Tourism in the Everest region

International tourism and travel is one of the world’s largest and most rapidly expanding industries. It is also one of the most diverse, with many different suppliers providing a range of tourism and recreational facilities, operating in different types of places, and catering for a variety of visitors with differing demands. Changes in the development of tourist activity in the Everest region can be seen in terms of visitor types and host-visitor relationships. The following main types of tourists have been identified:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of tourist</th>
<th>Numbers of tourist</th>
<th>Adaptation to local norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explorer</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Accepts fully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Rarely seen</td>
<td>Accepts fully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-beat</td>
<td>Uncommon but seen</td>
<td>Adapts well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusual</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Adapts somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incipient mass</td>
<td>Steady flow</td>
<td>Seeks Western amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass</td>
<td>Continuous influx</td>
<td>Expects Western amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Massive arrivals</td>
<td>Demands Western amenities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Terms

- Incipient mass = early stages of mass tourism
- Continuous influx = continuous arrivals
- Mass = volume
- Charter = package

(Smith, 1977)

According to the table above, explorers initially ‘discover’ a place, and are followed by a changing flow of visitor types. Tourist types and numbers, together with their impacts and the local responses to them vary over time. Tourism has both positive and negative impacts which can be social, cultural, economic and environmental. The question is not whether to continue to develop tourism, but in a form which leads to sustainable development. One of the ways is through the promotion of ecotourism, which is defined by the Ecotourism Society as, “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.”

Impact of tourism

Environment

Since the 1950s, tourism has brought major economic changes to the Mount Everest region, leading to prosperity for many Sherpas, but also changing patterns of land use and resource management and increasing pressures on high-latitude resources and environment. Nepal has a wealth of ecosystems and since the 1970s has protected and conserved key areas, in fact 13% of its land area has protected area status.

The Sagarmatha National Park is one of eight national parks which has been widely reported as suffering from pollution and deforestation as directly related to the impact of tourism. Sherpas use local forests as part of their subsistence lifestyles and managing their inns. Forests are also a source of foods and medicines, timber and building material, firewood and grazing. The two regional uses of forests that have played the greatest roles in forest change are tree felling for timber and firewood collection. Wood is the main cooking and heating fuel in all settlements for domestic and tourist use, although household use has grown much less, since migration has kept population growth low. Although camping tourists no longer use firewood in Khumbu, porters for many expeditions and trekking groups continue to do so.
With the growth of tourism, the number of trekking porters entering the national park has risen and account for more than 10% of tourism-related firewood use.

Since the 1970s tourists have been mainly trekkers who, in recent years, have made up more than 97% of all visitors. Some are independent travellers, others are part of organised parties, but all need permits to enter the mountain regions. The number issued by the Department of Immigration increased from 7724 in 1984 to 16921 in 1996, with the largest visitors arriving in October, November, March and April. The income received is estimated at US$1/2 million a year. The number of expeditions has grown from one or two per year in the 1950s to more than 50 per year by the late 1990s, although the total annual number of foreign mountaineers is less than 600. In the 1970s most trekkers toured the region as members of large, catered camping groups with Sherpa staff and porters. In the 1980s, Sherpas also began to use income from mountaineering and trekking work to build inns and larger houses and individual trekking using local inns has now become more popular.

Recent research suggests that tourism related firewood and timber use have increased local Sherpa demand, and that use of firewood has had a greater impact on forests outside the Sagarmatha national park. (Stevens, Geographical Journal, September 2003) There has not been region-wide deforestation; the main impact has been forest thinning and the loss of alpine shrub in the Khumbu areas. It is not only due to tourism that deforestation has occurred. The park was set up to recognise local people’s subsistence rights, however many Sherpas feared that it would disrupt their use and control of land and resources. It appears that in some cases it is conflict with the government over the control of forests rather than the sale of firewood to tourists. Effective conservation of forests and alpine areas in the Everest region continues to be a major challenge.

Waste Management
The Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, set up in 1993 has been highly effective in improving waste management. Problems include abandoning dead bodies on mountaineering peaks and leaving waste on peaks and base camps. A number of strategies have been successful in making improvements including clean up campaigns at various base camps, constructing rubbish pits and distributing litter bins, employing litter collection staff, school environmental education lessons, giving out leaflets and booklets, and creating tourist information centres.

Economic
In economic terms, Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, but tourism has enabled the Everest region to become one of the wealthiest areas in Nepal. Tourism related employment opportunities include trekking agents, tour operators, sirdars (trekking field managers) high altitude climbers, porters and cooks. The majority of these jobs are taken by men, although women are mostly responsible for managing lodges. The most successful lodges actually produce more profits than trekking agencies; however the environmental cost is high. Local people being responsible for the development of small scale businesses such as lodges, shops and restaurants and direct interaction between local people and tourism
organisers from foreign countries has meant that many have benefited from tourism. The success of the local economy now depends on an equal distribution of wealth and the improvement in the conditions of those low paid porters who are regularly exploited.

Social and cultural
Tourism related funds have contributed towards schools being built in the area, such as the Himalayan Trust. Research has also suggested that families who are involved in tourism are more likely to achieve more in education. (Rogers and Aitchison, 1998) In many villages, tourism has helped improve water supply, but this can lead to greater inequality as only those villages near tourist centres have improved infrastructure.

The effects of tourism on religious traditions and monastic life suggest a more complex picture; that many Sherpas have managed to adapt to tourism successfully and without any great loss of culture. Sherpa religion and culture have evolved from years of myths, stories and religious practice, and have always been subject to a wide range of influences. Since the expeditions to Mount Everest, Sherpas have become a ‘celebrated people’ and received a great deal of international fame. The Sherpa themselves are aware of this fascination with their culture and have been able to direct this interest towards the building and repair of local monasteries. However, lifestyles have changed from one village to the next, from wealthier to poorer households and it is women rather than men who have taken on greater farming and domestic responsibilities. It is usually the women and less wealthy who are likely to maintain the ‘traditional’ link with the past. Many examples, such as the refurbishment of Tengboche Monastery and a culture and climbing museum dedicated to the many climbers that have climbed Everest show a positive world view of Sherpa culture.