Environmental Case Study

Ecotourism on the Roof of the World

Rising dramatically from the steamy southern jungles of the Ganges River Valley to the icy peaks of the Himalayan mountains on the Tibetan border, Nepal is one of the most scenic countries in the world. Tourists savor the exotic culture of Katmandu or Namche Bazar or hike through lush mountain forests of rhododendron and pine. Offering spectacular scenery, friendly people, and low prices, this charismatic country has become a premiere destination for adventure travelers.

With an annual per capita income of only $170, Nepal is among the poorest countries in the world. The phenomenal increase in visitors over the past 20 years has brought much-needed income but also has caused severe environmental degradation. Forests along popular trekking trails have been decimated to provide firewood for cooking and heating of water for the numerous wealthy outsiders, while tons of garbage and discarded gear litter popular campsites.

One of the most popular Nepalese trekking routes is a three- to four-week circuit of the Annapurna Range in the center of the Himalayan Range. Crossing rushing rivers on swaying suspension bridges, passing between the 8,167 m Dhaulagiri and the 8,091 m Annapurna I (the seventh and tenth highest mountains in the world, respectively), this ancient pilgrim trail follows the Kali Gandaki Valley to holy shrines at Muktinath. First opened to foreigners in 1977, this trail now attracts over 45,000 visitors each year.

Most Nepalese benefit very little from tourists who congest their villages, consume resources, and snap photographs incessantly, but the Annapurna region is different. An innovative project was launched in 1985 to alleviate the destructive impact of masses of trekkers and to maximize the income-generating potential of ecotourism. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is a 2,590 km² (1,000 mi²) biosphere reserve that serves as an encouraging model for conservation in developing nations.

Far different from Western ideals of parks composed of empty, virgin land, the ACAP is home to more than 100,000 people who continue to use resources in traditional ways. The area is divided into five different zones: intensive farming lands around the periphery, protected forest and seasonal grazing areas in the foothills, special management zones along tourist routes, protected regions with high biological or cultural richness, and wilderness areas in the high peaks.

Recognizing that there can be no meaningful conservation without the active involvement of local people, the ACAP returns visitor fees directly to residents to manage the preserve. About $500,000 per year finances a variety of conservation, education, and development projects. More than 700 local entrepreneurs have been trained in lodge management, hygiene, and marketing. Forest guards have been hired, latrines built, trails repaired, and schools and clinics built for local people. Trekkers now
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are required to use kerosene rather than wood. Local tree nurseries provide stock for reforestation projects. Solar panels and water turbines provide renewable energy for both tourists and residents. The area is cleaner, healthier, and more enjoyable for everyone.

This successful experiment gives us a different view of the meaning and purpose of parks and nature preserves than the ideal of pristine, unchanging nature conveyed by most American national parks. It also provides a model of how competing human and nonhuman needs might be balanced in other developing countries.

What do you think? Are there lessons in this example that we might apply to our parks? How might our park system change if we did so?