

Socio-economic and Environmental Impact of Ecotourism in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Nepal is very rich in terms of its natural beauty and cultural diversity which have provided an enormous opportunity for tourism. Past literature works show that ecotourism helps enhance conservation of natural resources and biodiversity, preserve local cultures and alleviate poverty through an ethical and responsible approach of development. Acknowledging its potential benefits, Nepal has promoted ecotourism as a strategy to attract foreign capital particularly based on indigenous culture, heritage and environmental resources. However, ecotourism has demonstrated its shortcomings. Hence, this paper aimed to critically review the impact of eco-tourism on socio-economic and environmental aspects in Nepal. Based on the review of the various related literatures, this study concluded that ecotourism is crucial for natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, and increase in greenery in Nepal. It is a major contributor to the Nepalese economy, economic development and poverty alleviation. Its contribution to rural development, agricultural transformation, community enrichment and social empowerment is significant. However, it also consumes scarce resources, produces wastes, requires specific infrastructure, and increase pollution, and is likely to increase alcoholism, and create adverse impact on local traditional cultures and make local lifestyle vulnerable to Western influence.

INTRODUCTION AND STUDY OBJECTIVES

Tourism has not only been the issue of economic significance but also has some ecological attachment (Neupane, 2020). As Nepal is one of the most beautiful countries in the world with its astonishing landscapes and rich cultures, it has an enormous possibility of tourism (MoFA, n.d). The possibility of tourism in Nepal is very high because of its geographical location, its culture and traditions, landmarks, and its natural beauty (Sthapit, 2020). The major tourist activities in Nepal include wilderness and adventure activities such as mountain biking, bungee jumping, rock climbing and mountain climbing, trekking, hiking, bird watching, mountain flights, ultra-light aircraft flights, paragliding,

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and hot air ballooning over the mountains of the Himalaya, hiking, and mountain biking, exploring the waterways by raft, kayak or canoe and jungle safaris especially in the Terai region (MOFA, n.d.). Recently, ecotourism has been taken as a solution to increase the advantages and to lessen the disadvantages of tourism. It provides measures to preserve various flora, fauna, and cultural heritage that are found in Nepal.

In recent times, ecotourism has been a widely discussed topic in tourism. Any issue in tourism calls for ecotourism right away. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defined ecotourism as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” It implies that ecotourism is not only minimising physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts, but also building a culture of environmental respect and protection while providing positive experiences. Various terms, for instance, sustainable tourism, green tourism, or even responsible tourism are being used for it but in essence all of them stand for utilising the environmental and ecological facilities to sustain the tourism sector. Upadhaya et al (2022) observed that Local people from their study area perceived that infrastructure development and increase in the knowledge base are significant impacts of ecotourism. Nepal Tourism Policy 2009 and Vision 2020 also identify ecotourism as the key vehicle for sustainable tourism (Upadhaya et al, 2022).

Likewise, Maharjan and Sthapit (2022) observed that the eco-tourism activities in Ghandruk contributed to creation of economic opportunities for the community and its people as well as to effective sustainable conservation of local resources. In addition to this, ecotourism in Ghandruk also served as an important source of government revenue and as a social initiative for sustaining cultural heritage and environment. Nevertheless, in Nepal, an increasing number of tourists is exerting pressure by producing excessive solid wastes in the tourism area. As a result, many travel agencies are adapting environment-friendly practices like banning plastics and bringing wastes back.

In this context, the article aims to critically examine the socio-economic and environmental impact of ecotourism in Nepal based on the review of the past literature.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Concept and theories of ecotourism

Ecotourism was first defined as “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations found in these areas” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987). This implies that even the conventional view of ecotourism covers its aspects primarily as study and enjoyment without spoiling its originality.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature states that ecotourism is “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and

appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past, and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples”. This definition of ecotourism is more comprehensive as it expects the eco-tourists to be more responsible for protecting natural area along with its socio-economic benefits to local people.

Roches (2010) describes ecotourism as more comprehensive agreeing “definitions could range from passive to active stances incorporating the three common concepts in the form of trade-off scenarios. The three common concepts within ecotourism are natural-based, educational, and sustainable (which includes economic and social criteria)”. The more dynamic definition of ecotourism mainly emphasized on the sustainability as the ultimate concept.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. It also points out the activities to be adopted as principles which are as follows:

- Minimise physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climates.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

Cobbinah (2015) illustrated the development of the concept of ecotourism as shown in figure 1.

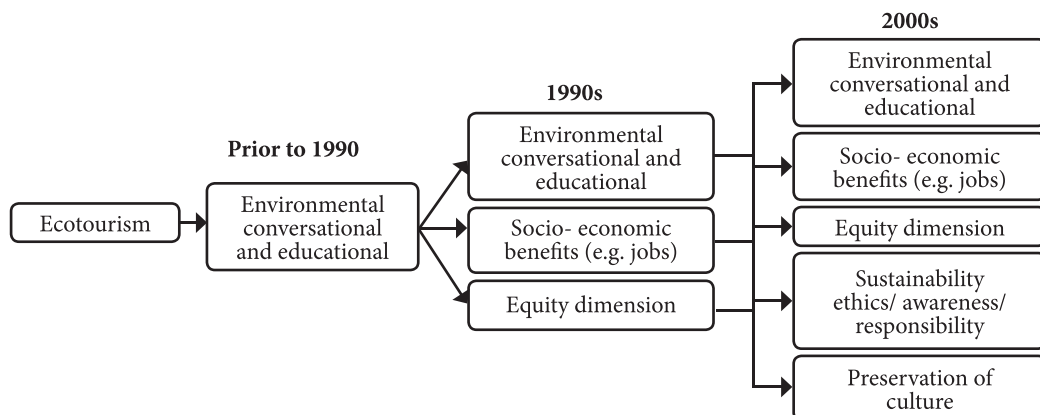


Figure 1: Development of concept of ecotourism

Although both look similar, there are some significant differences between ecotourism and conventional tourism. Generally, eco-tourists travel to nature-surrounded sites compared to mass tourists. According to The International Ecotourism Society, travel arrangements are also made by travellers themselves in ecotourism with nature-related activities like hiking and exploring trails, birdwatching or reef diving which tend to be more physically demanding whereas conventional tourism is more comfortable. In addition, ecotourism usually refers small groups and long-term stays while mass tourism refers to large groups staying for short periods.

There exists a number of reasons behind the growth of ecotourism. First one is the easier access to remote ecotourism destinations because of infrastructures developed. A growing interest of people in challenging tourism and greater awareness to protect the environment are also contributing factors for this.

Despite the aim of protecting environment, we should be aware of the possible harms ecotourism can cause to environment. Eco tourists often go to environmentally fragile areas that risk collapse. Moreover, disturbance of wildlife, the removal of vegetation, and increased garbage generation are also its possible consequences. In addition, visits done in sensitive periods like during breeding or hatching periods can affect wildlife. Some indirect impacts, for instance, the consumption of fuel for air or road travel; clearing lands to build infrastructures are also prone to ecotourism. Besides these, there is also the risk of ecotourism turning into mass tourism.

According to Butler (as cited in Dimitriou, 2017, p. 4), the following eight descriptive characteristics are consistent with an ecotourism experience:

- It must be consistent with a positive environmental ethic, fostering preferred behaviour.
- It does not denigrate the resource. There is no erosion of resource integrity.
- It concentrates on intrinsic rather than extrinsic values.
- It is bio-centric rather than homocentric in philosophy, in that an eco-tourist accepts nature largely in its terms, rather than significantly transforming the environment for personal convenience.
- Ecotourism must benefit the resource. The environment must experience a net benefit from the activity, although there are often spin-offs of social, economic, political or scientific benefits.
- It is a first-hand experience with the natural environment.
- There is an ecotourism, an expectation of gratification measured in appreciation and education, not in thrill-seeking or physical achievement. These latter elements are consistent with adventure tourism, the other division of natural environment (wildland) tourism.

- There are high cognitive (informational) and effective (emotional) dimensions to the experience, requiring a high level of preparation from both leaders and participants.

Costs and benefits of ecotourism

While examining the various aspects of the impact of ecotourism, it is relevant to discuss the direct and indirect cost and benefits of the impact of tourism on the natural environment, economy, and local communities.

Table 1

Environmental and Socio-economic Impact of Ecotourism

| Environmental Impacts | |
|---|---|
| Direct Benefits | Direct Costs |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provides incentive to protect environment, both formally (protected areas) and informally ● provides incentive for restoration and conversion of modified habitats ● Eco tourists actively assist in habitat enhancement (donations, policing, maintenance, etc.) | <p>danger that environmental carrying capacities will be unintentionally exceeded, due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● rapid growth rates ● difficulties in identifying, measuring and monitoring impacts over a long period ● idea that all tourism induces stress |
| Indirect Benefits | Indirect Costs |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● exposure to ecotourism fosters broader commitment to environmental well-being. ● space protected because of ecotourism provide various environmental benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● fragile areas may be exposed to less benign forms of tourism (pioneer function) ● may foster tendencies to put financial value on nature, depending upon attractiveness |
| Economic Impacts | |
| Direct Benefits | Direct Costs |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● revenues obtained directly from Eco tourists ● creation of direct employment opportunities ● strong potential for linkages with other sectors of the local economy ● stimulation of peripheral rural economies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● start-up expenses (acquisition of land, establishment of protected areas, superstructure, infrastructure) ● ongoing expenses (maintenance of infrastructure, promotion, wages) |

| Indirect Benefits | | Indirect Costs | |
|--|--|----------------|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● indirect revenues from Eco tourists (high multiplier effect) ● tendency of Eco tourists to patronize cultural and heritage attractions as 'add-ons' ● economic benefits from sustainable use of protected areas and inherent existence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● revenue uncertainties to in situ nature if consumption ● Revenue leakages due to imports, expatriate or non-local participation, etc. ● opportunity costs ● damage to crops by wildlife | | |
| Social Impacts | | | |
| Direct Benefits | | Direct Costs | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ecotourism accessible to a broad spectrum of the population ● aesthetic/spiritual element of experiences ● foster environmental awareness among Eco tourists and local population | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● intrusions upon local and possibly isolated cultures ● imposition of elite alien value system ● displacement of local cultures by parks ● Erosion of local control (foreign expert, in-migration of job seekers). | | |
| Indirect Benefits | | Indirect Costs | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● option and existence benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● potential resentment and antagonism of locals ● Tourist opposition to aspects of local culture (e.g., hunting, slash-burn agriculture). | | |

Note: Adapted from Weaver (1998)

Practices of Ecotourism in Nepal

Nepal has taken various initiatives for ecotourism. Several organisations such as Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) are involved in the field as national agencies. In addition, there are international agencies like World Conservation Union/ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) that are supporting ecotourism. Besides these, the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 was developed. There is also a central agency (DNPWC) which collaborates with 9 national parks, 3 wildlife reserves, 3 conservation areas and a hunting reserve. Moreover, Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP) is an initiative of the Nepal Government toward eco-tourism in Nepal which is aimed at poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism. This gets support from various international development agencies and non-government organisations. Furthermore, there are several laws and by-laws formulated to strengthen the ecotourism in Nepal.

STUDY METHODS

Study approach and technique

The study is based on review of the existing studies (literature) in the subject area. It has basically reviewed scholarly literature available online and related to ecotourism in Nepal. Various research journals, newspaper articles, official reports, and webpages of government and non-governmental organisations, were reviewed for which a 'keyword search technique' was used in Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Academia. These documents were examined with respect to their relevancy, and suitable ones were taken for the study. Based on the literature review using content analysis method, environmental and socio-economic impact of eco-tourism in Nepal are critically analysed.

Limitations

This review paper has several limitations. First, it has only used the electronic search which covers few available resources in this area, that too mostly available online. Secondly, it has used secondary data that would lack empirical tests. The availability of few and similar literatures would also limit the analysis and results. It could spare the room for improvements for future researchers and scholars in their future review and research works.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Impacts of Ecotourism

Ecotourism can have both positive and negative impacts on the environment, society and economy. In comparison, there are more beneficial impacts and few adverse impacts on socio-economic and environmental aspects. As Nepal is rich in ecological, social, cultural and ethnic diversity; there is a great scope of ecotourism for the overall development of country. Based on review of related literature, environmental and socio-economic impacts of ecotourism were analysed as below:

Environmental Impact

Ecotourism promotes preservation of the environment and sustainable communities. The more destinations are, the more opportunity for employment for the local communities. These people serve as guides, experts, demonstrators and hosts to visiting tourists which in turn raises the living standard of the indigenous. Also, by incorporating local cultural lodging, food, history and activities, communities can improve their welfare along with educating a wider population. It enhances sustainable development with the focus on ecosystem integrity and encourages local residents for environmental conservation. It further increases forest area, natural resources and biological diversity by decreasing deforestation and hunting rate. It is a major tool to develop an area with natural regeneration, new plantations, infrastructural development and new destinations for visitors and nature-based tourism. With well thrived flora and fauna, ecotourism

supplies real experiences of natural environments and solutions to increased tourists and increased degradation of natural areas.

However, increased tourism comes with increased pressure to develop areas and make them more inclusive and resort-like. With more accommodation, businesses and amenities in these communities or destinations damages habitats. As a result, the pressure on native species will increase. There is also the risk of distorting indigenous cultures to consumer culture which leads to the exploitation of existing resources and wildlife.

Ecotourism helps to enhance forests, flora, fauna, greenery, alternative energy sources, natural resources and biodiversity in Ghandruk (K.C., et al., 2015). There are good rooms, facilities, lodging, clean and comfortable stays, local cuisines, natural scenery and positive interactions with host communities and other benefits to tourists in ACA (Nepal, 2007). Greenery, forest resources, water resources and other natural resources are managed to promote ecotourism which helps to increase the biodiversity of flora and fauna in the country.

Although eco tourists are motivated to preserve the environment, there can be many negative impacts (Shrestha & Walinga, 2003). Trekking and mountaineering tourism can have more environmental impacts than others. There is deforestation, pollution and cultural degradation in the Sagarmatha area due to tourism development activities (Musa, et al., 2004). It is because eco tourists often go to these environmentally fragile areas. Also, visits might occur during sensitive periods such as during breeding or hatching periods. There is a risk of turning visits of Eco tourists to mass tourism at the site. Visits may cause some indirect impacts such as the consumption of aeroplane fuel. The impacts of all these factors can take several forms such as water pollution, land use pollution and ecological disruption. For instance, although the valley between Pisang and Manang is broad and there is enough room for further expansion of settlements, all the new constructions are being built only along the trekking route spoiling the natural beauty of the route (Schmeltzer, 2000). In some areas, construction of roads and other infrastructures had decreased the scenic beauty and greenery in the environment disturbing the flow of tourists in the area. Moreover, trekking tourism in most of the popular trekking routes of Nepal is disturbed by rural road construction (Schmeltzer, 2000). For the sustainability in Sagarmatha National Park, local participation, economic viability, education dissemination, tourist satisfaction, environmental, cultural, economic and social impacts, health and safety of the tourist and minimising of tourism impact is important (Musa, et al., 2004). Based on the above discussion, the environmental impacts of ecotourism can be summarised as follows:

Positive impacts

- provides incentive to protect environment, both formally and informally
- provides incentive for restoration and conversion of modified habitats

- Eco tourists actively assisting in habitat enhancement via donations, policing, maintenance, etc.
- exposure to ecotourism fosters broader commitment to environmental well-being
- space protected because of ecotourism provide various environmental benefits
- increase in forest cover,
- conservation of flora and fauna,
- increase in greenery,
- use of alternative energy sources,
- conservation near protected areas
- Decreases deforestation and hunting rate,

Negative impacts

- fragile areas are exposed,
- increased levels of pollution,
- effects of pollution, such as killing fishes,
- consumes scarce resources,
- produces waste by-products.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Social Impact

Interaction between host and guest contributes to bringing social changes in local communities. The other factors are differences in their values, beliefs, traditions, customs, lifestyle and attitudes towards strangers. The longer they spend time, the more the impact will be. Furthermore, the increased number of Eco tourists brings various benefits to local people. For instance, they get access to several new facilities which are developed for the tourists. Also, local cultures, arts and traditions are preserved. Besides these, it provides many job opportunities which help in making local people independent, specifically for women and youths. Ecotourism, in general, attracts funds, enhances transportation, improves accommodation, reduces poverty and enhances social stability and harmony.

However, according to scholars, in contradiction with cultural revival, 'demonstration effect' can also be seen, i.e., local people imitating tourists' way of life. The cultural concerns in the interaction between tourists and communities can also be viewed in terms of assimilation, acculturation and cultural drift (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). A large number of tourists and outsiders may displace local people to the periphery from the centre of tourism activities which can result in conflicts.

Extensive research has confirmed that tourism not only plays an important role in economic development, but also brings enormous socio-cultural impacts (Hall & Lew, 1998; Lindberg et.al, 2001; Pizam & Milman, 1984; Smith 1989). Ecotourism addresses gender inequities, social pride, and excitement of children, peace and prosperity in Barpak. Coordination of local community members, government agencies and tourism entrepreneurs had helped in the successful implementation of the ecotourism project (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Ecotourism had helped in controlling antisocial activities, conserving religious and cultural heritage, maintaining peace and prosperity and increasing cooperation of people with religious beliefs and religious tolerance (KC., et al., 2015).

In a study conducted in Annapurna Conservation area, Bhatta (2019) found that almost all of respondents believed that tourism has enhanced resident's feeling of pride and respect towards their indigenous culture, and traditions. For instance, the Sherpas in the well-known tourism destination of Khumbu are involved with the cash economy as a result of tourism and have therefore become more westernised. But they have apparently not lost the essence of their cultural identity and have even developed an enhanced sense of ethnic pride because of the value placed on their services and culture by tourists (Weaver, 2001). In a study, the results show that the majority of the local people perceived that their knowledge base had been improved due to ecotourism (Upadhaya ya, et al, 2022). Further, they believe that ecotourism impacts the educational development of their children. Based on the discussion, the social impacts of ecotourism can be pointed out as follows:

Positive impacts

- ecotourism accessible to a broad spectrum of the population
- aesthetic/spiritual element of experiences
- foster environmental awareness among Eco tourists and local population
- traditional hospitality of residents
- traditional culture strengthened
- conducive to the social stability and harmony

Negative impacts

- intrusions upon local and possibly isolated cultures
- imposition of elite value system
- displacement of local cultures by parks
- erosion of local control because of foreign experts and in-migration of job seekers
- potential resentment and antagonism of locals

- tourist opposition to aspects of local culture such as hunting and slash-burn agriculture
- conflicts between the locals and government authorities
- increase in alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution
- foreign cultures impact local traditional and plain cultures
- traditional local people having simple life are vulnerable to Western influence
- community members do not share same understanding and appreciation of financial growth

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Economic aspect of ecotourism includes employment in hotels, tourist restaurants and other tourism activities. It is an integral part of the master development strategy of a developing nation (Doan, 2000; Stem, et al., 2003). Integrating ecotourism with farming activities, handicraft and other local businesses also brings benefits to the society. It helps to generate revenue from fees and licences from parks and protected areas. It increases employment, releases environmental pressure and helps in regional economic development (Bin, et al., 2008). Moreover, one of the studies revealed that people were only fulfilling their basic needs rather than making more money which significantly improved or changed their lifestyle through tourism activities (Upadhaya ya, et al, 2022). On the other hand, despite its significant benefits to local residents, tourism has also been perceived as an agent to increase crime rate, and use of drugs in the local area (Bhatta, 2019). Despite some exceptions, local communities perceive tourism as a tool to improve their quality of life.

Usually, people think of the environment and the economy as mutually exclusive; however, ecotourism in Nepal has challenged this mindset. Ecotourism contributes to about 4% of Nepal's total GDP and provides varying forms of employment to about 200,000 people. Therefore, tourism is one of the important sectors contributing to the economic uplifting of the tourism dependent community and one of the contributors to Nepal's economy. It has helped in economic development and job creation to local villagers with the establishment of hotels, restaurants, tea shops, bakery cafes, grocery and gift shops in Ghandruk (K.C., et al., 2015). It can generate more income and help local people to provide basic needs for household consumption in Manaslu. In addition, protected areas across the country have created a substantial decrease in inequality and poverty in Nepal. Studies have found increasing the number of protected areas led to increased employment from 10% to 70% for the villagers. Furthermore, in a study of homestay operators in Nepal, 83% reported feeling empowered and 88% reported improving their lifestyle after opening their business. These positive outcomes ecotourism offers potential paths out of poverty for even the most remote villages in Nepal. However, ineffective management of tourism causes a negative impact on park resources. Based on the discussion, the economic impacts of ecotourism can be pointed out as follows:

Positive impacts

- revenues obtained directly from Eco tourists
- creation of direct employment opportunities
- strong potential for linkages with other sectors of the local economy
- stimulation of peripheral rural economies
- indirect revenues from Eco tourists
- rental of accommodation for visitors,
- sale of handicrafts and food,
- improved infrastructure,
- increased business for local stores,
- better living conditions,
- promotion of linkage between agriculture and tourism,
- development of rural economy,
- transfer of rural surplus labourers to non-agricultural industries,
- change in traditional rural lifestyle
- increase in income of farmers.

Negative impacts

- Start-up expenses for acquisition of land, establishment of protected areas, infrastructure etc.
- expenses for ongoing maintenance of infrastructure
- revenue uncertainties and revenue leakages
- opportunity costs
- damage to crops by wildlife
- ban on trade,
- restrictions on mountaineering / expeditions and trekking activities
- lack of proper utilisation of park resources

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ecotourism has environmental, social and economic impacts to the community, nation and the whole world. From above discussions, it is revealed that ecotourism is crucial for natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, and increase in greenery in Nepal. It also enhances mutual help and cooperation, conserves religious and cultural heritage, and maintains peace and prosperity in the society. Besides these, it is a major contributor to Nepal's economy and helps in economic development, job creation, increase in household consumption and poverty alleviation. Also, it has made significant

contributions to rural development, agricultural transformation, community enrichment and social empowerment.

Despite these positive impacts, it has various negative impacts. For instance, it consumes scarce resources, produces waste by-products, requires specific infrastructure, and increases pollution. In addition, it promotes social conflict by challenging cultural values, increases conflicts between the locals and government authorities, increases alcoholism, drug addiction, adverse impact on local traditional and plain cultures and also makes simple life vulnerable to Western influence. Moreover, the local economy is damaged due to the ban on trade, mountaineering/expeditions and trekking activities and negative impact on park resources.

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