanced the quality of wilderness not only in the park but also outside the park boundary. This arrangement has promoted community forests and the rivers flowing through them. Bagmara Community Forestry has been one of the most successful buffer zone management practices in Chitwan. Thus tourism has started to show direct benefits of conservation, and people have begun to accept wildlife as earning members of their community. Elephant rides in a buffer zone forest is getting more and more popular among tourists. Experts claimed that "the present forest regulation had prevented development of tourism infrastructure inside the community forests" (The Himalayan Times, 2008).

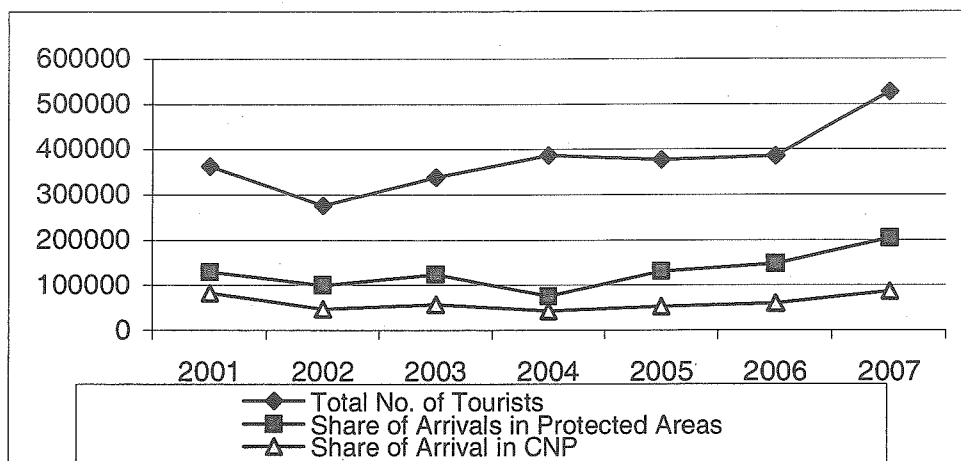
Tourist Satisfaction and International Brotherhood

Tourism has emerged as the world's largest industry with over 200 million people involved in it. This is one-tenth of the world's workforce which brings about an output of US\$ 3.4 trillion. According to the World Tourism Organization Year Book of 1998, there will be about one and a half billion people traveling annually outside their own country in the year 2020. Thus, there is a great scope of strengthening global brotherhood through tourism, and Nepal's comparative advantage is surely on ecotourism based upon nature, wilderness, wildlife and indigenous culture. Nepal, once known as the country of fighting Gurkhas and climbing Sherpas, is also renowned as a country of smiling faces and friendly people. Culturally, guests are regarded as gods. Therefore, the trend of tourism growth is increasing. After the peace agreement signed in 2006 the flow of tourist is increasing and reached a historic record of 5,26,705 in 2007.

Table 1 Tourist Arrivals in Nepal and Chitwan National Park (2001-2007)

Year	Total No. of Tourists	Share of Arrivals in Protected Areas	Share of Arrival in CNP
2001	361237	128956 (35.6%)	82542 (64%)
2002	275468	99483 (36.1%)	46705 (47%)
2003	338132	123309 (36.4%)	56303 (45.6%)
2004	385297	74010 (19.2%)	43061 (58.1%)
2005	375398	129429 (34.4%)	52572 (40.6%)
2006	383926	147024 (38.2%)	60126 (40.8%)
2007	526705	203275 (38.6%)	86443 (42.5%)

Source: DNPWC, Annual Reports and MoCTCA, Nepal Tourism Statistics (2001-2007)

Figure 1 Tourist Arrivals in Nepal and Chitwan National Park (2001-2007)

Thus CNP is very important area of global convergence. Word-of-mouth promotion from the visitors is playing an important role in promoting tourism. This is possible only when there is satisfaction in the minds of our guest. This needs to be maintained and enhanced through planned activities and intentional actions.

Similarly, using the protected areas of National Parks and Wildlife Reserves for the purpose of tourism has been adopted in Nepal for quite some time. The concept of eco tourism is fully visible in these areas (9 national parks, 3 wildlife reserves, 3 conservation area and 1 hunting reserve), where a strong representation of tourism is demonstrated by following table.

Table 2 Tourism in Protected Areas

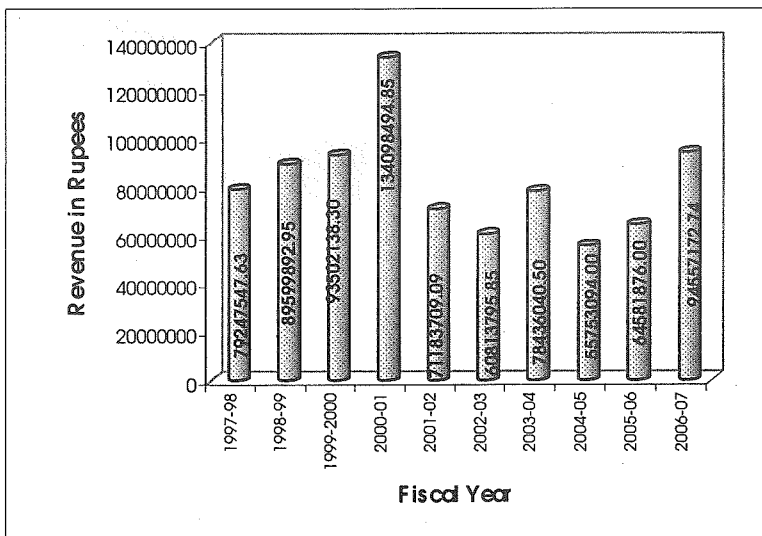
Year	Non Indians	South Asians	Nepalese	Total
2001	93,668	7,412	27,876	1,28,956
2002	59,628	5,290	34,565	99,483
2003	65,755	8,886	48,668	1,23,309
2004	74,004	6	0	74,010
2005	63,331	3,700	62,398	1,29,429
2006	70,288	3,575	73,161	1,47,024
2007	10,2059	5,645	95,571	2,03,275

Source: Compiled from several issues of Nepal Tourism Statistics (2001-2007) and Annual reports of DNPWC.

Eco tourism and Revenue Generation

Nepal is not only endowed with rich and varied biodiversity, but also with scenic splendor and a mosaic of ethnic groups with their rich religious and cultural heritage. While the mountain parks attracts international visitors for mountaineering expeditions, trekking and adventure tourism, the lowlands of the country lure tourists with jungle safari to view rare and endangered wildlife species. The following graphs make us clear that during the FY 2006-07 a total of 147,024 tourists visited the protected areas and the total revenue generated was NRs 94,557,173.

Figure 2 Eco tourism and Revenue Generation in Nepal



Conclusion

Tourism industry has a significant share in Nepal's foreign exchange earnings which is around 3 per cent of her GDP (WTO). The number of tourists which was only 1,000 until mid 1950s and about 12,000 in 1960s has grown dramatically since 1980s. Over 460,000 tourists visited Nepal during the Visit Nepal Year 1998. During last ten years, tourism industry in Nepal has greatly suffered due to political conflict, insurgency, and political instability. Government wants more tourists to visit Nepal and more and more tourists want to visit Nepal. Peace and security are prerequisite to any tourism but if the real spirit of ecotourism not practiced, Nepal's own existence will face serious ecological problems.

There does not exist another Chitwan in this planet. It is providing a refuge to a large number of charismatic mammals which are rare and endangered elsewhere in the world. Thus we have to save Chitwan without sacrificing it to the so-called development activities to satisfy today's political needs. Park tourism, a form of ecotourism, should be viewed as the best prospect for future development in Nepal and hedonism should not be promoted in our tourist industry.

If we failed to seriously think over these issues in near future Chitwan will not be able to keep up status of third popular tourist destination in the country. Therefore, to maintain Chitwan as an ever standing competitive tourist destination the programmes be promoted in the ignition of the nature, culture, adventure, society and maintenance of environment ethics. To meet this we need to broaden our horizons from living politically to living environmentally.

Recommendation

Parks and protected areas have served as excellent research and exploration sites for scientists and explorers of the world ever since Nepal open its frontiers during 1950's. The body of information and scientific datas are however widely scattered and are not available at a central location in Nepal or abroad. Recent datas such as animal plants, species counts and changes in geographical coverage of PA's are published at different times of the year. It would be very helpful if DNPWC regularly published census datas and other related datas during the Annual Wildlife Week Programme which is observed during the new year of Nepali calendar.

References:

- Dermer, J. (2002). *Tourism-Related Training and Education in Nepal*, ICIMOD, Kathmandu.
- Dhakal, Deependra Purush (2008). *Trend of Tourism Development: Global, Regional and National*, Reading in Rural Tourism, Sunlight Publication, pp. 145-162. Kathmandu.
- Dobschuetz, Sigismund Von (2007). *Actual Problems in the Tourism Business of the Chitwan Region*, Report Submitted Ratna Nagar and Narayangarh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, April 11, German Development Service (DED), Kathmandu.

- Grandon Ramand (2007). *Nepalese Tourism: The Challenges*, Nepal Association of Tour and Travel, Kathmandu.
- MOCTAC (2007). *Nepal Tourism Statistics 2007*, GoN, Kathmandu, GoN.. (NATTA) DNPWC (2000) Annual Report, MOF., Kathmandu.
- Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center (2005). *Tharu Cultural Museum*, Sauraha, Chitwan.
- The Himalayan Times (2008). *Call to Attract Tourists to Forest*, Vol. VII, No. 268 August, 16, p. 9. Kathmandu.
- Upadhyay, Rudra (2007). "Prospects of Eco-Religious Tourism in Chitwan Valley: Problems and Prospects" *Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2, Kirtipur, pp. 94-106, Nepal
- Upadhyay, Rudra (2007). *Save Chitwan from Disaster*, Nepal Travel Trade Reporter, February, pp. 26-27. Kathmandu.
- Upadhyay, Rudra (2008). *Tourism in Chitwan at Cross Road*, Special Bulletin Published by Chamber of Commerce and Industry on the occasion of 4th Annual General Meeting, January, Narayangarh.
- Upadhyay, Rudra and T.B. Shrestha (2008). *Protected Areas in Nepal*, Reading in Rural Tourism, Kathmandu Sunlight Publication, pp. 226-249, Kathmandu
- Upadhyay, Rudra and T.B. Shrestha (2006). "Protected Area in Nepal", *The Economic Journal of Nepal*, CEDECON, Tribhuvan University, pp. 148-162, Kathmandu.