



Designing Research for Himalayan Tourism: Travelogue-Based Approach to Fieldwork for Pilot Study

**Dr. Ratna Mani Nepal^{1*}, Dr. Rajan Binayek Pasa^{2*}, Ramesh Prasad Bhatt^{3*},
Shankar Tiwari⁴, Chanda Parajuli⁵, Bishal Gnyawali⁶, Chakra Pani Joshi⁷,
Anupama Pyakurel^{*}, Numa Thamsuhang⁹**

1. Assoc. Prof. at Tribhuvan University Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) and Principal Investigator (PI) of the Project
2. Asst. Prof. at Central Department of Rural Development and Co-PI
3. Asst. Prof. at CNAS and Research Assistant
- 4-9. CNAS, IRG-Project Team Members

Abstract

The Himalayan tourism ecosystems are becoming increasingly climate-vulnerable in Nepal, with local residents facing growing risks from glacial retreat, permafrost thaw, shifting precipitation, and more frequent extreme events. This paper presents a travelogue-based approach to field work of a pilot study related to the Tribhuvan University's national priority research project, "Developing an Integrated Framework for Climate Resilient Tourism Planning in the Himalayan Regions of Nepal" (TU-NPAR-081/82-IRG-03). It identifies key lessons, challenges, and methodological considerations to guide future researchers undertaking large-scale, multidisciplinary research in climate-vulnerable Himalayan tourism regions. The six-day pilot (15–20 June 2026) was conducted in Chumnubri Rural Municipality-3, Gorkha district, Manaslu region, as the initial phase of the broader project. The study used a qualitative, narrative-driven research design using travelogue-based approach. Researchers' field work preparation, planning, and daily experiences were treated as narratives for description. Thematic analysis and travelogue-based place writing were used to analyze the researchers' experiences. Although the off-season offered the pilot team greater flexibility, low visitor numbers and closed businesses reduced respondent intercepts, reinforcing the need for peak-season fieldwork. The instruments showed reliability, though the pilot highlighted the need to cluster respondents across settlements. These lessons directly inform full-fledged survey design of the research project proposed in the Khumbu, Langtang National Park, and Annapurna Conservation Area regions. The seven reflections presented offer a blueprint for the project and transferable lessons for similar large-scale research.

Keywords: Climate-resilient tourism planning, Manaslu region, Himalayan community vulnerability, Travelogue-based place writing, Pilot study, Field work

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*R.M. Nepal (nepalratnamani@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0079-2743>),

*R.B. Pasa (rajan.pasa@cdrd.tu.edu.np; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8886-7714>),

*R.P. Bhatt (bhattaramesh3@gmail.com)



Introduction

The Himalayan ecosystems are becoming most sensitive due to escalating climate change effects. Climate warming in the Himalayan region is about 1.5 to 3 times higher than the global average and has led to significant changes in the availability of water and human livelihoods (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development [ICIMOD], 2023). In Nepal, this has caused severe climate risks including glaciers retreat, flash floods, shifting precipitation, and land-slides which threatens local livelihoods as well as tourism infrastructures. The issue of climate change and tourism is becoming increasingly significant in the Himalayan country, Nepal (Pasa et al., 2026) which receives above 40 percent of the total tourism revenue from the region. The current research on the climate change and tourism nexus relies heavily on conventional top-down models which often ignores iterative research process and researchers' experiences. It paves a way to travelogue-based approach to field work for pilot study vital to complex, dynamic and qualitative field realities.

To safeguard the sustainability of the fragile Himalayan region, recent academic and institutional initiatives have increasingly focused on climate-resilient tourism planning. For instance, Tribhuvan University's Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) launched a three-year national priority area research project (NPAR) entitled 'Developing an Integrated Framework for Climate-Resilient Tourism Planning in the Himalayan Region of Nepal' supported through Nepal Government's Innovative Research Grant (IRG). The project's proposed study sites are major tourism hubs in the Nepal's Himalayan region, namely, Khumbu, Langtang, Annapurna regions. Contemporary research designs heavily favor mixed-method frameworks (Cresswell & Clark, 2017). Existing frameworks examine climate vulnerability using macro-level modeling, standardized household surveys and secondary data (Phuyal, 2024). These frameworks link macro-level climate modeling and time-series economic indicators with broad stakeholder surveys to establish policy frameworks.

Despite these macro-level and policy-oriented frameworks, a critical execution gap remains. Firstly, the existing methodological frameworks for climate-change assessments depend on abstract satellite mapping and heavy meteorological data (Gerasimina-Theodora et al., 2025). It barely captures local socio-ecological realities. Secondly, the standard surveys and elite interviews often overlook the need of pilot study as these methods follow deductive reasoning. The established methodologies also assume tourism infrastructures and its stakeholders as fix realities rather than dynamic and evolving socio-ecological spaces.

To address these methodological constraints and to complement the final research design, this paper introduces a travelogue-based approach to fieldwork tailored specifically for a pilot study. A travelogue-based approach is basically a qualitative

research instrument which helps to examine the various components of a pilot study and refining the research objectives, tools and design for the final field work. The approach helps researcher capture seasonality, field timing, population dynamics, and reflections on socio-cultural spaces (Mansfield & Potočnik, 2023). The travelogue synthesizes field workers (researchers) direct observations on the local realities which supports building adaptation strategies and contextual work plan for the final stage field work. It is a preparatory tool which enables researchers to map unexpected micro-level vulnerabilities, refine context-specific variables and ground-truth large-scale quantitative surveys as well as qualitative interviews before executing large scale final field work (Mansfield et. al. 2020). This paper argues that the travelogue-based method provides the necessary qualitative nuance to bridge the knowledge-action gap for the field work in the Himalayan region. By transforming researcher-led action into deep field reflection, this method offers a flexible, bottom-up foundation for refining the research design and building truly adaptive, climate-resilient tourism policies across the Himalayan region of Nepal.

Given this context, this paper applies travelogue-based approach to reflect on a pilot study of the Tribhuvan University's National Priority Area Research Project (TU-NPAR-081/82-IRG-03) entitled "*Developing an Integrated Framework for Climate Resilient Tourism Planning in the Himalayan Region of Nepal*," conducted by the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). A six-day pilot study (15–20 June 2026) was carried out in Chumnubri Rural Municipality-3, Gorkha. The objectives of this paper are to document methodological lessons, examines the feasibility of the research design, get feedback for the refinement of data collection instruments, assess stakeholder engagement process, and field-level challenges to inform future interdisciplinary research projects in the Himalayan region of Nepal.

Methodology

Research Design

This pilot study adopts a qualitative, narrative-driven research design using a travelogue-based approach. This methodology treats researcher's journeys to the pilot study site, Philim of Chumnubri Rural Municipality, as a primary text. It captures lived experiences, spatial interactions, and cultural observations in a chronological and reflective format. The goal of this pilot is to test the feasibility, reflecting the seasonality, observing the local socio-ecology, data-gathering, and drawing an analytical framework of the project before full-scale implementation.

Field Work Area

Chumnuhari Rural Municipality, located in the northern part of Gorkha District, Gandaki Province, Nepal, was selected as the study area due to its high vulnerability to climate change and dependence on mountain-based livelihoods and tourism. The municipality consists of seven wards, namely Chhekumbar, Chumnuhari, Bihi, Prok, Lho, Samagaun, and Sirdibas, and covers approximately 1,649 km², with elevations ranging from 1,239 m to 8,163 m above sea level. It lies within the Manaslu Conservation Area and includes Mount Manaslu (8,163 m), one of the world's highest peaks, along with other Himalayan peaks, glaciers, rivers, and high-altitude lakes.

The area is inhabited mainly by indigenous mountain communities, including Nuwari and Chhume ethnic groups, with distinctive cultural traditions and livelihood practices. The municipality's remote Himalayan geography, rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and growing trekking tourism make it an important site for examining the relationship between climate change, socio-economic vulnerability, livelihood adaptation, and sustainable tourism development. However, communities in this region face increasing challenges from glacier retreat, changing climatic conditions, limited infrastructure, and institutional constraints, highlighting the need for context-specific research on climate resilience and adaptation strategies (Chumnuhari Rural Municipality, 2025). For the researchers, field work in the Chumnuhari Rural Municipality becomes safe, interactive and brings vivid experiences of tourism and climate change nexus.

Participants Selection

Participant field workers in the pilot study were selected from among the university interdisciplinary faculties and graduates. Actually, the entire project team was involved in the pilot's field work. The principal investigator and co-investigator were TU's faculty belonged to Center for Nepal Asian Studies (CNAS) and Central Department of Rural Development (CDRD) respectively. Other team members were: two Scholars pursuing PhD in Rural Development, one MPhil Scholar from Sociology, and two research assistants from Geography and Population Studies. The participants also included two enumerators; one a graduate in Political Science and the other a trained Chartered Accountant. The team was fairly inclusive in terms of gender, education and training in field work. The study was conducted in Philim of Chumnuhari Rural Municipality referring the high tourist density and similar spatial layout to that of proposed study sites for final research execution.

Method of Analysis

This study analyzed the travelogue, or fieldwork narrative, of the field journey from Kathmandu to Sirdibas (Philim) as data sources. The travelogue was approached in a

manner similar to that of Mansfield et al. (2020), who used deep mapping and literary approaches to elicit emotions regarding the spatial practices' researchers experienced on site. This analytical lens, together with the recent shift toward travelogue-based place writing as a methodological approach, offers a model that researchers can learn from and apply to their own research (Mansfield et al., 2020; Mansfield & Potočnik Topler, 2023). At first the textual data were transcribed verbatim. It was followed by open coding identifying themes related to seasonality, tourism activities, households' preparedness, business motive and environmental impacts on tourism infrastructure.

This approach allowed the research team to question travel experience on understanding climate vulnerability, problem of infrastructure and community resilience as well as capability of the project team members. The travelogue-based place writing thus highlighted following areas: (1) sensory and affective elements of the off seasonal field experience; (2) positioning and phenomena and (3) emergent themes concerning accessibility, environmental change and tourism infrastructure.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the main study. The pilot findings were used exclusively for instrument refinement and were not included in the final dataset. Ethics was approved by the research ethics review process under executive council decision of ethical review board of Tribhuvan University (see Tribhuvan University, Ethical Review Board/Committee, 2022). The study emphasized that the dignity, autonomy, confidentiality, beneficence and equity of the human subjects have been taken into consideration. Besides, the study also submitted research permission letter to the municipal office of the Chumnuhari Rural Municipality before start field work.

Pre-Field Preparation

Prior to field mobilisation, the research team undertook two preparatory phases to ensure the readiness of instruments, personnel, and logistics for the pilot study. Phase I focused on the development and refinement of survey and interview tools, while Phase II addressed team composition, role assignment, and logistical arrangements ahead of departure. These preparatory steps were essential for ensuring that the six-day pilot field visit to Chumnuhari Rural Municipality-3 could proceed smoothly and that the instruments and team were adequately prepared for the field conditions described in the findings section.

Phase I (Tools Development). This phase focused on finalizing the survey and interview tools before their use in Chumnuhari. Based on the two inception workshops, the CNAS Academic Stakeholders Cooperation program and the TAAN industry and

community stakeholders' consultation, along with three rounds of Delphi refinement, the research team developed three questionnaires set for local residents, business owners, and tourists. Semi-structured interview and focus group discussion guides were also prepared for institutional stakeholders, including local government offices, conservation project offices, schools, and health facilities. The tools were digitized in KoboToolbox, tested for skip logic, and translated into simple Nepali language suitable for communities with different levels of Nepali proficiency. Before the field visit, the team conducted an internal pre-test to assess clarity, question sequence, completion time, and offline data collection functions. Necessary improvements were made before the six-day pilot field visit.

Phase II (Survey Team and Preparation). The field team consisted of nine members, comprising the principal investigator, co-investigator, research assistants, and PhD/MPhil scholars, including three females. Before departure, the team reviewed field briefings, role assignments, and ethical protocols, and finalized logistical arrangements, including travel equipment, a first aid box, power banks, and other requirements. The team departed Kathmandu on the morning of 15 June 2026.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the six-day pilot field study conducted in Chumnuhari Rural Municipality-3. Building on the tool development and team preparation described in the Methodology section (Phase I and Phase II), this section reports on Phase III: Field Mobilization or field activities, encounters, and reflections generated during the six-day pilot. The findings provide insights into the study area, communities, and challenges of conducting research in a high-altitude, off-season setting. The lessons and recommendations from this pilot can also support future researchers in designing similar field studies. The section is organized around the day-by-day field travelogue, followed by seven field reflections that correspond directly to the paper's objectives.

Phase III: Field Mobilization

First Day Travelogue: Kathmandu to Sirdibas (Phelim)

Departure and Route

On the first day (15th June), the members of the research team met at two specified meeting spots at Kirtipur Naya Bazar Gate and Balkhu Chowk. We then went together at 08:30 AM after joining at the Sitapaila petrol pump. We decided to go through Sitapaila, and avoid the busy Nagdhunga area of Mahendra Highway, to reach Dhunibeshi in Dhading. This was one of the popular green routes and the first sight of this day's scenic beauties. We traveled through Dhunibeshi Municipality and Thakre

Municipality and entered into Galchi Rural Municipality. We had breakfast poori tarkari at Galchi Bazar. It is quite a busy local market situated at the point where the Rasuwa track goes north towards Langtang Valley. We then set off after breakfast. The trip proceeded on through Gajuri Rural Municipality, taking a right turn at a crossing on way to Malekhu Bazar, then crossed the Trishuli River that led into Siddhalekh Rural Municipality. We had a good opportunity to see the Siddhalekh viewpoint on the top of the hill located far left side during the peaceful drive. The renowned panorama view above the agro-tourism village of Nalang, famous for its tea farms and homestays. More interesting, the entirety of the thirteen local government units (eleven rural municipalities and two municipalities) of Dhading District can be observed from this top. The landscape detail was observed as a possible relevant factor in tourism planning research: Landscape viewsheds are becoming an asset of communities in mountain planning.

Entering Budhigandaki Valley

Following Thopal Khola, we went on the road further into the district headquarters, Dhading Besi followed the Budhigandaki Valley northward. The location of Sotikhola was said to be a well-known rest point for trekkers on the way to the Tsum Valley and the Manaslu Circuit and it was agreed to have a lunch stop there. Thinking about hot lunch, we went through Salyantar, a large and long elevated plain farmland (tar) which is the administrative center of Tripurasundari Rural Municipality. Salyantar is located in a fertile land area between Budhigandaki and Ankhu Rivers, and showcases the capability of the region's agricultural industry, as well as its tourism importance.

We crossed Budhigandaki River at Arughat from Dhading to Gorkha District. We had hot lunch in Sotikhola. The road descends, slightly leading into the gorge of Dharche Rural Municipality. We pointed out the following features of the trek that provide a break from the walk: the Nyauli Waterfall, caravan village of Tatopani, nestled by its natural hot springs, and the starting point of most trekkers to Manaslu Circuit Trek at Dobhan.

On the way, after passing through Lapu bhir and Kalo bhir, the stone falling cliff zone as well as observing Migu, Yarupade and Yangu villages we reached Jagat. It serves as the entry point from Chumnuhari Rural Municipality and the official entry point in the Manaslu Circuit trail. In this place the Manaslu Conservation Area Project operates its checkpoint. Beyond Jagat it is a cliff track on the top of Budhigandaki gorge passing through Salleri, Sirdibas, Philim and Ghattekhol. A 12 Megawatt hydropower being constructed by Sahara Nepal was observed on the right nearby Salleri. It is an infrastructure development project with local energy access implications and promoting tourism services. After ten hours of driving, we reached Philim (1,590 meters) and went to Laliguras Hotel. This hinterland and administrative center were the primary

settlement of the study area. The evening was ended with an introduction to officers of Manaslu Conservation Area Project and Administrative Chief Officer of Chumnubri Rural Municipality. This opening meeting became immediately beneficial to the research team members. It contributed to building institutional goodwill and gave the institutional orientations from officials who possess an in-depth knowledge of various aspects of the benefits of community and inclusive tourism.

Second-Third Day: Field Work

Field Briefing and Team Division

We conducted an early field briefing in the morning on Day 2 (16th June) and carefully discussed ethical protocols, selection of respondents and the need for Nepali language communication. A formalization of the above discussion took place during the briefing, but was reinforced by the previous evening's interaction. In this regard the team was divided into two groups: Group A (principal investigator) along with 5 researchers into mobilizing around Philim–Nagchet–Ghattekhola–Sirdibas settlements. The co-investigator, along with four researchers, made the challenging journey to the off-road Sarsion (2200 meter) village nestled on a hillside above the main circuit, Group B.

Group A: Philim, Hinterland Surveys

On the second day, the team visited Philim, Nagchet, Ghatte Khola and Sirdibas. The survey questionnaires were filled by the business owners, local residents and tourists. It was off season time. Business owners seemed less energetic and worried with flow of international visitors. The local residents have both positive and negative views on tourism activities. Tourism has created earning and learning opportunities to the limited villagers having good socio-economic status in the village. Most of the villagers are still excluded from the slogan inclusive tourism benefit sharing.

On the third day, the team carried out key informant interviews with institutional stakeholders, namely, staff in Chumnubri Rural Municipality Office, Ward No. 3 Office, Community Action Nepal (a local NGO), and Buddha Secondary School, in addition to structured surveys. There was a five-day ICT teacher training at the school. A recruitment exam for health assistants was being held at municipal office. The team was fortunate enough to participate in focus group discussions with teacher trainees and health workers, which provided rich qualitative data on the impact of tourism on service delivery, use of infrastructure and community wellbeing. Most of the participants seemed worried about inclusive benefit sharing and sustainability of tourism activities and realized the importance of developing climate-resilient tourism planning framework for managing mountain tourism activities even in Manaslu region.

Group B: Trek to Sarsiun and Pansang

On the second day, Group B left Philim early in the morning, and headed up through greenery forest and up steps in the terraced farmland to Sarsiun village. This is an alternative-route settlement. It was a steep climb of about an hour which offered a superb viewpoint across the Budhigandaki River valley towards the ridge villages of Pansang and Chisapani settlements. Sarsiun has four homestays and a small community in its three settlements (Sarsiun, Aanga and Maniraong) of less than twenty households each. We interacted with a woman who had the highest herd in the area (60⁺ goats). Economic Agency was represented by Homestay tourism and goat farming. Moreover, the agro-pastoral livelihoods also overlap with the seasonality of mountain tourism. Also conducted interactions with lady school teacher and chairperson of school management committee. They suggested opening alternative route to Ganesh himal basecamp from their locality. The survey of the local residents was done in Sarsiun village only. We could not visit Aanga and Maniraong located upside the hilly range. After having lunch in homestay, we decided to move down towards Chisapani. On the way, we met with 83 years old active man who was returning to Aanga village, after he had gone to his son's local shop in Philim. The meeting provided a glimpse into intergenerational data: the unvarnished, first-person observations of the senior resident about the evolution of tourism over his lifetime in terms of the goods, the visitors and the prices, gave the narrative reflections.

On the morning of the third day, we reached Chisapani and crossed suspension bridge and led to Pansang. It is a popular village in the District for rearing the highest number of goats and sheep by every household. At present the villagers have more than 5000 goats and sheep. It is a terminal point, which is accessible by jeep and motorbike, and therefore important point for data collecting. We met with four domestic tourists and interacted for a while. This highlights the importance of selecting access point either entry point or exit point for conducting field survey. The group then divided, two researchers went back to Chisapani to consult with business owners and the other two ascended to the higher settlement of Pansang. There, a young lady shopkeeper made it easy for consulting with senior women of the community. There was an authorization and encouragement from a local intellectual, who was contacted by cell phone of the lady shopkeeper. It made the point that if respected, community gatekeepers can be enabling partners and not obstacles. Before leaving Pansang, we conducted flash talk with lady teacher in the school premises. She was a tourism entrepreneur who had operated a hotel in Khumbu and Manang a decade earlier. She used to share her cooking experiences to the local business owner operating their business without necessary knowledge and skills.

Evening Debriefs and Key Findings

In the evening all of us got together for the field briefing. Assessment of resident data collection, key informant data collection and tourist data collection was satisfactory, adequate, and inadequate respectively due to low footfall in off seasons. The pilot confirmed that the study's completion should be coordinated with the peak time for conducting of tourism surveys. During the pilot period, most of the commercial establishments were closed during the monsoon and business owner surveys were also challenging. On Day 3, we agreed to change the focus of the tourist surveys to the Jagat entry point by which only a set proportion of movements come and go, regardless of the season.

Fourth-Fifth Day: Field Work

Chisapani Business Owner Surveys

Sunny morning (18th June) saw the completion of business owner surveys which were deferred on the previous day. Group B, moved into Chisapani early in the morning. This morning was a new experience. Indian vendor was supplying chicks to the villagers. A micro-enterprise feeding into the tourism sector, existing in a symbiotic relationship with it, with local poultry production supplying a certain proportion of the supply to trek lodges. We interacted with local youths who were travelling to Gorkha bazar. They expressed their views on the unreliability of economic migration, which is partly caused by the unreliable income flows from seasonal tourism. We also noted a mule caravan coming down from Pansang. This is bringing supplies for mountain communities outside the road, a stark example of a supply chain reality of connecting upland communities to the market economy. The mules' rider read the notice posted on the wall of suspension bridge. It was about stopping the goods supply by mules for nine days (10 to 18 Asar) due to road construction work in Nubri Valley side. For them it was the peak season for supplying necessary items in this valley.

Visit Jagat, Entry Checkpoint

On the fifth day (19th June), after having lunch at Philim, Group A and B jointly visited the rural municipal office and then interacted with administrative staff. Then moved towards Jagat and Bazar for field survey. Interviews were held with the staff of the Tourism Management Joint Sub-Committee. This local body controls entry fees, guide requirements and visitor management. Key informant interviews were also conducted with school teacher and business owners. These institutional voices supplement the resident/tourist data collected elsewhere and offered a governance perspective. The highlight of the day was at Jagat. At one point, we got a chance to be introduced to a Monk Professor from Lumbini Buddhist University with the accompaniment of an American senior professor. The monk was headed back to his birthplace Chhekumpar

located in Tsum Valley. His teacher from America was on a cultural immersion visit. We returned to Philim together. This common tea meeting at Philim and these photographs captured the amazing mix of local, national and international perspectives that the Tsum Valley offers. Shared about what diaspora academics and cross-cultural scholarly discussion can do about the development of the mountain communities.

The day ended with a meeting with a female homestay owner in the making in Prok village, who was going through the formal registration process with the municipality. A very concrete example of formalization made possible by the process of governance in tourism, and a direct connection between the policy questions raised by the research and experience on the ground. The evening briefing was about the logistics of the return trip and an initial synthesis of the three days of field data. The data exposed emerging patterns in the perceptions of tourism benefits, in institutional gaps of coordination and in the need to consider differentiated survey pathways for directly and indirectly benefited households.

Day Six Travelogue: Return to Kathmandu

Final Institutional Consultation

On 20th June, before leaving Philim, we met with the Vice President of Chumnubri Rural Municipality in her residence. It was a sign of respect, and reaffirmed the research team's commitment to institutional partnership. During the coffee, the Vice President was given a briefing on the research framework, the results of the pilot survey and the observations from the two field days. Her expression of thanks for the research team's choice of this context was also data, confirming to the team the community's awareness. It is underrepresented in tourism policy research, as well as its desire to engage with scholarly work. The final morning was rich with cultural experiences, including a short visit to the Ghatte Khola traditional water mill, unexpected element of cultural richness. Village inhabitants nearby had assembled to grind wheat flour a communal activity practiced even after the electrification and accessibility of markets. This indicates that the social structure of the villages is a social reality that must be taken into account when planning for tourism. The mills are, themselves, heritage sites and suitable for community based cultural tourism.

Returning Journey

The ride back was quite an adventure and brought its own set of rewards. The team left Philim and Nagchet then journeyed back through Ghatte Khola, Sirdibas, Salleri and reached nearby Jagat Khola. We took an unplanned break at the twin waterfalls, milky-white falling from a Dudh Kunda (milk pond) and another as a normal clear-water fall took an unplanned break. A time of physical refreshment and collective decompression after 4 days of field engagement followed by swimming and sacred bath in colorful pool

located at the base of waterfall at Jagat Khola. Most of the team members got a chance to take sacred bath after a long time. This opportunity was regarded as a set of rewards for us. Moving ahead, surprisingly, an emergency arose when the driver-side Land Cruiser tyre became loose after the bolt came off at Dobhan. We, the five members of the Land Cruiser team, walked a portion of the journey to Tatopani where the driver organized five motor bicycles to continue the trip to Machikhola hinterland. This was followed by another walk and a replacement vehicle from Sotikhola where the team had come for a late lunch. Although the endeavor was complex to organise, it provided a welcome introduction into the local transport network, and a greater understanding of the types of mobility challenges both residents and visitors in the territory may encounter. After two days without proper meals, the journey was refreshed by a night's stay at Taribeshi, a place known for its Ankhu River fish fry and fresh milk tea. The convoy crossed the Thopal Khola and Trishuli River as the sun set from the Murali Bhayangyang ridge and headed back to Kathmandu towards the late evening.

Field Reflections

The six-day reflections of the pilot study conducted in Chumnubri were more than just an exercise in testing the reliability of the tools; they also helped the team rethink the methodological design of the entire field study. In particular, this pilot identified seven points, each corresponding directly to one of the study's objectives.

Reflection 1: Effect of off-season timing on respondent availability

The most important lesson learned from the pilot study is timing. The survey took place in the monsoon off-season (June), when virtually no international or long-distance domestic tourists were found, who were the main targeted group. Many lodges and tea-house operators had closed down, limiting the team to just a handful of business owner respondents at the key points in the circuit (up to upper Philim and further out) when tourism revenue is greatest. The whole survey should be conducted during the busy trekking months, especially spring and winter, when tourists are present in large numbers and businesses are in full operation. A two-wave design (including a peak-season wave) would enable comparisons of resident and business owner attitudes across seasons, offering data of substantive value for climate-resilience planning.

Reflection 2: Sampling and access challenges in dispersed settlements

Second, the selection of Chumnubri as a pilot site was validated as suitable, a high-stakes tourism site with mixed settlement patterns (roadhead villages, off-road hillside villages, upper valley communities), diverse livelihood portfolios, and strong institutional presence (conservation authority, local government, NGOs, schools). However, the pilot showed the need for a more intentional spatial sampling plan. Settlements such as Aanga, Maniraong, and upper Pansang can only be reached by a

multi-hour trek beyond a single day's field schedule. The full survey should include dedicated days for trekking to off-road settlements or enlist local enumerators able to independently reach these communities.

Reflection 3: Enumerator communication and rapport-building

Third, the pilot confirmed that all survey instruments should be well practiced by team members before piloting, and that enumerators should be able to code-switch into simple, understandable Nepali. Local community members respond best to informal, short question structures, underscoring the importance of communication and rapport-building skills alongside physical fitness and trekking capability for field researchers in mountain tourism research. Role-played interview situations in Nepali should be included in enumerator training, with special attention to probing questions, active listening, and appropriate non-verbal communication in communities where Nepali proficiency is limited. This is part of the rationale for including local educated youth who can serve as both gatekeepers and data collectors in their own language.

Reflection 4: Effectiveness of stratified sampling

Fourth, the pilot reinforced the team's commitment to a stratified sampling design representing tourism's diverse impacts on the community. The full survey will encompass those directly involved in tourism (lodge operators, guides), indirect beneficiaries (farmers, artisans), and non-beneficiaries (subsistence farmers in remote areas). The framework intentionally oversamples marginalized households including youth and seasonal migrants, single women-headed households, and persons with disabilities ensuring their voices are statistically represented within the cluster design.

Reflection 5: Role of community gatekeepers in field access

Fifth, community gatekeeper involvement is not an external action taken by research teams but an internal part of the research process itself. Multiple field encounters confirmed that gatekeepers sit at the center of research access. Community entry should be formalized in the full survey protocol: an initial introduction through the rural municipality or ward office, a short community briefing, and identification of local contact persons. This additional logistics time significantly enhances response quality, reduces refusals, and upholds research ethics in communities where institutional trust must be earned.

Reflection 6: Role of institutional key informants

Sixth, meetings with officers of the Manaslu Conservation Area Project, the Tourism Management Joint Sub-Committee, Community Action Nepal staff, and the rural municipality vice president were not incidental courtesies but "data collection events" in

their own right. Household surveys alone cannot capture institutional stakeholders' strategic perceptions of tourism governance, community conflict, or planning gaps. The full study should treat institutional key informant interviews as a distinct data type, using a structured protocol covering four areas: policy mandates, coordination challenges, climate-related tourism risks, and inclusion mechanisms.

Reflection 7: Instrument clarity and reliability

Seventh, despite seasonal restrictions on sample completeness, the instruments functioned well overall. Most questions were understood as intended, though a few where respondents hesitated, sought clarification, or gave conflicting answers on similar items have been flagged for simplification. The tourist questionnaire, having had the lowest number of respondents, is considered the least tested, while the local resident questionnaire proved the most effective, with a high response rate and consistent answer distribution across settlement types.

Learnings and Recommendations

1. Conduct surveys during peak tourism seasons: Main fieldwork should be undertaken during spring and winter trekking seasons, with a two-wave design to compare seasonal variations in tourism perceptions.
2. Develop a spatially inclusive sampling plan: Allocate additional trekking time or involve local enumerators to include remote settlements such as Aanga, Maniraong, and upper Pansang.
3. Strengthen enumerator preparation: Provide training on tools, local language communication, role-play, rapport building, and culturally appropriate interviewing practices.
4. Maintain stratified sampling of diverse groups: Include tourism-dependent, indirectly benefited, and non-benefited households, with adequate representation of marginalized groups.
5. Establish community entry procedures: Coordinate with local authorities, introduce the research to communities, and identify local contacts to improve trust and participation.
6. Include institutional key informant interviews: Engage conservation authorities, local governments, NGOs, and tourism stakeholders to understand governance, climate risks, and inclusion issues.
7. Refine research instruments: Revise unclear questions and further test tools, particularly the tourist questionnaire during peak visitor periods.

Research Contributions and Positioning within Existing Literature

Methodological literature on pilot studies has largely developed within clinical, nursing, and single-discipline qualitative research contexts (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Malmqvist et al., 2019). However, reflective accounts of pilot fieldwork remain limited, as pilot studies are often presented mainly as brief assessments of instrument reliability rather than as methodological contributions in their own right (Ismail et al., 2018). This gap is particularly evident in tourism and Himalayan-livelihoods research, where pilot-phase reflections are rarely documented despite the complex challenges of conducting research in remote, climate-vulnerable environments.

This paper contributes to the pilot-study discourse in three ways. First, it presents methodological lessons from a high-altitude, climate-sensitive, multi-stakeholder tourism setting, where seasonal accessibility, dispersed settlements, and limited institutional capacity create challenges distinct from the clinical and urban contexts that dominate existing pilot-study literature. Second, it extends conventional pilot objectives, including instrument testing, sampling refinement, and ethical preparation, by integrating a travelogue-based reflexive approach (Mansfield et al., 2020; Mansfield & Potocnik Topler, 2023) to capture experiential and contextual knowledge generated during field engagement. Third, it contributes to gatekeeper and field-access scholarship by illustrating how access negotiations operate in remote mountain communities, where local officials, school committees, and community members may shape researcher mobility, respondent identification, and knowledge exchange (Clark, 2010; Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013).

Beyond methodological contributions, this paper also contributes to climate-resilient tourism planning literature by generating grounded evidences on how tourism opportunities, seasonal livelihoods, and institutional relationships are experienced across different settlement contexts. Such locally embedded evidence addresses persistent concerns that climate adaptation and tourism planning in Nepal remain largely top-down and insufficiently connected to community-level realities (Pasa et al., 2024). Through these contributions, the paper positions travelogue-based approach to field work not merely as a preparatory exercise but as a valuable methodological resource for informing future large-scale interdisciplinary studies in similarly challenging environments.

Conclusion

This pilot study in Chumnuhari, Manaslu Circuit, highlights the importance of a fieldwork-based learning approach and contributes to the broader discourse on the value of pilot studies, gatekeeper-mediated field access, and climate-resilient mountain tourism planning. While existing pilot-study literature is dominated by clinical and

single-discipline qualitative accounts and often reports pilot data only as a brief note on instrument reliability, this travelogue-based approach to pilot study demonstrates the value of a full, reflective account situated in a high-altitude, climate-vulnerable, multi-stakeholder tourism setting. The research team tested and improved the tools developed through stakeholder consultations and Delphi refinement by engaging with local communities and experiencing the realities of mountain fieldwork. The journey from Kathmandu to the Manaslu region provided important insights into the social, cultural, and geographical context of the study area, including the negotiated, gatekeeper-mediated nature of access to remote settlements.

The experiences of the researchers involved in the pilot study identified key lessons related to survey timing, site and settlement access, communication and rapport-building skills, stratified sampling, community gatekeeper engagement, institutional coordination, and tool improvement. These lessons will guide the main survey design and implementation. Beyond refining the instruments, the pilot begins to supply the disaggregated, household- and business-level field evidence that Nepal's climate adaptation and tourism policy literature has been criticized for lacking, and which the forthcoming main survey across Khumbu region, Langtang National Park, and the Annapurna Conservation Area is designed to provide at scale. The study also shows that participatory research is a continuous learning process where each stage improves the next. The reflections and recommendations from this pilot provide a practical roadmap for conducting the main research project and a transferable model for other large-scale, interdisciplinary fieldwork in climate-vulnerable mountain regions.

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