

2005

INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN DAY



Mountain Tourism: making it work for the poor

Mountain tourism on the rise

In an increasingly urbanized world, blighted by overpopulation, noise and pollution, mountains are an oasis of spiritual calm and peace, a place to commune with Nature and to rediscover the simple pleasures of life. More than 50 million tourists visit mountain regions each year, attracted by the clean air and natural beauty, by the many sporting and recreational activities they offer and by the unique traditions, cultures and lifestyles of their people. And in many mountainous countries of the world, there is untapped potential to develop tourism in the future.

Yet, although tourism might bring in cash in the short term in the longer term it often causes irreparable damage to the mountain communities who should be gaining from it. Often, the development of tourism in mountain areas is concentrated in the hands of outside interests, with little of the profits going to local communities. Underlying this is the fact that mountain regions are often the most disadvantaged and least developed places in the world. Social inequality, political marginalization and environmental stress are problems that the poor commonly face, wherever they live. Yet it is a disturbing fact that mountains are home to some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable.



FAO/A. Mihich

High returns

Tourism has undoubtedly brought considerable benefits to many upland regions around the world. It has brought additional income to vulnerable and marginalized communities, for whom earning a living is complicated by remoteness, difficult terrain and often harsh climate. In Europe, many Alpine valleys have gained access to the outside world thanks to communication and transportation links brought by tourism. Young people have been persuaded to stay, instead of joining the exodus to the cities. To small mountain communities, tourism can create jobs, raise incomes and provide better services. An influx of visitors can create markets for products made by local workers and produce from the land. For a growing number of developing countries, revenue from mountain tourism represents a major source of foreign exchange. Sport-based mountain tourism, in particular, has seen rapid growth in the past 30 years, expanding from the traditional regions of Europe and North America to previously uncharted mountain areas, including parts of central Asia, the Himalayas, the Karakoram, the Caucasus, the Andes and even Antarctica. Other growth areas for mountain tourism focus on mountains as a source of well-being and health and an ever-increasing number of mountain tours offer opportunities for culture, contemplation and meditation.



FAO/A. Mihich



FAO/R. Falduti

The case for sustainable tourism in mountain areas

Counting the cost of tourism

But experience has shown that the price of the growth in mountain tourism can be high. Tourism does not necessarily equate with sustainable development. Although tourism – and mountain tourism in particular – is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world it is also one of the least regulated.

Tourism development can cause a great deal of visual damage to the landscape and can disrupt local cultures and traditional ways of life. Tourism development can also upset ecosystems, and mountain ecosystems – the world's richest source of biodiversity – are more fragile than most. Developing a tourist infrastructure often involves destroying swathes of forest, planting electricity pylons and building roads and tunnels. In many of the most beautiful mountain regions of the developing world, cutting trees for fuelwood and the construction of amenities have emerged as key problems as visitors seek new and unspoilt destinations. Vegetation is damaged and wildlife habitats destroyed. A proliferation of litter left by tourists scar land and pollute water. Rivers, streams and slopes are further contaminated by human and solid waste and untreated sewage. Such degradation in mountain environments is particularly damaging as environmental recovery rates at high altitudes are slow. And this environmental damage in mountain areas affects those whose lives and livelihoods depend most on these natural resources – mountain people.

Tourism in mountain areas is thriving and an essential fact of life for many countries – particularly those in the developing world who depend on tourism for much-needed foreign exchange. And there are opportunities to start developing new tourism initiatives in many other mountainous countries of the world. The Simen Mountain National Park in Ethiopia, for example, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site of outstanding natural beauty and unique wildlife, yet it receives few tourists every year. A tourist infrastructure – including roads, accommodation and amenities – would not only boost tourism but also reap rewards for local people.

One of the main challenges is to harness mountain tourism so that it benefits mountain people and their environments while at the same time satisfying the desires of tourists.

Mountain tourism needs to be sustainable

Sustainable tourism has various models (Box: 'Models of sustainable tourism'), but what all commonly share is the aim to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income and employment for local communities.

People and local ownership of tourism are at the core of sustainable tourism. As mountain people are the stewards of mountain ecosystems, any decision to develop tourism must be made with their involvement and agreement. Often, the development of tourism in mountain areas is concentrated in the hands of 'outsiders' and foreign operators, with little of the profits going to the communities themselves. This is especially true of developing countries and emerging economies, where foreign capital is often used.



FAO/T. Hofer

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

"Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems."

World Tourism Organization (WTO)



FAO/J.A. Mithich

In most parts of the world mountain communities are relatively powerless, with small communities and weak local governance. Where protected area management is in place, the needs and interests of local communities are often not of primary concern to conservationists. For tourism to be managed by local communities, real empowerment and partnership-building with more powerful agencies – government, tourist operators, NGOs – is essential, as well as careful thinking about the kinds of products and services that the community can develop and which will ideally attract an appropriate mix of domestic and international visitors.

Sustainable mountain tourism therefore needs to be developed with respect to, and according to, specific local conditions and cultures, an approach that will help communities gain a niche in an increasingly competitive market. It should favour activities that complement and strengthen rather than supplant existing livelihood activities, as well as build on local knowledge and traditions. This ensures not only that tourists respect the natural and cultural diversity of the places they visit, but also encourages mountain people to view their environments with a sense of pride and a desire to preserve them for future generations.

Policies and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that a substantial proportion of tourism revenues remain in mountain areas and are reinvested in infrastructures and services benefitting mountain communities. Governments can help mountain communities by investing profits in programmes to ensure sustainable livelihoods for local people. Non-governmental organizations and the private sector can also help get the tourism balance right by offering education and training in responsible tourism practices, approaches and methodologies to enhance local participation in the tourist industry.

Finally, tourism in mountain regions needs to be developed as part of an overall economic development strategy, with a strengthening of existing systems and diversification to ensure local economies do not become reliant solely on tourism revenue. This is particularly important considering that the tourism industry is volatile, vulnerable to security concerns and often highly seasonal.



FAO/J.A. Prado

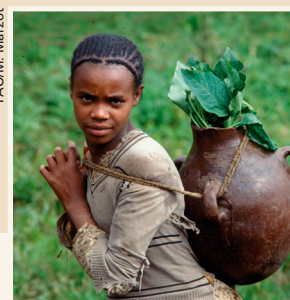
MODELS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Ecotourism is a tool for protecting ecologically sensitive areas and species, as well as providing sustainable economic help for often impoverished communities.

Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) aims to deliver increased net benefits to the poor as a goal in itself. It aims to strengthen the linkages between tourism businesses and poor people, so that tourism's contribution to poverty reduction is increased and poor people are able to participate more effectively in product development.

Responsible tourism is a growing movement committed to the principle that all forms of tourism can be more responsible, all forms of tourism need to be managed by government, communities and the private sector to enhance the positive impacts and minimize the negative impacts of tourism.

FAO/M. Marzot



Sustainable tourism in practice

In many mountain regions of the world, ecotourism is helping to develop mountain areas sustainably for tourists while helping to reduce poverty and hunger amongst mountain people. It also has considerable potential for strengthening communities and for protecting mountain ecosystems.

With increased focus on conservation issues, ecotourism has developed in recent years and is growing fast. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), defines it as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people'. This form of holidaymaking makes a point of putting something back into the area and culture being visited, in terms of revenue and financial support for conservation projects, but often also in-kind. Most ecotourism holidays closely involve local communities and plough back a portion of the profits into the environment. Some operators plant trees to combat desertification, collect garbage from trekking regions and ensure tourists use bio-degradable wrapping on their food and drink. Others actively participate in conservation projects, enabling tourists to help protect endangered species or environmentally precious sites.

According to a relatively new model of sustainable tourism, poverty can be further reduced by forging links between local markets and tourists. Pro-poor tourism (PPT) stresses that net benefits to the poor can be increased when they can sell their goods and services in a tourist locality directly to tourists and tourism businesses. (Box - 'Putting the poor first in Nepal').

SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN TOURISM

- ❖ alleviates poverty and hunger
- ❖ improves employment and livelihood opportunities
- ❖ conserves the environment
- ❖ encourages economic growth
- ❖ boosts development of mountain products
- ❖ satisfies tourist needs

Contributes to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, as well as the necessity of working together to protect our common environment



FAO/G. Diana

The path ahead

Sustainable tourism in mountain areas earns income, increases opportunities, offers financial incentives to protect the natural environment and brings positive cultural exchanges for mountain people. But the challenges of promoting sustainable mountain tourism requires that all partners – governments, tourism industry, tourists, development agencies, civil society and the private sector – work side-by-side with mountain people to steer tourism on a more sustainable path and to use it as a force to fight poverty in mountain areas.

Practical steps are already underway. The World Tourism Organization (WTO), the UN agency responsible for tourism and the lead agency for the International Year of Ecotourism (2002) has launched the Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) Programme to combat poverty and bring development and jobs to people living on less than a dollar a day. And throughout the world, many successful alliances, initiatives and networks – large and small – are actively advocating for change, disseminating best practices, providing training, and developing responsible codes of conduct and practices for local mountain populations and tourists alike.

But it is action at the country level that is vital for sustainable tourism in mountain regions. Only countries have the power to build capacities, implement national strategies, develop policies and pass laws that will create conditions in which tourism can work sustainably and benefit local communities.

International Mountain Day in 2005 with its theme of ‘Sustainable Tourism for Poverty Alleviation in Mountain Areas’ provides a unique opportunity to increase awareness, to enhance solidarity and to promote concerted action for sustainable tourism – particularly at the country level.

CASE STUDY

PUTTING THE POOR FIRST IN NEPAL

Humla, a remote mountainous district in Western Nepal, is marked by chronic poverty, hunger and food insecurity. The Netherlands-based international development organization, SNV, recognized that the 600 annual tourists in the area represented a potential economic opportunity for the local population, many of whom practice subsistence farming. A strategy was developed to focus on the local provision of tourism goods and services (portering, mules, horses, vegetables) directly to the tourist, trekkers, and the Kathmandu Valley-based trekking agencies. This was complemented by other initiatives: toilet construction along the trekking trail, a US\$2 per tourist trail maintenance tax and a levy on pack animal grazing in community forest areas. Profits from tourism have remained within the local economy and there are considerable net benefits to the poor. The additional tourist-related income makes a significant difference to the welfare of households, often faced with severe food deficits, and enables them to buy shoes, cloth, ready-made clothes, salt, flour and rice. To the landless poor – horsemen, porters, and casual- and skilled- labourers – these tourist earnings constitute their main livelihood.

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