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**Sustainable Management of Trekking Trails for the  
Adventure Tourism in Mountains: A Study of Nepal's  
Great Himalaya Trails**

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**Abstract**

*The existing body of knowledge in tourism reveals that the trekking trails have global appeal and vast potentials to be established and developed as adventure tourism products cum destinations in world mountain regions. The adventure tourism is as one of the fastest growing sub-sectors of tourism. Today the world's trail systems play a significant role in adventure tourism for its rapid growth. Such a trend inevitably necessitates a clear guideline (the formulation and application of sustainable trail management approach) not only for establishing trails heritage as safe, quality accredited (audited) and branded products but also for meeting trail development and maintenance international standards and best practices. Through the review of the literatures on trails and trails management for adventure tourism, participation in the Trail Standards Guidelines (TSG) formulation process for the Great Himalaya Trails (GHT) of Nepal and assessment of Nepal's trail sites as GHT certified trail auditor by the author; this paper argues that sustainable trail management is trail destination specific innovative approach. It should be understood and applied through the interaction of local practices with global knowledge and best practices. There is pressing need of clear guidelines at trail destinations. Such guidelines can be easy reference for shared engagements and benefits of trail communities and enlightening experience of trails users. The discussion concludes with the case study of*

**Keywords**

*Great Himalaya  
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*GHT as an emerging brand for adventure tourism identity of Nepal. GHT strives for sustained and beneficial tourism management system through effective implementation of the TSG by the means of integrated approach.*

## **Introduction**

The research evidences for adventure tourism reveals that it has accelerated a discernible move towards the commodification of mountains and their trekking trails. With numerous trekking options and the significant proportions of new tourism attractions with access to the direct and authentic experience of nature and culture, the many of the global mountain trails are integrated with tourism on the forms a distinct trekking and adventure destinations. These trails attract millions of explorers, trekkers, mountaineers, and general-purpose visitors for the purpose of adventure tourism. As such there has been exponential growth in adventure tourism with tourists also visiting destinations previously undiscovered between 2010 and 2014; the adventure tourism industry grew by 195%. Adventure travel is rapidly becoming mainstream. The international adventure tourism market is likely to grow the compound annual growth rate of 45.99% during the period 2016-2020. These trends highly necessitates the proper management of these trails backstopped by a clear standard guidelines for safe, qualitative, standard and also branded trekking trails in order for making adventure tourism sustainable (ATTA, 2018; Williams & Soutar, 2005).

Interest in sustainable management of trekking, hiking and backpacking trails based adventure in the tourism industry and among researchers is relatively new, emerging only recently as a distinct subfield of tourism research. Several studies (Ballantyne & Pickering, 2015; Council of Europe, 2010; Hayes & MacLeod 2007; Hugo, 2010a; MacLeod, 2016; Marschall, 2012; Mu & Nepal, 2015; Pickering & Norman, 2017; Rogerson, 2007; Sato, Kim, Buning & Harada, 2018; Timothy & Boyd, 2015; UNWTO, 2014; Zabbini, 2012) through their diverse focuses on trails and tourism emphasize for managing growth through sustainable management. The sustainable management of trekking trails matters for a number of crucial issues at the trail destinations:

- (a) The explosive growth of tourists for established trekking trail destinations is a challenge for the quality of experience of trail users due to the deficiency on proper management that has lacked minimum parameter of safety, quality and standards. As overtourism without sustainable management will continue to be a serious issue felt by adventure tourism, the destruction of the world's most pristine and special trail destinations is irreversible.
- (b) The newer destinations (with under visited tourist number and under competitiveness) need to offer them with differential brand identity consisting sustainable management. Such a trend should also coincide with

the interest of trail users who are not only growingly conscious for their authentic (unique) experiences but also for their well being and fulfillment of their expectations (standards, safety and quality) and the betterment of destinations.

- (c) Developing and enhancing trails to international standards that offer safe and quality trail experiences, requires that trails are monitored and assessed following a robust system of auditing. This is especially necessary to meet the expectations of the global hiking, walking and trekking tourist.
- (d) The meaningful participations of trail destinations' wide-ranging trail stakeholders (service offering workers and business and value chain creating enterprises as host communities) is vital.

The right management aspects for addressing aforementioned issues are key strengths for the global trail destinations' unique and differential branding/marketing (Hayes & MacLeod 2007; Marschall, 2012; Rogerson, 2007; Sato, Kim, Buning & Harada, 2018; Zabbini, 2012) that is undeniably right and indispensable in case of Nepal's Great Himalaya Trails (Bezemer, 2014; Boustead, 2015; Choegyal, 2011; MoCTCA, 2017; SAMARTH-NMMDP, 2018a; GHTNA, 2018; Upadhayaya, 2018) too. As its consequences, there has been growing attention and debate as how the trekking trails be managed sustainably by integrating trail management strategies and be branded which will result with the multiple benefits for the diverse stakeholders like trail hosts (trail owners, trail managers, trail developers, business communities, local communities, local government, trail workers as guides, porters, etc.) and guests (trail users/trekkers).

The 'current academic conversation' on trails and their relevance for adventure tourism emphasizes that the sustainable management of trails be possible by integrating trail management strategies and branding and marketing of trails. However, a knowledge gap remains on the empirical evidence base. This calls for standard guidelines (the knowledge as an easy reference or model) for the management (planning, construction, best practices, internationally accepted standards, maintenance, conservation, sustainability, accreditation/certification and branding) of trails through integrated approach and the procedures.

In this contextual background, this paper intends to address following questions:

- a) What does it mean by the sustainable management of trekking trails that result with its brand identity and value of mountain adventure destination?
- b) What and how systematically it works for the management of trekking trails for the sustainable adventure tourism in mountains?

- c) How Nepal's GHT is evolving for its standardization, sustainable management and branding that as a case study could be copied in and scaled up?

### **Methodological note**

Methodologically, this paper is based on both interdisciplinary (including trekking tourism and mountain development) and transdisciplinary (including universal trail standards and tourism) research approach. The author has applied eclectic technique for accumulating information from his work experience as the GHT certified trail auditor and Nepal government approved trek guide. The methodology included the collection of the qualitative information through primary source of information from the research based GHT trails auditing in the years 2016 and 2017. The secondary source of information included a comprehensive review of relevant published and unpublished literatures, reports and data through desk studies. Theoretically, this paper is conceptualized on sustainability criteria based integrated approach of tourism planning and management.

### **Positioning mountain trekking trails as the global adventure tourism products cum destinations**

A trail is usually a path, track or unpaved lane or road or highway. The trekking trails on foot have played significant roles in the human story for their accessibility, migration and civilization since the pre historic time. Trails around the world are an immeasurable asset to local communities as pathways of connection and avenues for development and livelihood. These products have a global appeal and are becoming more prolific (Alves, 2008).

The trail or route provides a themed and interpreted journey through the rural or urban landscape, creating links between sites, attractions and other tourism businesses by providing information and storytelling along the way. Trails range in scale from the site-specific to the international and can be followed on foot, by bicycle, on horseback, by car, by boat or even by diving along underwater trails. In many cases, these trails have been developed to promote access and recreation, to explore a conservation theme and to give a clear identity to places not already well-known by visitors.

In context of trekking which is the one of the integral activities of adventure oriented mountain tourism, a trail can be considered as a rough path across open country or through forests. The earth's land surface area caters one-fifth (nearly 24 per cent) of it as Mountains of all kinds (e.g. Alps, Hindu Kush-Himalayas, Andes and Rocky mountains) in a great variety of topography, geography, shapes, ecosystems, climatic conditions, and diversity of cultures. The table 1 below offers the major mountain types of the world as popular for trekking based adventure tourism.

**Table 1: Global major Mountains types offered with adventurous trekking trails**

Mountains types	Continent/ Countries covered	Few existing popular trekking trails for adventure tourism	Key features /pull factors	Key mountain ranges	Ranges in altitude of trekking trails
<b>Alps</b>	Europe (Austria, Italy and Slovenia)  France	Alps-Adriatic regional trail  Tour du Vieux Chaillol in France	Home to the most beautiful mountains of the World with high access and facilities  Offering larch forests, stunning green pastures and hamlets	Mont Blanc (4810 m)  Monte Rosa (4634 m)  Matterhorn (4478 m)  Awe-inspiring mountains (3163m)	600 - 3163 m
<b>Rockies</b>	North America (Canada and USA)	Appalachian trail  Bruce trail	One of the longest (over 4830 km) mountain ranges	Mt. Elbert (4401 m)  Mt. Massive (4398 m)	1153 m average
<b>Andes</b>	South America (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina)	Inca and Machu Picchu trail	The longest(7242 km) mountain ranges in the World	Aconcagua (6962 m)  Ojos del Salado (6893 m)  Huascarán (6768 m)	Up to 4215m
<b>Himalayas</b>	South and East Asia (Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal)	Great Himalaya Trails -GHT (Ladakh – Markha Valley trek, Margalla Hills trek, Chomolhari trek, Kanchenjunga Basecamp Trail, Makalu Base Camp Trail, Annapurna Base camp Trail, Rara Khaptad Trekking Trail)	Home to world’s highest peaks including Mount Everest and K2	Over 4500 km of Great Himalaya ranges including Mt Everest, K2, Mt Kanchenjunga, Mt. Makalu, Mt Cho you, Mt. Annapurna, Manaslu, Mt Dhaulagiri, etc.	Up to 6000m

Mountains types	Continent/ Countries covered	Few existing popular trekking trails for adventure tourism	Key features /pull factors	Key mountain ranges	Ranges in altitude of trekking trails
<b>African Rift</b>	Africa (East and West)	Mt Kilimanjaro summit trek Mt Kenya summit trek Fish river canyon trek	With altitudinal, climatic, land use, ecological (forest and moorland) differentiations	Mt. Kilimanjaro (5895 m) Mount Kenya (5199m) Atlas Mountains (Toubkal)(4,167 m) The Simien Mountains ( Ras Dashen) (4620m) The Drakensberg (Thabana Ntlenyana) (3,482 m)	Up to 5895 m

*Source: Author*

These Mountains are a valuable natural asset of which the tourism industry very often makes extensive use. The mountains as in table above are the flourishing ground for adventure tourism products cum destinations as these mountains with several lower and higher peaks of the globe posses enormous trekking trails. Such trails pass through lush green valleys, arid high plateaus and incredible landscapes. In this sense, Mountain tourism as an integral part of global tourism has developed as higher recreation and adventure for tourists who are fond of trekking. The last three decades have seen the deliberate creation of new trails for recreation and adventure tourism purposes (Hayes & MacLeod, 2008).

Based on the altitude and types of activities, mountain trails can be broadly categorized as (a) easy walking/trekking trails, (b) nature/culture trekking trails and (c) high Mountain trekking trails and (d) pilgrimage trekking routes. The trekking trails generally meet the needs of outdoor, nature and adventure enthusiasts through offering pristine untouched nature and changing landscapes (MoCTCA, 2017). Furthermore, these trails provide breath-taking views of the towering and short peaks and give tourists the chance to visit communities and villages and learn about the culture and traditions of various ethnic groups. The world as trails connects people on intercultural level in a relaxed environment and a host of other values.

Such trails attract tourists from varied tourist market segments like holidays, pilgrimage, adventurous and special interest from all over the world for the ranges of activities in terrestrial, aerial and also aquatic forms. It is indicative that 10 per cent of tourist hotspots worldwide are developing mountain tourism (Paunovic & Jovanovic, 2017). As per UNWTO 2014 Global Report on Adventure Tourism, the global trail industry is multibillion dollar contribution to the economy. Most of these mountains in the lower altitude with cultural routes also bring tourists to some of the most remote communities on earth. Trekking in the mountains is adventurous, rewarding and unforgettable experience with these trails (Bezemer, 2014; Shrestha, 2000). Highlighting the adventure and challenging context of trail just prior to the establishment of the World Trails Network (WTN) in 2015, Saintz (2015, p.61) reveals that 'trails can test our resolve on day and be celebration of the outdoors and friendships the next'.

Amidst aforementioned various mountain regions, some popular trekking trails are confined in particular country (e.g. Appalachian trail in USA and Bruce trail in Canada, historical cultural routes in Switzerland, etc.) while others are also spread in two or more than two countries (e.g. Alps-Adriatic trail in Alps and Great Himalaya Trails in Himalayas). The cross-border trails among nations of the world and people act as inter-cultural bridges and promote peace-building through common understanding and bring mutual prosperity. Nepal as the home of the GHT is one of the potential beneficiaries of this industry.

The Himalayas in Nepal and her neighboring countries in the global South collectively offer Great Himalaya Trails. GHT in the Himalayas are one of the World's longest and highest walking and trekking trails in the World. It covers the full distance of the Himalayan mountain range in Nepal and continues through Tibet, Bhutan, India and Myanmar to the East of Nepal and continues through China (Tibet Autonomous Region), India and Pakistan to the West. The GHTs are the prime attractions for tourists for adventure tourism from all over the world.

### **Sustainable management of trekking trails: A conceptual foundation**

A sustainable trail is not merely a "path only in the field" joining two or more paces but it should form an integral part of the local tourism industry. The sustainable trails management concept coincides with the concept of sustainable tourism development. Sustainable tourism development follows the basic principles of sustainable development. Kunwar (2010) reveals the guiding principle for sustainable tourism development as the management of natural and human resources so as to maximize visitor enjoyment and local benefit while minimizing negative impacts upon the destination site, community and local population. The sustainable development endeavors unveil that sustainability implies for permanence through the planning

and management of resources in such a way that economic, social, cultural and aesthetic needs of the societies are met while maintaining the essential ecological processes, biological diversity and naturally occurring life support systems (United Nations General Assembly, 1987).

Respecting the objectives of the sustainable development, sustainable trails development stresses for the design, construction and maintenance of trails in such a way to ensure that the bio-physical character of the environment will not deteriorate due to the use of the trail. Ecological conservation of the resource base is most important (MoCTCA, 2017). Sustainable trails have many facets, including social and economic sustainability. A trail must be designed so as to enhance the social as well as environmental expectations of hikers. Along with the conceptualization of trail as quality assured product, great care in the probable environmental risk is must for sustainability of trail atmosphere and tourism market. A trail that is truly sustainable should also be designed so as to enhance the experience of the hiker so that they would enjoy the hike; manifested in the fact that they return for frequent re-visits to the trail. An ideal sustainable trail should also provide enough scope for outdoor education that is able to differentiate between learning and enlightening experience for the trail users. A sustainable trail provides a high quality recreational experience in a landscape and community that is capable of supporting the activity and is economically sustainable through appropriate management model (David, 2012 as in WTN, 2017).

There are a number of publications on management practices on trails and their implications for sustainability. The existing body of knowledge (American Trails, 2007; Beeton, 2007; Beirman, Upadhayaya, Pradhananga & Darcy, 2018; Council of Europe, 2010; Hayes & MacLeod 2007; Hugo, 2010b; Hughes & Morrison-Saunders, 2002; Kling, Fredman, & Wall-Reinius, 2017; MacLeod, 2016; Marion & Wimpey, 2017; Marschall, 2012; Mu & Nepal, 2015; Nyaupane, Lew, & Tatsugawa, 2014; Pickering & Norman, 2017; Rogerson, 2007; Santarém, Silva & Santos, 2015; Sato, Kim, Buning and Harada, 2018; Slabbert & Preez, 2017; TAOC, 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2015; Weston & Mota, 2012; Williams, & Soutar, 2005; Zabbini, 2012; Zurich, 2010) on trails and tourism has diverse focuses.

Such focuses ranges on the need of the maintenance of the trail over long term (American Trails, 2007; TAOC, 2006); critical management issues of multi-use trail (Beeton, 2007); accessible tourism through auditing and development of trekking trail for differently able (physically disabled) persons (Beirman et. all, 2018); certifying routes (Council of Europe, 2010); creation of business opportunities and enhancement of the visitor experience (Hayes & MacLeod 2007; Rogerson, 2007); assessment of the influence of sustainable trail design and maintenance on soil loss (Marion & Wimpey, 2017); impact of trail-side interpretive signs on visitor knowledge



(Hughes & Morrison-Saunders, 2002); the status of international trail research and analyzes (Kling, Fredman, & Wall-Reinius, 2017); and self-guided trails as a route to more responsible tourism through planning principles (MacLeod, 2016).

Some other publications have specific focuses on the potential of trails for the improvement of the lives of host communities (Marschall, 2012; Zabbini, 2012), trekkers' perceptions of risk and death associated with high mountain adventure tourism (Mu & Nepal, 2015); trekking tourism led social and environment changes in the Himalayas (Nyaupane, Lew & Tatsugawa, 2014); trail soil erosion and maintenance (Pickering & Norman, 2017); role of decision and non-decision makers on role of adventure tourism motivation and destination loyalty and the destination marketing as the fulfillment of the expectation of the adventure tourists (Sato et. all, 2018); ecotourism potential of hiking trails (Santarém, Silva & Santos, 2015); an accreditation system for hiking trails (Slabbert & Preez, 2017); development of trails and routes to promote regional development agenda while focusing on trail management (stakeholders and visitors'), cultural, and ecological issues and integrated efforts on trail development and management (Timothy & Boyd, 2015); low carbon tourism trail (Weston & Mota, 2012); responsible management of responsible tourism operation (Williams, & Soutar, 2005); cultural routes and intangible heritage (Zabbini, 2012); potential of adventure tourism for national and local development in the frontier areas (Zurich, 2010); and recreation value of a new long-distance walking track (Cook, 2008).

The work of few scholars like Pickering & Norman (2017) and Ballantyne & Pickering (2015) have discussed the impacts of formal and informal recreational trails on urban forest loss and tree structure and highlighted the importance of careful consideration towards management options when dealing with trail networks especially in areas of high conservation value. The results of the work of Mutana & Mukwada (2018) indicate that most research on mountain-route tourism emphasize the nature and marketing of mountain tourism and impacts of tourism on mountains.

The wide ranging diverse focuses on trail management have contrasting and fragmented focuses and these do not offer a common understanding or a common easy reference. It is also due to some different standpoints of the sustainable tourism from one mountain community to another. In this context, the sustainable management of trekking trails calls for a comprehensive guidelines for planning, auditing, development, accreditation and branding (marketing) trails in an integrated approach with in a context where there are wide-ranging trail stakeholders (hosts and guests) with diverse perspectives (Hugo, 2010b; Timothy & Boyd, 2015). This paper offers following four measures for standards, safety, and quality of trails which are foundations for trails' sustainable management.

- a) Trail path area safety quality
- b) Comprehensive information management on trail
- c) Trail’s natural environment and its grading
- d) Enterprises’ (lodges, hotels, tea house, homestay, etc.) and/or camping facilities on trails and its status

The tables below offer the list the elements for each of the measures mentioned above.

**Table 2: Trail path area safety quality for sustainable trails**

	Key elements	Actors influencing or influenced by such elements
Trail path area safety quality	Natural disasters, Dangerous elements (animals, mugging, etc.), Path surface conditions [Trail width for walking (1.2 m minimum), trekking (1.2 m minimum) and high mountain trekking trail (1.2 m typical), rockiness, stoniness, slippery, sandy, unstable surface, trail sagging, erosion, drainage, trail deviation, lack of proper steps or high steps, water barriers, lack of alignment of path, stream crossable, gradient (normally less than 10% is ideal), handrails, stile with hand railings, cambered pathway, pruning, fallen tree or grown vegetation blocking normal passage, deepness of the trail path than surrounding landscape, trail path surface strength (solid/loose/muddy) any obstacles (e.g. large rock, landslides, loose stones) stepping stones, bridges (secure/insecure), communication provision (cell phone coverage) availability of drinking water, health post, emergency evacuation provisions, path marking and warning signage , etc.]	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)

Source: MoCTCA, 2017

**Table 3: information management provisions on trekking trails**

Indicators of information management on trekking trails	Grading/Types	Actors influencing or influenced by such elements
Difficulty levels based on trail altitudes	Easy (generally up to 2000m) Moderate (between 2000 m to 3000m) Moderate (between 3000 m to 4000m) Very hard (between 3500 m to 5000m) Extreme (between 5000 m to 6500m)	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)
Potential standard signage for trail routes (See Annex 2: Standard signage designs for trekking trails)	Trail head signage at the start of trail Welcome signage for trail destinations Warning signage at danger prevailing pints or at points prior to risk prevailing Directional signage at trail intersections Interpretative signage for point of interests Management maintenance signage at necessary points where works are in progress Trail markers at regular intervals	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)

Source: MoCTCA, 2017

**Table 4: Trail’s natural environment and its grading**

Trail’s natural environment and its grading	Key elements as associated with trails natural environment	Actors associated
	Application/non application of ‘Leave No Trace’ principle with/ without warning signage Uncared sources creating unpleasant odors Unnatural noises Graffiti	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)
Trail’s natural environment and its grading	Key environmental characters	Actors associated
	Pristine Natural-rural Semi-urban	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)

Source: MoCTCA, 2017

**Table 5: Enterprises’ and/or camping facilities on trails and its status**

Enterprises’ facilities on trails and its status	Key elements as associated with Enterprises’ facilities on trails	Actors associated
	Food and refreshments (with or without menu) Accommodation (lodges, hotels, tea house, homestay, etc) with beds (single, double, twin, dormitory) and beddings (luxury or standards) availability or not Supplies of facilities/services (lighting, heating, washing, etc.)	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)
Camping facilities on trails and its status	Key elements as associated with tented camp facilities on trails	Actors associated
	Suitable camping space with or without scenic views Water availability	Trail auditors Trail workers/builders Trail users (tourist and local communities) Trail authorities (if a trail falls in the national park areas and national park authority is responsible to govern it)

Source: MoCTCA, 2017

The sustainable trail management necessitates the auditing of all above measures by the certified trail auditors for further recommendations for actions (design, redesign, trail building, construction, reconstruction and maintenance) and finally accreditation of trails. Accreditation has a significant role to play in the upholding of quality and sustainability standards in the supply of trail products. The work of Slabbert & Preez (2017) finds consumers response towards an accreditation system for hiking trails. This study reveals that there are very few systems addressing the needs of adventure and nature-based tourism. The study demonstrates a link between accreditation and consumer decision making leading to perceptions of quality and credibility amongst consumers. Amidst those systems, European Ramblers' Association (ERA) has set a European standard measures through 'Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe'.

**Photo 1: Image of Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe**

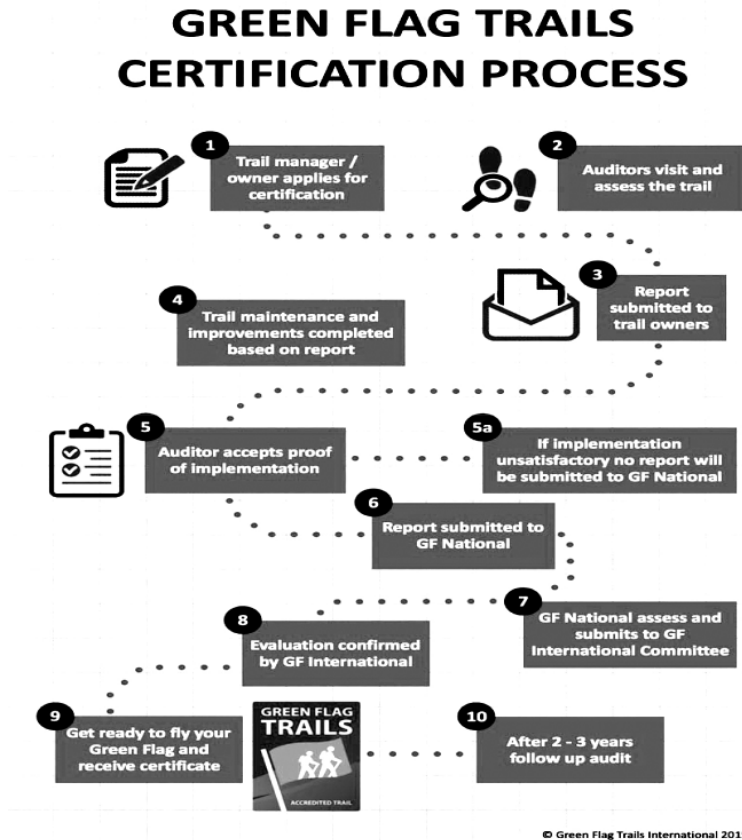


*Source: European Ramblers' Association*

This special quality certification for walking trails offers a transparent system of multi-dimensional assessment of walking route using 23 criteria for the improvement of trail quality throughout Europe. It is required to achieve full accreditation as each 4-km section must achieve 11 points for the choice criteria. ERA's this provision guarantees a high quality walking experience for trail users.

Green Flag Trails (GFT) is a voluntary quality and sustainability eco-label for trails. A Green Flag trail is well directed, user-specific and honestly marketed trail that has been well-designed and responsibly managed from the perspective of the trail users as well as from an environmentally responsible perspective. GFT has its own website as <http://greenflagtrails.org> for more information on its sustainability model of trekking trail. Under GFT, the trail auditing and certification process have to pass through a number of steps as per diagram 1 for the sustainable management of trails (SAMARTH-NMDP, 2018b).

Diagram 1: Trail auditing and certification process



Source: Green Flag Trails

Depending on objecting and directives, the trail should be furthermore financially viable, generating enough income to sustain the trail management. This implies sound management of various sustainability issues including marketing, promotional material, construction and maintenance methods, local communities’ owning of trail, and receiving benefits from their own environment, etc.

**Sustainable adventure tourism management initiative: A case study of Nepal’s Great Himalaya Trails (GHT)**

**About GHT**

Nepal stands as one of the unique adventure mountainous tourism destinations in the tourism map of the world. She has outstanding natural environments coinciding with the age-old rich cultural traditions and attractions on the foothills of Himalayas.

Nepal Himalaya has 28 distinct Himal ranges and only 14 of such ranges have peaks higher than 7,000 meters including 8 of the 14 highest peaks of the world. Nepal's landscapes offer an extensive network of trails as the Great Himalaya Trails (GHT) in the hills and mountains that present her as a fascinating tourism destination (Shrestha, 2000). There is high significance of trails for the adventure tourism in Nepal as trekking on these trails offer a fantastic way to explore Nepal's magnificent mountain landscapes, unique culture and natural beauty.

GHT is a new phenomenon. Initially GHT was developed as the single long distance trail (figure 2) when the concept for a 'Great Himalayan Trail' was first outlined in the Asian Development Bank/South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation Tourism in 2006.

**Figure 1: GHT conceptualized as the single longest trail at the beginning**



*Source: Author*

Later, the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) in association with United Nations World Tourism Organization's Sustainable Tourism Eliminating Poverty led GHT project through pilot projects development in Humla and Dolpa districts in the far west Nepal in 2008-2010.

The promotional buzz concept of GHT was led by SNV and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development for developing this programme under the umbrella of Sustainable Mountain Tourism in the Himalayas and in collaboration with the Nepal Tourism Board and the Sustainable Tourism Network. It was for the exploitation of the significant potential for product and marketing synergies that exists within and between mountain districts in Nepal, as well as between Nepal and other Himalayan countries (Stevens & Banskota, 2006).

The vision behind this intervention was that the proposed trail could help to attract more trekking tourists to mountain areas of Nepal, as well as encourage them to make repeat visits to the region and to explore different products and destinations. The then aim was also to help spread the benefits of tourism to the more remote and least developed parts of the Himalayas, where poverty is often the most acute.

In Nepal, the proposed trail starts in the Api Saipal and continues through Karnali, Humla, Dolpo, Mustang, Manang, Manaslu, Ganesh Himal, Rolwaling, Everest, and Kangchenjunga. To date, trails based tourism demand in the mountain regions of Nepal has been concentrated primarily in Annapurna, Everest and Langtang, which are the three most frequented trekking regions. Apart from these trail regions, which are highly visited, there are other more secluded walking tracks in Nepal which are equally splashed with natural and cultural riches but are less visited due to the perceived low improvements on trails and its management, lack of required infrastructure, sub-standard tourist facilities, poor destination area management and inferior service quality. The lower standards, safety and quality level of trails product requires substantial interventions for improvements and high-quality promotion of such products under GHT brand value.

As a single longest trail, it was in fact difficult to package GHT for the trekking tourists due to passing through rough terrain without having proper amenities for accommodations, fooding, information provisions and other safety arrangements. The integration between product and marketing remained very poor and it could not take advantage in the form of business identity. As such, there were very few departures of tourists for GHT.

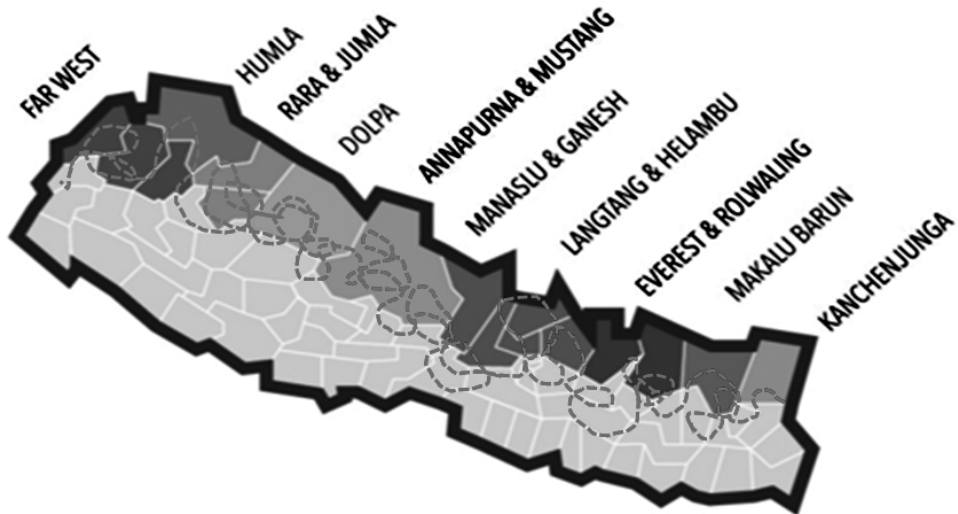
Nevertheless, the enthusiasm to develop, promote and distribute benefits from GHT had not stopped in the backdrop where GHT is an important tourism product offering from Nepal. It was Department for International Development (DFID) which continued the intervention in GHT through another pilot project in five more districts in the year 2010 – 2012, which was further extended till 2013. The DFID funded SAMARTH- Nepal Market Development Programme continued the intervention on GHT through product and infrastructures' development, destination area management, strategic marketing and promotion, and industry standards improvements related interventions in the years 2013 - 2017. From 2017 onwards, the GHT Management Unit of the Nepal Tourism Board is the custodian of GHT for all interventions and standardizations.

#### **Change of the identity of GHT: From single long distance trail to the network of trails**

In post SNV, the concept of GHT has also changed from the single longest trail to the network of trails with 10 sections, each with different bright colour pallets and their own entry and exit access routes (GHTNA, 2018).



**Figure 2: GHT transformed from single longest trail to the network of trails**



*Source: GHTNA (2018) & SAMARTH-NMDP (2016)*

Today the GHT is a diversified network of trails for varied personal and unique trekking experience in Nepal. Within Nepal, the GHT is roughly divided into two main routes: the 1700 Km long High Route, which winds through high mountain ranges with an average altitude of 3000 - 5000 m and the Low Route (also referred to as the Cultural Route), which wends its way 1500 Km through mid-hills between 1500 and 2500 m. The two routes of the GHT in Nepal are interlinked and also have a number of side-treks.

GHT is randomly split into 10 different sections (see figure 3 above) making it possible for trekkers to complete the entire stretch of 1700 km in 5 months or in parts at their convenience (Boustead 2015 & 2018). The GHT in Nepal connects both upper and lower (also known as cultural route) routes while expanding from Kanchenjunga in the East and Api-Saipal in the West including popular trekking destinations of Everest, Annapurna and Langtang.

Overall, the GHT passes through all five development regions of Nepal, many of the country's 77 districts and numerous towns and villages, large and small. Most of these trekking trails also pass through nationally protected areas (e.g. national parks, conservation areas, hunting reserves, etc.) which account for about 23 per cent of the total landscape. Hence, Nepal is identified as a hotspot of nature based trekking tourism. There is obviously a huge potential for the outdoor tourism in the

Himalayan part of the country. The enormous trails spread all over Nepal in mid hills, higher mountain regions and Himalayan regions from East to West can provide opportunities for each visitor to experience the classics as well as many other off-the-beaten trekking options and the natural and cultural diversities that Nepal inherently possesses. These network of trails provide not only an opportunity for each visitor, whether local or foreign, to experience the natural and cultural diversity that Nepal offers, but also vital transport routes for rural Himalayan villages.

The trekking paved its way in Nepalese tourism trails after the introduction of mountaineering expeditions and opening of Nepal for international visitors in the decade of 1950s. The country was opened in the backdrop of the greatest concentration of high mountains in the world. The exotic rural areas and hospitable people have attracted the waves of international adventure seekers to be on Nepal's pristine and rural trail environments since 1950s. It was during 1960s, that foreign travelers were allowed to make multi-days' trekking tours to explore the country. Since then, hiking and trekking tourism is gaining its annual increasing trends in Nepal. Furthermore, restricted areas in Nepal opened up in 2002, creating a possibility of trekking through the entire GHTs in Mountains and Himalayas for the first time.

The trails have been won from the steep slopes of the Himalaya Mountains, all built by hand and maintained over many centuries in some places. These are potential not only to attract and increase the number of tourist arrivals but also to offer local communities as pathways of connection, avenues for development, basis for serving the daily livelihood and increment of income of medium and small size entrepreneurs, workers and other disadvantaged groups located on these trails (Dhakal, Khadka, Sharma & Choegyal, 2007).

This heritage can be capitalized in current global era of adventure tourism only if it can be developed and marketed as quality, safe and standard assured product to the global tourism market. This finally can add to the economic benefit of rural communities enhancing sustainable tourism apart from livelihood connectivity. Once the network of trails becomes commercially sound, the GHT is expected to mitigate economic challenge of rural villages as well as facilitating their commuting and transportation needs.

The minimum standards, quality and safety on the development and management of such trail products can assure to fulfill the widespread involvement of local people in mountain tourism, fulfillment of their livelihoods related inevitable needs and thus help the comprehensive development of mountain tourism while meeting international best practice of the global market of tourism. A major objective of the GHT concept is to bring tourism benefits and improve livelihoods in remote mountain communities (Choegyal, 2011; Upadhayaya & Upreti, 2011).

A total of 75,217 tourists visited Nepal in 2017 in GHT regions for trekking and mountaineering. Out of it, 29,993 trekkers visited in protected areas through which most of the trails of Nepal have passed through. The arrivals of tourists for trekking and mountaineering occupy 8 per cent of the total arrivals of 940,218 tourists in 2017 (MoCTCA, 2018).

In order to enhance the accessibility of rural tourism products in destinations, it is necessary to upgrade and maintain trails, roads, bridges and other essential infrastructures. These improvements not only help tourists, but also greatly ease the livelihoods of local people. Improving the standards of service and infrastructure on trekking trails is at the core of GHT (Boers & Cottrell, 2007).

### **Sustainable trails management in context of establishing GHT as an appealing destination**

Nepal's trail heritage is rich, reaching from lowlands to the highest peaks of the world. This heritage is worthy of protection through sustainable management and future development. The sustainable trail management concept for GHT reveals that Nepal's Great Himalaya Trails should not only provide vital transport routes for rural Himalayan villages but also improve standards of services and infrastructures on trekking trails. Such trails should generate sustainable business for trek entrepreneurs and workers with attracting higher paying more number of tourists from diverse source markets. Such trails should also be more marketable products to different market segments due to its diversifications.

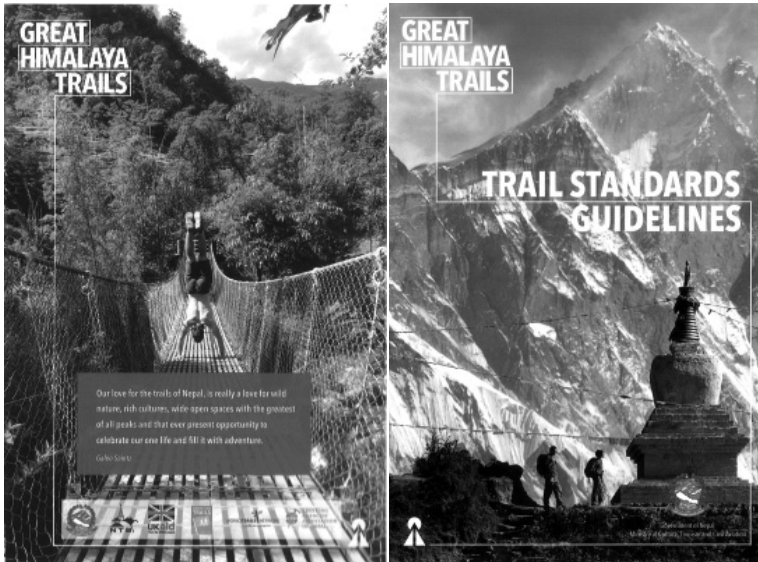
The sustainable trail management concept is guided by Nepal's National Tourism Strategic Plan (NTSP) (2016-25). NTSP aims to develop Nepal as 'a leading tourism destination in the region and to diversify current tourism offerings as well as to provide a range of experience and interests' and also stresses on the quality improvements of products and services' (MoCTCA, 2016). In meeting this strategic plan, the joint effort of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, private sectors, Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal led by Trail Standards Committee in association with the World Trail Network and Green Flags Trails (GFT) has resulted in a comprehensive document "Trail Standards Guidelines (TSG)" which attempts to addresses the core of sustainable trail management issues. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil aviation launched the TSG on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2017 with the aim of standardizing and grading trails across the country.

**Photo 2: Unveiling of Trail Standards Guidelines**



*Source: Author*

**Photo 3: Trail Standards Guidelines as the sustainable development guiding framework for GHT of Nepal**



*Source: Author*

The TSG is designed as a summary for easy reference for the planning, construction, management and maintenance to the basic trail types and trail standards to be found in Nepal. It is a guideline of best practices and internationally accepted standards for trails as applied to Nepal's unique geography and terrain challenges in relation to trail design.

The guidelines also serves as a basis for the implementation of Great Himalaya Trails brand through auditing, post auditing, infrastructure building, accreditation and certification of such trails from Green Flag Trails. Apart of detail focuses on trail planning model, standards and accepted changes, trail quality, trail classification and attributes, trail standards specifications, extra construction guidelines and maintenance notes and standards of assessment and monitoring; the TSG has covered following four key areas for ensuring the benefits to guests (trail users), hosts (product and service providers in trail areas) and the local environment in GHT (MoCTCA, 2017; SAMARTH-NMDP, 2018a).

- (a) the provision of information to trekkers through installation of signage designed by GHT certified trail auditors
- (b) trail path safety assessment and post assessment maintenance for trail certification
- (c) environmental grading and its sustainability consideration
- (d) responsible management and operation of standards of enterprises and tourism products along the trekking trail routes

Any trail that meets the core principles of above mentioned guidelines on safety, quality and better experience for visitors can be accredited to as a Green flag/Great Himalaya Trails. For the implementation of the TSG in the real ground, Nepal also developed eleven internationally certified trail auditors in association with Green Flag Trails and World Trails Network for the first time in its trail history. Following the unveiling of TGS, the auditors' training was facilitated by Samarth-Nepal Market Development Programme [funded by financial assistance of British people (UK aid)] under the technical guidance of Green Flag Trails and World Trails Network. The ten day training programme kicked off with two days of intense theory and presentations indoors. This was then followed by 8 days of trekking on the Annapurna Panorama Trekking Trail following a route from Dhampus via Ghandruk and other smaller villages to Tadapani and ending at Birethanti. The trainees selected to attend the training, were from a diverse cross-section of trail industry representatives, which included trekking professionals, guides, trek operators, conservation officers, tourism specialists and development programme managers, engineers, and related experts. The trail auditors represent officials from Department of Tourism, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Nepal Tourism Board, Annapurna and Manaslu Conservation area as well as Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal and Village Tourism Promotion Forum - Nepal. These auditors are licensed to audit trails and grade them as per the trail standards set in the guidelines.

By conforming Nepali trail grading to international standards, GHT allows trekkers to compare factors such as safety and comfort levels both between different

trails in Nepal, and with other destinations around the World. By defining a set of simple yet clear standards for Nepal's trails and having a committed team of certified trail auditors now available to oversee the implementation of such standards, from signage to safety, is an important step for Nepal in ensuring that the trail experiences offered to the world's trekking community are both within the bounds of safety and are accurately graded and described.

#### **5.4. Trail branding through accreditation/certification as the integral part of sustainable management**

Accreditation and certifications are often viewed as a way to communicate quality to consumers, signaling that the service provider is reputable brand and professional. These have significant role to play in the upholding of quality and sustainability standards in the supply of tourism and leisure products. At a national level, different strands in a country's 'brand' can be articulated through a trail, for example Scotland's Whisky and Castles Trails and the Alsace Wine Route in France emphasize national identity through heritage and industry (Slabbert & Preez, 2017).

In attempt for being strongly established as a brand, GHT of Nepal joined hands with Green Flag Trails and World Trails Network to develop the TSG in order to ensure that the guidelines for quality standards on trail maintenance and development meet international best practice (Upadhyaya, 2018). GHT is envisioned today as a mountain tourism brand that assures safety, quality and enhanced experience to visitors while providing a meaningful opportunity for a local resident to participate in trail activities. It aims to provide a comprehensive guideline for trail infrastructure and local businesses focusing on information management (trail signage), safety, quality standards, environmental sustainability, fair working conditions, etc. It emphasizes working on the principle that better standards in trails and enterprises will lead to products that are more marketable and more sustainable (both environmentally and from a business perspective). A study titled 'Assessment of the impact & effectiveness of Nepal's destination marketing efforts' states that GHT brand is generally the fourth most promotional theme in Nepal after Everest, Nepal Himalaya, and Annapurna. However, it is the most liked brand among Western European and North American tourists (ASI, 2014). Thus any trail that meets the core principles of GHT (safety, quality and better experience) should be accredited to as a GHT brand. While staying true to their diversity and their authentic appeal, GHT intends to represent a shift towards higher quality in Nepal's tourism offerings, which will make it possible to attract more visitors from more diverse source markets. As the brand becomes more recognized, it is believed that other enterprises will aim to meet these standards, building a network of quality trails (SAMARTH-NMDP, 2018a).

A tabular format and figure 1 below offers information on the brand vision and some brand successes of GHT at a glance.

**Table 6: GHT brand values for sustained trail management for adventure tourism**

Identity of brand	Image of brand	Utility of brand	Core values of brand	Promises (few are on progress) of brand	Meaningfulness of brand	Communication of brand	Unique selling point (marketing and promotional perspectives) of brand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Network of trails</li> <li>● Established with brand logo (See figure 3)</li> <li>● Safe trekking system</li> <li>● Integrated amidst varied enterprises</li> <li>● Geographically fascinating</li> <li>● Culturally rich</li> <li>● Entity with authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Engaging and inspiring to existing and potential tourists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Easy to package and sell</li> <li>● Trails marked with standard signage designs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diverse (Hiking, trekking, yoga, meditation, etc.)</li> <li>● Meaningful experiences to trail users</li> <li>● Safe and quality trails</li> <li>● A widely used promotional website (www.greathimalayatrails.com)</li> <li>● Another widely used website (http://greathimalayatrail.com/index.php)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Audited, certified and accredited trail products</li> <li>● TSG for planning, building, managing, maintaining and accreditation of trails</li> <li>● GHT certified enterprises on trails</li> <li>● Collection of GHT accredited TOs/TAs for responsible business practices (See note 3 for more information)</li> <li>● Destination Management Organization managed trails</li> <li>● International associations (ATTA, WTN, GFT)</li> <li>● Integrated with NTB</li> <li>● Uplifting Nepals brand image towards a premium tourist destination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Meaningful to trekkers</li> <li>● Positive economic impact to hosting communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● GHT promotional video (http://samarth-nepal.com/resource/great-himalaya-trails)</li> <li>● GHT collaboration with Yeti Airlines</li> <li>● GHT Instagrammers trip</li> <li>● GHT Face book</li> <li>● My GHT capturing individual tourists experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Marketing and booking through www.greathimalayatrails.com</li> <li>● Find a trek option for tailored trips with 50 trek itineraries for trail users</li> <li>● Offering of extraordinary journey with meaningful experience to trail users</li> <li>● B2C option for international inbound tour operators</li> <li>● B2B option for tour operators (inbound and outbound)</li> <li>● NTB leveraging the brand on its regular marketing platforms and campaigns</li> </ul>

Source: MoCTCA, 2017 and Author

GHT as a unique, challenging, and extraordinary network of Himalayan trails for hiking and

Figure 3: GHT brand visual identity and logo



Source: GHT brand guidelines

The GHT in Nepal's mountains and Himalayas can have strong brand appeal through developing and marketing trails as quality assured "GHT" branded products.

### Discussions and conclusion

The growth of tourists and tourism is usually the main aim for all trail destinations in the world. Growth brings with it a host of benefits and important challenges as pressure on trail communities and natural resources will also increase. The sustainable management of trekking trails through standard guidelines is vital in this tendency.

Developing and enhancing trekking trails to international standards that offer quality trail experiences, requires that trails are standardized, monitored and assessed following a robust system of auditing. This is especially necessary to meet the expectations of the global hiking, walking and trekking tourists. By defining a set of simple yet clear standards for such trails and having a committed team of certified trail auditors should be available to oversee the implementation of such standards, from signage to safety, is an important step for trails regions should ensure that the trail experiences offered to the world's trekking community are both within the bounds of safety and are accurately graded and described. Nepal GHT demonstrates its strong example in this regard.

The GHT stays true to the authentic appeal of Nepal's tourism attractions. It has the potential of network of extra ordinary journeys (natural and cultural diversified and religiously and spiritually unique that Nepal offers). Amidst a number of apparatuses for establishing GHT as the quality brand, the formulation of TSG is a timely step. GHT thus aims to provide a comprehensive guideline for trail infrastructure and local businesses focusing on information management (trail signage), safety, quality standards, environmental sustainability, and fair working conditions. The GHT adopts that better standards in trails and enterprises which will lead to products more marketable and more sustainable (both environmentally and from a business perspective). The guidelines also serves as a basis for the implementation of Great



Himalaya Trails brand in the country: any trail that meets the core principles of the guideline on safety, quality and better experience for visitors will be accredited to as a Great Himalaya Trails. Backed by the newly formulated TSG (standard policy and operational guidelines) and GHT/Green Flag Trails trained and certified trail auditors, Nepal's Great Himalaya Trails are thus moving from great to good and sustainable trails in terms of trail development planning, management, construction and maintenance.

Thus, having clear guidelines for trail development, monitoring, upkeep and accreditation, allows for the sector as a whole to work more effectively together to enhance those attributes that make elsewhere's trail offering unique and sought after. The uniqueness factor needs to be retained and kept in mind when it comes to trail standards and the trail experience. Nonetheless, the key of success rests further in the implementation of it and this will require close collaboration and partnership from all stakeholders including public, private sector, trail communities and development partners.

This paper recommends for future research in the areas of poverty reduction through entrepreneurial activities related to tourism in mountains, guide needs and training and impact of trail based adventure tourism on host communities.

#### **Note 1: European Ramblers' Association**

The European Ramblers' Association was founded in Germany in 1969 and by 1971 consisted of 14 ramblers' organizations from 6 countries. Today, this umbrella organization comprises 61 ramblers' organizations from 34 European states (+2 ramblers' organizations from Morocco and Canada/USA as observers)

#### **Note 2: World Trails Network**

The World Trails Network (<http://worldtrailsnetwork.org>) is an internationally representative body of the world's leading trails and trail destinations. It is based in Geneva, Switzerland and works to further the interests of the trails industry for the benefit of all.

#### **Note 3: Collection of GHT accredited Tour Operators (TOs)/Trekking Agencies (TAs) for responsible business practices**

##### **GHT Standards and quality goals for TOs/TAs**

The goal of the Great Himalaya Trails (GHT) partner tour operators in Nepal is that there is a mechanism to assure safety and quality of products and services offered by Nepalese tourism industry for international and domestic travelers that it contributes to their increased demand and value thereby benefiting the hosts and visitors in a sustainable, equitable manner.

### **Objectives of GHT accredited TOs/TAs for**

- To develop a mechanism to standardize tour operators as per global potential and accepted national and international standards and practices.
- To facilitate standardization process in line with global sustainable practices and standards
- To enhance awareness and commitment of TOs on delivery of quality tourism products in line with these standards
- Provide a forum for tour operators to incentivize their sustainable tourism products and services

To contribute to increased income and employment in the Great Himalaya Trails through implementation of such standards.

### **Major themes and criteria for TOs/TAs**

1. Commitment to quality and quantity
2. Professionalization of human resources (workforce) and their welfare
3. Respect of human and animal rights
4. Responsibility towards environment and community
5. Sustainable and responsible business operations
6. Responsibility towards local economy and community benefits
7. Sustainable and Responsible Excursions
8. Proper selection of destinations
9. Responsibility towards clients (*Atithi devo bhava*)

GHT Alliance is a network of TOs and TAs handling GHT packages. These agencies, while using the Great Himalaya Trail logo, practice fair trade trekking codes of conduct and Corporate Social Responsibility (Boustead, 2018).

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