

The Druk
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Journal

Autumn 2019

Volume 5, Issue II

Tourism in Bhutan

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The Druk
Journal

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Tourism in Bhutan

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Introduction

The Druk Journal contributes to Bhutan's growth as a democracy and as a modern nation. It is a vibrant public space in which we encourage our contributors to expand our national discourse by introducing new ideas and concepts into the Bhutanese conversation.

Through regular publications, an interactive website, and open discussions after each edition, we engage Bhutanese society in conversation so that all citizens can exchange open and frank views on national policies and issues relevant to Bhutan.

The Druk Journal hopes, not only to inform citizens, but to build a community of people who will take an active role, as individuals and as a community, in the development of analytical attitudes toward national policies. It is our hope that participation in such a community will encourage individuals to engage in policy research that can be made available to the government and larger Bhutanese society.

The Druk Journal thus serves as a vehicle for the development of a society which is concerned about national issues and wants to participate in the development of policy by thinking publicly and through conversation. Such a community of thinkers will also draw on the experience of other countries in those areas of political, social, economic and cultural experimentation that are relevant to our own concerns.

The Druk Journal is a nonpartisan publication. Our purpose is to serve the national interest through the development of serious conversation on issues from every possible constructive point of view. We have no editorial position of our own. We believe that our stated objectives and the means we will use to achieve them are the best way in which we can serve our country and His Majesty The King.

We invite all interested citizens and friends of Bhutan to join us. We wish you Good Reading, Good Thinking, and Good Conversation.

Editorial

A Deep Dive into Tourism in Bhutan

“... in the 1970’s, tourism as an industry was only introduced after the Coronation of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. It was suggested to us then that Bhutan would benefit economically from bringing as many tourists as possible into the country... yet, with Drukgyal Zhipa at the helm, we had the confidence to make our own decisions -- to decide that our approach to tourism policy would be that of high value low volume... because of that policy, Brand Bhutan emerged. And you see the results of that policy for yourselves today. People who make it to Bhutan feel privileged to be our guests. In hindsight, we realise the profound wisdom of that decision, but we could have easily gone the other way had it not been for that conviction we had to forge our own path, our future, and our destiny.” His Majesty The King - 2016.

Today, there is growing evidence that the Bhutanese tourism industry is headed in the wrong direction. When we talked about mass tourism in the past, we were talking about other countries. Now we worry about the onset of mass tourism in Bhutan. So what went wrong? When did we go wrong? Why did we go wrong? How did we go wrong? Who went wrong? Most, importantly, what are we going to do about it?

Bhutan had a vision for tourism long before the concept of sustainable tourism became trendy. But, with our pristine nature and rich culture under peril, that vision now seems threatened by a rapid trend towards mass tourism. The policy was changed from high-value low-volume to high-value low-impact but, in hindsight, both remained largely rhetoric. The absence of statistics and records, another Bhutanese trait, makes accurate analysis impossible but the general trends can be deduced even from memory.

In the past, the profile of the average tourist coming to Bhutan was the middle-aged international tourist who paid USD 250 a day, and some international celebrities happily travelling unrecognised. It was only in the past decade or so that regional -- mostly Indian -- tourists were called tourists. This enormous blind spot came to light when the government announced, in 2008, the goal to promote Indian tourists in an Accelerated Bhutan Socio-Economic Development Plan, advised by McKinsey

India. A Rupee crisis and global economic recession, with international tourism declining, reportedly influenced this decision. Then the second government's tenure was characterised by inaction.

This trend is disconcertingly connected with Bhutan's transition to democracy, despite the prerequisites which actually define democracy -- public interaction and discussion, consultations and interaction, and vigorous parliamentary debate. The situation was allowed to deteriorate because of a combination of malaise, inability to choose even the obvious policy options, and several wrong decisions. The past decade saw a rapid increase in regional tourists because of the conditions that encouraged budget tourists.

Sadly, our political parties were reluctant to formally contribute party ideology to this issue of *The Druk Journal*, on an industry that can make or break the country. But the basic theme of this editorial is based on informal conversations with senior party members. And all parties have no options but to be active participants in the Conversations that follow.

By 2019, the supposed low impact has become high impact, and not a desirable one. The concept of visitors being guests and pilgrims changed overnight. The reversed proportion of regional and international tourists also changed the culture of the industry, not just in numbers but in terms of behaviour. Crowds in monasteries and at scenic viewpoints, congested footpaths, loud music, selfies along roadsides, cash transactions without receipts... the result? High-end tourism has taken a blow. A resounding message came from an agent who had brought high-end tourists to Bhutan for many years: "Goodbye," he said, after a visit to Taktshang in May this year... "Bhutan is no more a high-end destination."

There is no argument on the national vision for tourism. Neither is there any misgiving that the vision is lost in the absence of a coherent policy, strategy, and implementation. To understand the descent of high value into low value tourism, we need to look at the key issues related to this complex industry which, internationally, represents 10 percent of the global GDP.

What we see is that tourism, as a main revenue earner, has devastating implications if it is translated into mass tourism instead of promoting the Bhutan brand, which was synonymous with "high-end". And these are a

result of government decisions and functioning. One major reason is the lack -- rather the absence -- of coordination among the organisations involved in governance. The tourism industry involves dozens of organisations working in isolation: Cabinet, ministries, TCB, DCSI, *thromde*, RSTA, banks, tour operators, hoteliers, *dzongkhags*, transporters.

There is an explosion of budget hotels and a herd behaviour in building three- and four-star hotels. In this trend, the nail decided what the hammer should do. Banks gave generous loans; TCB, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the *thromde* issued hotel licenses with blind abandon; the government approved biased incentives to hotels which included tax waivers for furniture and fittings. There is credible information that some hotels are funded by outside money. And Airbnb is the latest disruption.

Frustratingly this deterioration into mass tourism was repeatedly predicted by experts and observers. Yet we watched it happen with open eyes. Tourism officials claim that they have submitted a number of proposals that were ignored by governments which were reluctant to take what they perceived as unpopular decisions. The Tourism Council and the Hotel Association of Bhutan have strong representation of the private sector with vested interests.

It certainly does not help that the growth trend of Thimphu city is a mess. A good structural plan was completely ignored, zoning laws were either deliberately or inadvertently reversed, even by the *thromde* itself. While hotels, shops, and bars were encouraged, the essential needs like health, education, food, water, energy, and waste management for the existing population has not improved. The dilution of Bhutanese culture is hastened and the ecosystem strained.

Transport is another critical issue, perceived by some as being politically sensitive. Tourists from India are driving in Indian taxis disguised as private vehicles and, in the last two years, one estimate says about 12,000 Indian vehicles entered Bhutan. In the arrangement between India and Bhutan, reciprocity has always been seen in symmetry because, just as Bhutan has 750,000 people and India has 1.5 billion, Bhutan has 80,000 motor vehicles and India has an estimated 250 million. It has to be a proportionate exchange.

The trends were partially driven by the perception of the tourism sector as a major employment generator, employment which threatens to become a crisis by Bhutanese standards. It was a narrow vision for employment. There was no attempt at economic diversification until His Majesty the King commanded such a strategy on National Day, 2016. Now we see the potential and need for entrepreneurship in many areas like agriculture, ICT, the cultural and creative industry, herbs and foods, and other niche products.

Tourism has never been of benefit to the rural population. It has made a few people in Thimphu rich, leveraging the Bhutan brand that actually attracted the tourists in the first place. As someone said, “profit was privatised, and losses socialised”. The remote host communities did not benefit from tourism and, in such a situation, tourism makes no sense. When the people are not the beneficiaries of the policies and plans, there can never be sustainability.

It has been recommended in the past that campsites, services, local transport, and essentials, including food and water, be provided by the local people. Thimphu operators should pay the local communities for these services. Not only has this been ignored, it has now been made redundant by roads that scar the mountainsides. Places where tourists could have trekked and camped for days and weeks, paying the daily rates, are now just photo opportunities for groups carrying a packed lunch.

How has such a powerful industry stumbled along without direction? Who has (or has not) been making all the decisions? Why is it that we have a system where there appears to be no accountability? Why are the host communities not involved, as responsible citizens, not just as voters? The government needs to take a raincheck and re-think. Apart from strong political commitment we need a good policy, expanded from the existing vision, developed with citizen involvement. We need a strategy to implement the policy, and we need regulations in place. These are a starting point. Today, there are trends to be reversed, difficult decisions to be made.

For Bhutan it is all about scale and proportion. We need data and analysis. How many tourists can a small population with vulnerable infrastructure accommodate? How should tours be organised? By who and with whom? What regulations need to control the flow?

What are the charges and fees that will ensure sustainability? These are not terms and restrictions unique to Bhutan. They are applied by every country to ensure that society functions. At the recent UNWTO conference in Thimphu, every country made it clear that tourism must not destroy their heritage. Ironically, it has been destroyed in many of them.

The essence of a new policy should be a cap on the number of tourists allowed into Bhutan, the actual number being based purely on their value and our capacity. A tourism official from India was involved in Kerala's brand "God's own Country" when they decided that each tourist should spend at least USD 100 a day. The basis for Bhutan has to be the GNH of the Bhutanese population. GNH, not as rhetoric but as a real goal. The volume must be decided by policy makers who are advised by analysts and experts, not pressured by hoteliers and tour operators and transporters.

Someone said that today's generation must work together for those who are not here yet. This has been cited, more powerfully, in many a Royal Address: In his first Royal Address to the nation in 2006, His Majesty said:

Deep in our hearts, as Bhutanese citizens, we will be able to see beyond His Majesty's (Drugyal Zhipa) selfless act and find that this special nation built by His Majesty is left to none other than the people of Bhutan. Such a legacy is a source of great optimism for our future. I share His Majesty's complete faith in the people and I believe that we will, as His Majesty has bestowed on us today, leave for our own children such a gift in 30 years.

What will our legacy be for future generations of Bhutanese? Sustainability seems to be the buzzword today. For Bhutan, this can be translated as survival.

Tourism Policy - the Way Forward

Dorji Dhradhul

Under the blessed stewardship of our visionary Kings, from the very start of tourism in the early 1970s, we have always been on the right road: a road that is less travelled; a road that is globally envied; a road to a very special destination -- a destination that is exclusive and happy, popularly known as “the last Shangrila”, the kingdom of Bhutan.

The policy of “high-value low-volume” has been steering this exclusive journey of Bhutan tourism for nearly five decades. Today, with a new goal to further enrich the direction, the journey and the destination, the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) embraced “Taking Tourism to the Top” as an organisational motto. Taking tourism to the top has two dimensions. Firstly, it is about making Bhutan the world’s topmost tourist destination and, secondly, it is about making tourism our country’s key economic sector.

The time-tested policy of high-value low-volume has been a golden gift from His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck to his people and country since the early 1970s. This is being continuously nurtured by His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Therefore, the road for Bhutan tourism has been clearly laid out by the Monarchs and it is our sacred responsibility to pass on this legacy to the future generations, in policy and practice.

However, in recent times, Bhutan tourism is being hit by rough waves. These emerging rough waves, if not manoeuvred well and in time, could be a potential threat to the exclusive journey of Bhutan tourism.

Wrong business practices of undercutting, fronting, and bad debts are on the rise, poor services, an unbalanced spread of tourism benefits, an oversupply of hotels, low yield mass tourism, overcrowding at tourist sites, and uncontrolled littering are some disturbing trends that are emerging. All these need to be prevented, minimised, and stopped at any cost. We just do not have the luxury of any other option.

Talking about the direction Bhutan tourism needs to take, we really do not have an option but to continue with Brand Bhutan, which is associated with our Monarchs, with GNH, and the high-value low-volume policy. Our vision is to take Brand Bhutan to the top of the world, make Bhutan the world's most exclusive travel destination, and play a more meaningful role in promoting happiness for our citizens and our guests, therefore enhancing Gross Global Happiness. Therefore, our goal is to further strengthen the Bhutan brand. This means we want to make Bhutan even more exclusive and of high value.

How Do We Do This?

First and foremost, we need to put in place a comprehensive national tourism policy to provide the overall framework and direction for the development of the tourism industry. I believe the time-tested vision of high-value low-volume will be the cornerstone of the national tourism policy. The sustainable approach of high-value low-volume should consistently seek to ensure a cautious tourism industry growth within the carrying capacity of our natural environment, socio-cultural environment, service and infrastructure which meets the needs of present visitors, while enhancing and ensuring opportunities for the future. This will be best ensured through the pricing policy of a minimum daily package rate guided by the overall development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

The policy is also expected to continue to offer Bhutan as a unique and distinctive experience to the world -- a spiritual, cultural and natural heritage -- a way of life which is a living tradition for the people of Bhutan and a brand that is a significant tourist attraction.

The policy should focus on creating high value for all stakeholders involved -- delivering experiential and immersive tourism experiences through better quality products and services, while earning higher revenue returns for all the local stakeholders. The high value is in terms of value for money, high revenue/yield, high-quality tourism products and services, experiential travel, good infrastructure, and the Bhutan brand.

The low-volume aspect of the policy, on the other hand, should ensure that the number of tourist arrivals is decided by the absorptive carrying capacity of our resources and services. It does not necessarily mean that there will be a reduction or restriction on the number of visitor arrivals. Put together, by high-value low-volume, we are talking about promoting and practicing targeted guests and regulated arrivals so that visitors get the best services for an exclusive experience.

Secondly, the institution and the organisation of tourism in the country need to be strengthened in terms of human resources and budget. The present organisation -- the Tourism Council of Bhutan -- is severely constrained in terms of human resources, both in number and quality. A sector that is today second only to hydropower, and has the real potential to lead in terms of revenue earnings and employment opportunity, deserves much more priority. As of now, TCB has just a handful of staff at the officer level, who are also bogged down with routine work, without any time for strategic planning and direction. This is a serious shortcoming that has to be addressed if tourism is to live up to the high expectations of the nation and to take advantage of the real potential it can offer.

Thirdly, the spirit of ownership and responsibility of all citizens in tourism development should be strengthened. We Bhutanese need to understand and accept that the onus and the responsibility lie on ourselves to take and keep tourism at the top. Today, it appears that we conveniently want to believe that the emerging challenges are not our creation but something being imposed upon us by some external forces and, therefore, happily wait for others to do what is necessary. I believe this gross error is the core issue that we are faced with today in the tourism sector. I would like to elaborate this point with two emerging issues -- the growing litter problem and Bhutan being sold cheaper.

While tourists are contributing to the increasing litter, I believe if all Bhutanese people take care of our own litter, the litter problem at the national level would be manageable. We could lead by example. For instance, it is a common experience that when one travels to a destination like Singapore, one automatically minds one's litter. One suddenly becomes conscious and responsible and the situation should not be any different here.

We also tend to blame overseas tour operators and agents for selling Bhutan cheaper. I believe this is wrong. We know that, under the present tourism system, no tourist can visit Bhutan without a Bhutanese ground handler. This means the Bhutanese ground handler has to agree to the price tourists pay. But, because of the cut-throat competition among the Bhutanese ground handlers, the price offered to the overseas tourist, tour operator, or an agent may be far below the set minimum rate. This is also known as undercutting, which happens to be the biggest threat to the hard-earned Brand Bhutan, a brand associated with exclusivity and high value. This situation is contributing to the emerging problem of mass tourism with a lower yield.

Fourthly, we need to all come together as one team through strong partnerships and solidarity. As tourism is multi-sectoral in nature, there is also a need to strengthen partnerships and coordination among the stakeholders in the tourism industry. The primary stakeholders -- the tour operators, the hoteliers, the guides, the handicraft dealers, the transporters, including the airlines -- need to develop and promote win-win business models instead of cut-throat and win-lose models, which appears to be the trend.

Let me humbly conclude with a Royal quote that inspiringly summarises the way forward for tourism in the Kingdom of Bhutan:

“...when Bhutan opened to foreign tourists in the 1970s, our leadership resisted the temptations to harness a quick fortune from mass tourism and instead, was prescient to formulate a visionary policy of high-value low-volume tourism. The wisdom of our tourism policy has led to the emergence of a strong Brand Bhutan -- an exclusive destination.”

His Majesty the King, 24 May 2019.

The Bhutan Brand

Koh Buck Song

The Importance of Brand Delivery

Few countries have as strong a nation brand as Bhutan. Worldwide, there is widespread brand recall for happiness as a key Bhutanese brand attribute. The universality of this brand affinity is something quite rare among place brands around the globe. Happiness is what most people would immediately think of at the mere mention of “Bhutan”. Many visualise this as the world’s happiest country. Bhutan’s own tourism tagline “Happiness is a place” encourages this mental association.

Also, few countries embrace its nation brand as pervasively. Ever since the 1970s, when the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was promulgated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, Bhutan’s government and people have taken the idea of happiness to heart.

The GNH model has inspired other countries, like New Zealand, to try to adopt at least aspects of it in their own systems of government. The framework for integrating happiness into policymaking has also sparked research, and drawn endorsement among institutions ranging from the United Nations to Oxford University. This is a contribution from Bhutan to the world that is of immense value.

A brand, however, is only as good as its brand delivery. Undoubtedly, Bhutan delivers for most tourists -- its mountainous scenery is stunning, its fresh air exhilarating, its cultural heritage deeply charming. But Bhutan’s tourism amenities can only deliver if the infrastructure can support the demand. When there can only be a finite number of hotel rooms available, when the paths up to Tiger’s Nest are only so wide, there is a limit to how many visitors can be catered to.

Extensive tourism can only be sustained if the local population is also involved in, welcome, and can benefit from, the growth of the industry. Every Bhutanese man dressed in a *gho*, and every woman in a *kira*, is a very visible brand ambassador for Bhutan. There is a powerful involvement of every citizen, seen most overtly through the national dress code *Driglam Namzha*, that symbolises the vested engagement of the ordinary Bhutanese in the state of tourism. Therein too lies the impetus for positioning the centre of gravity of the direction of the industry: it must always be for the greater good -- indeed, the happiness -- of the people.

The Impact of Over-tourism

On this score, Brand Bhutan has come under threat of late. Sustainability has been a keyword in the world's vocabulary for many decades, most often associated with the environmental type of sustainability, more so than the economic and financial varieties. However, sustainability also applies to tourism itself. If too many tourists and their transport vehicles crowd around tourist sights seeking their obligatory selfies along small, narrow roads, and even disrupting residential neighbourhoods or other civic spaces, preventing local people from going about the activities of their daily living, such as buying food, going to work, and enjoying their own recreation, then something has to give over time.

The global phenomenon of over-tourism has been a hot topic internationally in recent months. The city of Venice, Italy, rose to action when large numbers of tourists, including those on day visits from cruise ships, strained local resources and aggravated residents so much that a place that had been lived in for 16 centuries was becoming depopulated, with resident numbers dropping to below 53,000 in a city made for 150,000 people.

To address a similar problem, Dubrovnik, Croatia, imposed a cap on cruise ships, to gain some relief from the hordes that had been cramming the city, while Barcelona, Spain, had to work with the vacation rental online marketplace Airbnb to limit apartment listings only to those with city-approved licences.

As in Dubrovnik and Barcelona, new legislation and stricter enforcement of quotas, caps and other regulations in Bhutan might also dampen over-tourism in the short-term, but any damage to the place brand could have a longer-term impact in putting off high-end tourism, spurring a spiral of decline that would take some effort to reverse.

Maintaining a High-value, Low-impact Model

Bhutan is fortunate not to have suffered yet from what I termed a “brand keloid” in my book *Brand Singapore: Nation Branding After Lee Kuan Yew*, In *A Divisive World* (second edition, 2017). Like a raised flesh scar, a major negative point about a place could be repeatedly referenced in mainstream and social media so many times that it crosses a tipping point to, as it were, sear itself into the perceptions and memories of a majority of people worldwide. Once that happens, trying to remove such a scar would be certainly troublesome and possibly painful.

Tourism overcrowding -- such as with visitors from the immediate region -- could potentially generate enough negative reports and social media citations to mar what has hitherto been an exceptionally positive image, and this is something Bhutan should try to avoid. A balance should be maintained between regional and international tourism to give preference to visitor segments that support the growth of this vital sector of the economy, without allowing over-commercialisation to hurt its heritage components or overly stress the physical environment and the surrounding human ecosystems of supporting industries and local populations.

Bhutan should do what it can to at least maintain, if not build upon, its high-value, low-impact model. This had been a critical success factor for brand Bhutan in the past and is an approach that other tourist destinations would very much like to implement, if only they could turn back the clock and undo the harm that has already been done to their tourism infrastructure, environment or brand.

Despite recent developments regarding excessive regional tourism, Bhutan's tourism brand is still on the right side of this delicate balance between value and impact. Quick, corrective action targeted at the root sources of excessive regional tourism would go some way towards restoring the full measure of the magic of brand Bhutan.

There is an element of valuable novelty, of something exceptional, about visiting Bhutan that, once lost, is difficult if not impossible to recapture. Bhutan has a quality that many countries have long lost -- a special mystique about the place that is sustained by the relatively low number of people who have actually visited. In the words of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck: "People who make it to Bhutan feel privileged to be our guests." Indeed, what Bhutan offers carries a unique resonance with the deepest human yearning to be closer to culture and to be able to appreciate nature in its glorious, untarnished state. This is something precious and deserves to be preserved.

The Risks of High Volume Tourism

David Keen

High-volume Tourism is Doing Irreparable Damage to Bhutan

His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan's vision for the country was one of universal sustainability, manifested in adherence to the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). His vision was to modernise Bhutan and develop a country with economic, environmental, social, and political balance.

All of the Druk Gyalpos have shared that same motivation to modernise Bhutan. His Majesty the Fourth King held the enlightened vision that there was a philosophy around which the population could unite. GNH speaks plainly to the core of Bhutanese society. At its most basic level, it speaks to the magical humility that is ubiquitous among Bhutan's eclectic population -- a joy, warmth, sense of pride and love. It is that essence which makes Bhutan such a magnetic destination. And it is that essence that is under threat from the seismic changes underway within the tourism landscape.

GNH speaks equally to the political, economic, social, and cultural fabric of society. It speaks to the machinations of society and it talks to how Bhutan is perceived internally and externally. All indicators predict that a further and sustained influx of regional tourists will flood across the land border with India. The country has not prepared for this growth and it appears most likely these incremental numbers in the next few years will have a dramatic impact on both the culture and environment of the kingdom. That impact will have an impact on the sustainability of GNH as a guiding principle.

Over the last decade the government has not put in place any structural foundations to restrict travel (as it did in the latter part of the 20th century). This has led in turn to an exponential increase in the number of tourists

visiting Bhutan. These numbers have precipitated a surge in budget hotels and hostels, diluted the nature of *tshechus* and other festivals, created unacceptable visitation levels at *dzongs*, *chhortens*, Taktshang and other religious sites and is, arguably, leading to an irreversible cultural erosion that will inevitably change the essence of the country.

The government and tourism authorities have espoused for many years a philosophy of high-yield, low-impact tourism. This considered and well-intentioned philosophy is only viable if the concept is adhered to. Today, because of the influx of regional tourists from countries within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bhutan's historic vision of limiting tourist entry to a sustainable level no longer holds true.

The country is increasingly popular for tourists who do not need entry visas and are not limited by air access or government-imposed tariffs. In 2018, more than 200,000 predominantly Indian tourists entered the country. That number will only increase unless the government imposes similarly strict restrictions as enforced by the government tariffs on international tourists in the 1980s.

We only need to look at Nepal for a clear example of the challenging impact of high-volume tourism on cultural tapestry, environment, architecture, economy and political infrastructure. In 2018, Nepal registered 1.2M foreign tourists entering the country, a 17 percent increase from 2017. The tourism leaders celebrated reaching 1M tourists for the first time. The same tourist board is reporting a 19.6 percent increase in the first half of 2019. In 1993, according to the Nepal Tourist Board statistics, the country registered 293,000 tourists.

According to one of Bhutan's tourism leaders from the private sector, the current upward trend (10 percent in 2018) will increase exponentially over the next three years. He believes regional tourists will number a minimum of 500,000 in three years. At the same time, he does not believe there will be any substantive increase in high-yielding tourism. Projecting this

hypothesis forward would mean the current ratio of 27 percent international tourist and 73 percent regional, would increase to well over 85 percent of all tourists to Bhutan being regional low-yielding tourists and approximately 15 percent being the higher yielding international tourist.

Asked whether Bhutan could continue to be perceived as a high-yield low-volume destination, he immediately responded, “No, that has changed.”

Unless clear restrictions are imposed by the government, and given the increase in accessibility and the growth of the Indian middle class’s desire for travel, there may be no limit to the number of Indian tourists arriving in Bhutan over the next decade. Bhutan’s free market economy and its dynamic entrepreneurial population has already recognised the seemingly endless opportunities these tourists bring, including in the traditional off-season (May/June). The relative explosion in numbers remains the catalyst for a proliferation of budget accommodation and unplanned development.

Apart from the obvious economic impact from a tourist who pays no government royalty, and a “high-yield” tourist who contributes 35 percent of his fee to government, there is equally a significant perception difference between the two tourist typologies. The regional tourist is spending less, approximately USD 20 on hotel rooms, staying a shorter period (five nights vs. up to an average of 11 nights for Swiss travellers from the international segment – Kuensel April 8), and arguably, by sheer volume, having a far greater impact on the cultural tapestry.

Should half a million plus regional visitors enter the country in three or four years -- each with a desire to go to similar places and do similar things at similar times -- there will be massive disruption at Taktsang, religious sites, popular sites in Thimphu and Paro, and the cultural fabric will be irreversibly changed.

Asked whether Bhutan will follow the Maldives to becoming a mass tourism destination, each of our interviewees has replied that they believe this is inevitable. In the Maldives, not unlike Bhutan, mass tourism was

avoided by access and price. Today, a second runway is about to open in Male, regional airports have opened and the destination is increasing its room supply by exponential percentages. Prices have come down and the essence of the country as high-yield, low-volume has disappeared.

Equally critical to GNH is the way in which success is measured. Today in Bhutan, as in Thailand, the Maldives and elsewhere in Asia, success is measured by volume. The greater the numbers (as in Nepal), the more successful the tourism policy. One of Bhutan's leading tourism businessmen said, "Measuring by numbers is wrong. We utilise GNH as our guiding principle, we should measure success by a cost benefit analysis of the revenues from tourism to our cultural landscape."

According to one source, this will only continue and Bhutan will be completely reliant on the Indian traveller as it was on the international traveller in past years. He believes "there will be more investment in budget accommodation, more regional airlines coming in to the country and more destinations being created to accommodate these visitors". Should this prediction hold true, the country will lose its beloved hidden, magical status and will become yet another mass tourist destination.

While the international tourist market grew by 1.76 per cent in 2018 to 71,807 (Kuensel), this growth rate is a massive decline compared to 2017, where international tourism grew by 14.1 per cent. Does that imply that the high-value tourists are no longer as enamoured with Bhutan? Is it a function of limitation of air access? Or does it mean the plethora of regional tourists has already tarnished the exclusive image of the country and the allure of Bhutan is diminishing to the high-yielding visitor?

A leading business figure in the tourism industry (who did not wish to be named) believes there is no one factor that is impacting "brand" Bhutan. "It is impossible to pinpoint one particular reason," he says. "Our traditional target market [for the international traveller] has changed the way in which they book and the way in which they choose a destination. Everything is digital. We are not prepared for that eventuality."

“I do not feel the dramatic drop in the growth of international travellers can be ascribed to the rise in regional travel. Our numbers have also dropped because there was no ‘friendship package’ in 2018 as there were in previous years. While the statistics are unclear, I believe we lost about 5,000 Thai visitors compared to the previous year,” he maintained.

To the challenge of the growth in regional travel, he said, “I know at least one very famous international travel agency that has announced it will not bring tours to Bhutan after 2020 because of the mass tourism.”

One may trace the source of this discussion to the country’s evolution to a constitutional democracy in 2008. And one may fairly argue, as do leaders of the business community, that in order to allow democracy to thrive, one must allow for trial and error in development. But at what cost to the sanctity of the nation? To GNH? And is it the core of democracy that is at stake? Without visionary, unencumbered drive and leadership, can a young democracy survive the economic reality that arrives with hundreds of thousands of tourists?

“You need to allow for change. We are a young democracy. We need to allow the leaders of the country to make mistakes,” argues a leading member of Thimphu’s business community. “We need to establish balance between high-volume and low-impact tourism. Today that balance is out of kilter and the government needs to address it.”

The tourism leader agrees: “I think there is space for both markets. There will inevitably be a lot of investment in infrastructure to accommodate the Indian tourists but I believe the high-end tourist developments will continue. Look at Six Senses, they are developing five resorts in the country.” Prudently he continued, “There should be a shift in policy from the government sector to allowing the investors to have more say in policy making.”

The argument that high-value, low-impact tourism can sustain the heart of the nation can only be true if it is managed and nurtured in line with the vision in which it was created. Allowing more than 200,000 regional tourists into the country in 2018, with seemingly little or no control, is neither sustainable nor viable.

The same is true for the government's inability to only raise minimally the surcharge on high-yielding tourists for the last 30 years. Today, no matter which way it is couched, for a vastly widening demographic, Bhutan is not an expensive destination (as it was perceived for many years). USD 250 a day is not expensive if compared to the price of accommodation in Hong Kong, London, Singapore, New York or any of the other major global cities. A Bhutanese tourism leader agreed, "The price has hardly increased over the last decades. It certainly has not increased in line with global inflation."

When the original surcharge came into effect, and for many years thereafter, Bhutan's perception was coupled with a myth that it was closed to ordinary visitation. That, and difficulty of access because of the limited number of flights, acted as organic limitations on the number of tourists to the country. And it worked.

On 9 July, at the Journalist Association of Bhutan's first briefing on tourism for 2019, the Director General of the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), Dorji Dhradhul, said: "TCB has always focused on taking tourism to the top and we are going to take Bhutan's tourism to the top by making Bhutan the number one destination in the world and making tourism the highest revenue-generating sector in the country at the national level."

He also said that it is important to note that while making tourism the highest revenue-earning sector in the country, Bhutan should not compromise or sacrifice its Gross National Happiness development philosophy. "We will do things very cautiously," assured the DG.

He pointed out that Bhutan is at a critical juncture at this point of time and important decisions need to be made. "For the last 50 years, tourism in Bhutan has been sustaining with the visionary policy of our Monarchs and now we need to continue this legacy, but we are confronted with many threats. If we don't do anything at this point of time, there is a big risk or threat that we will be derailing from this legacy, which would mean we are going in the wrong direction."

While the business community agree with Dhradhul that decisions need to be made and a direction honed, they are unclear about which direction the government should take. “I personally feel everyone is as confused as I am... we’re not sure which strategy to follow. Let the industry follow its own course,” said a veteran of Bhutan’s tourism industry.

In the context of increasing numbers of regional tourists and its negative impact, Dhradhul said that Bhutan must take cautious steps from here because the number of tourists has already reached 274,000. “If we don’t restrict it now, even the visionary policy of high-value and low-volume would not help,” he added.

Indeed, Robert Govers, an independent international advisor, at the World Economic Forum in Davos said on September 1 this year: “Destinations have to figure out how to deal with soft targets, goals not so specific and easy to measure as arrivals, like happiness, civic pride, and reputation. These objectives have often been swept aside as being too vague, too sappy, too difficult, but with a little imagination, they can be achieved.” I think this is a critical point. Nations measure everything by numbers; in Bhutan, because of GNH, the government should introduce some sort of measurement of how much tourists impact on the national psyche, the environment and the cultural fabric.

“While it may sound like clever public relations rhetoric for those of us used to traditional tourism marketing, for many Bhutanese the idea of Gross National Happiness is both a utopian philosophy and a practical guiding principle. This price [the government surcharge] includes a Sustainable Development Fee of USD 65 per day, which goes towards free education, free health care, and poverty alleviation. In other words, tourists are taxed significantly as a result of the government’s strict ‘high-value, low-impact tourism’ policy that protects the country’s culture, traditions, and natural environment while benefiting local development.”

Thuji Nadik, the recently retired former director of the Tourism Council of Bhutan, believes that with more than 100 budget hotels being planned or built in Thimphu alone, the economic reality of this uncontrollable growth will have a lasting impact on the architectural tapestry of the capital. “We have to fix the accommodation problem, both in the uncontrollable growth of budget accommodation and in non-traditional accommodation such as AirBnB.” Nadik continues, “All of the problems are self-made and can be sorted out with the stroke of a pen.

Nobody has the vision to do it. There should be an immediate moratorium on the growth of budget accommodation.” He does not believe the government policies have changed in the last five years. On my last trip to Thimphu, the entry to the capital was more reminiscent of the drive into Kathmandu. Thimphu had seemingly lost its strict adherence to the architectural zoning rules.

Is This the Fabric of Society That’s at Stake?

“The genie has been unleashed from its bottle and cannot be put back in its cage,” claimed one of Bhutan’s most acclaimed business leaders. He shared the economic reality that the hotels that are being developed in Thimphu, Paro and Bumthang are being financed by local bank loans. “These loans can only be repaid by a growing number of regional tourists. That is the economic reality.”

Bhutan is a young democracy. The country is facing critical decisions across multiple sectors from urbanisation to hydro-electric power to tourism. At its core, GNH remains the guiding principle that will strengthen the culture of the nation and lead it into a future in spite of geo-political forces, environmental factors, global trends, local democracy and a multitude of other forces which will combine to create obstacles to the country’s progress.

The government has a critical responsibility to create a balanced tourism vision embracing the realities of the massive growth of regional tourism. This vision must not differentiate the impact to the cultural environment from either high yielding (international) tourists or low yielding (regional) tourists. Both typologies, particularly in high numbers, represent a significant threat to the cultural fabric of Bhutan. It must be a vision which does not count the number of tourists that arrive in the country but treats each tourist as an opportunity to strengthen the nation's core and its Gross National Happiness at the same time.

Overwhelming Sacred Spaces

Growing Trends in Tourism

Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

It used to be that visitors to Bhutan would mention Taktshang (Bhutan's famed Tiger's Nest) with awe and consider it a privilege to be able to climb the steep trail on a spiritual journey. Today, tourists are asking: "Should we do Taktshang, is it worth it?"

With nearly 275,000 visitors in 2018, of which 202,290 are from the region,¹ Bhutan is feeling the tensions of heavy tourist traffic and unpleasant experiences as tourists and pilgrims jostle for space in small spiritual sites.

There are stories of tourists climbing on the monks' seats at monasteries to take selfies. Some walk around *chhortens* (stupas) in the wrong direction. All this frustrates Bhutanese pilgrims, and Buddhist practitioners. "Regional tourists like to talk loudly and blast their music and the Taktshang trail has become like a 'fish market', from the base camp right up to the top door step," said a tour operator, Kencho.

This article looks at the impact of increasing visitors on Bhutan's sacred sites, in particular, monasteries and *dzongs*. Reflecting the concerns of a cross-section of people -- guides, tourist companies, monks and lamas, and visitors -- this article concludes with some suggestions for policy-makers at a time when Bhutan's Tourism Council and stakeholders are drawing up a tourism policy and management plans for such sites.

At a Crossroads

The increasing number of low-spending tourists today is contradicting Bhutan's High Value Low Impact (HVLI) exclusive travel destination policy. The onslaught of mass tourism, coupled with rapid urbanisation, is also challenging the country's carbon footprint. Bhutan is one of the most "rapidly urbanising countries in South Asia"² and is tackling growing demands for improved water, sewage, and waste facilities and plans.

¹Tourism Council figures show that 2018 saw a total of 274,097 visitor arrivals to Bhutan with a growth rate of 7.61% over 2017. Of the total arrivals, there were 71,807 international arrivals and 202,290 regional arrivals. 94.8% of regional visitors are from India. 87.89% of visitors came for leisure or tourism

²World Bank, Bhutan Development Update , Harnessing urbanisation, July 2019

Together with increasing consumption and materialism, Bhutan is aware that it could very well lose its carbon negative claim by 2030. With the population in the capital Thimphu being about 120,000, it is easy to see how the numbers of tourist arrivals can easily tip the balance of the local population and burden daily facilities and services. Policy-makers and people who are calling for action on the ground are pressured to figure out better regulations to improve services and facilities and to protect the sanctity of sacred and scenic sites. The growing number of tourists -- at more than 275,000 visitors a year -- need to be better managed.

Sacred Sites

Tourism is a double-edged sword. It will reap some revenue and resources, but it can also dilute the sanctity of Bhutan. The faith and devotion of generations of Bhutanese who have spent time contemplating precious teachings in the last independent Vajrayana country can be very quickly relegated to a mere theme park or monument of Himalayan extract. Sacred sites are not just monuments but powerful *nyes* (sacred places). Bhutanese believe that bodhisattavas³ and accomplished teachers have, over the ages, blessed the sacred sites, the trails and retreat centres across Bhutan. There are more than 2,000 protected monasteries⁴ throughout the country.

The *tshechus* (festivals), monasteries and rituals are not shows put on for tourists but real places and practices to enhance spiritual development. Thus a clash of culture occurs when tourism's "disneyland mentality"⁵ collides with the aspirational pursuits of Bhutanese. Bhutan's sacred sites and monuments need special attention in an age of growing tourism. There are many examples the world over of how sacred sites are regulated to prevent crowding, and to offer a more meaningful experience for the traveller that responds to local sensitivities and concerns.

The Indian state of Kerala restricts entry to shrines to Hindus only. Certain temples in Tibet, China, offer entry to persons with a "refuge"⁶ card showing

³Generally referring to people who have attained enlightenment but who continue to return to this life to help others attain enlightenment.

⁴The Culture Ministry's Conservation Department says this is a conservative number as the actual count is much more.

⁵DJKR in Book says: "No one is choreographing a 'holy site experience' (referring to India) and there's no serious exploitation, which means that, so far, they are free from any trace of a 'Disneyland' mentality." This is applicable largely still in Bhutan although more recent happenings tell a different story.

⁶In Vajrayana Buddhist practise, people take refuge to begin taking spiritual practise.

that they're Buddhist practitioners. In July this year, the Potala in Tibet announced an online booking system for entrance into the much sought-after monument.

Bhutan has always been clear about protecting its sacred heritage. Until the early 1990s, the Tiger's Nest was off-limits to tourists and visitors -- one could walk up to an observation point to view Taktshang but needed a permit⁷ to go in. The National Assembly took a bold decision in 1994 to close mountaineering because local communities believe that the sanctity of mountains was more important than material gain.

Tourist Behaviour

In the current scenario, regional tourists (99 percent of whom are from India) are now the focus as Bhutanese people find themselves pushed to the periphery of their small monasteries for their prayers and practice. "I work in tourism but even I'm getting frustrated and that's not good, because regional guests are our closest neighbours," said a hotel manager. "Just the other day, I made a prayer and threw the set of divination dice at Changangkha Monastery. Before I could read the dice, a pair of hands reached out for them. It was a tourist. I was really upset but couldn't say anything."

Regional tourists come with families and children, some are "back-packers" and many are simply looking for a cooler respite from the Indian summer. Bhutan, it seems, is even cheaper to visit than some neighbouring Indian states. "All of India's hill stations are overrun, so regional tourists are turning to Bhutan. They'll come until Bhutan is also 'done'. You can certainly introduce better management, up the fees and get regional tourists to come through local travel agents," said Sujoy Das, a photographer who leads treks and photo workshops to Bhutan.

The adventurous are motorcycling through the countryside and have revved their way up to monasteries, dispelling the sanctity of the environment, oblivious to the possibility of practitioners in retreat. Others walk past prostrating Bhutanese inside monasteries without lowering their voices, oblivious to the significance and sacredness of the place.

⁷Permits were issued by the royal Government's Culture Department.

Tourists need guides to enable them to understand local etiquette and appreciate the deeper experience that is Bhutan. “Non-Buddhists who don’t know what’s going on are not necessarily inspired by people bowing and making offerings in their religious piety,” says Professor Robert Thurman, a Buddhist scholar and long-time visitor to Bhutan. “Viewing monks and nuns studying and meditating as some sort of exhibition or museum is disrespectful.” There is also the opportunity to develop new experiences around sacred locations. Hikes and the journey to sacred sites can be improved, monks or nuns can be trained to offer classes or meditation guidance in special sites that don’t interfere with the education of the general monk body.

Pilgrims, Guests, and Tourists

The tension arises from the fact that tourists and pilgrims are forced to share the same space with very different intentions: Pilgrims who visit sacred sites for contemplation and prayer and who are merely curious⁸.

Bhutan began with a HVLI policy tourism that is predicated on the belief that all visitors are “tourists” and each Bhutanese is an “ambassador” of the country when interacting with guests. This policy has been deeply ingrained in the Bhutanese psyche. Tourists who pay a tariff are outnumbered today by regional tourists coming on their own without paying a fee, without a guide or a “host” to show them the country.

Tour operators say that fee-paying tourists come in smaller numbers with personal guides so they are more mindful of local etiquette. The need, therefore, is to ensure that each visitor to the *dzong* or monasteries has a certified guide. Better management is also required so that young monks are not forced to clean up after tourists. The Guides Association of Bhutan handles the ticketing booth for *dzongs* in Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha and in selected sacred sites such as Taktshang and Kyichu monasteries and the National Memorial *Chhorten*. In 2018, Taktshang registered 34,632 tourists over nine months⁹. Punakha dzong received 61,392 regional

⁸Bhutan Vision for Bhutan’s vision for development, Bhutan Vision 2020 published by the Planning Commission Secretariat in 1999 says that those who visit religious sites must demonstrate the appropriate respect for these sites.

⁹Available tourism figures show a tourism visitor no of 34, 632 between Jan. till Sept. in 2018. May tourists going to Taktshang totalled 7,630 and 6,596 in June.

tourists¹⁰, and it has been found that tourists often stray into off-limit areas. A draft management plan states that “many visitors without guides disturb the monastic environment”.

Infrastructure and Development

One visible impact of tourism is the commercialisation of the areas around sacred sites. The village near Chimi *lhakhang*, for example, has seen many farm houses converted into gift shops. The traditional village near Gangtoe monastery in Phobjikha is turning into a tourist centre. Immediate areas around *dzongs* and monasteries are overshadowed by hotels, snooker bars and neon night-life.

Many observers lament the trend of motor roads being built to the door step of monasteries. Bhutanese appreciated walking to spiritual places, contemplating, enjoying the pristine scenery, and the atmosphere of the sacred sites. The global gentrification with “international coffee shops and gift shops” can be delayed with the right incentives¹¹. Bhutan can provide the Bhutanese experience near sacred monasteries by developing more Bhutanese crafts, serving local delicacies, creating Bhutanese gardens and ensuring that the local culture is not overwhelmed by souvenir and coffee shops. When spiritual places are reduced to being tourist stops there is a tendency to focus more on ticketing and the economic returns.

Beyond Monuments

“When tourists outnumber pilgrims it affects the sacredness of the environment around our sacred sites,” said Khenpo¹² Phuntshok Tashi, former Director of the National Museum. Monuments refer to public buildings or previous spiritual sites that are no longer places for spiritual activities. In Bhutan, all our monuments come with a sanctum for spiritual practice. The *dzongs* are home to the monastic community. If all sacred sites simply become mere monuments, they will represent some historic significance but lose their spirituality in the minds of visitors. The risk is

¹⁰During a twelve-month period from August 2017 to July 2018, 112,747 non-national visitors entered the Punakha dzong according to records maintained by the National Monument Fund Committee and Royal Bhutan Police. Of this number nearly 50% were regional tourists.

¹¹A conservator from the Home Ministry, Nagtsho Dorji talks about the tendency for land use around sacred sites to be changed into commercial tourism spots that run counter to the sanctity of places.

¹²Khenpo suggests that tourists entering monasteries can be asked to leave behind their negative thoughts and energies and learn to practice mindfulness.

that the spiritual core of something more profound and the mind-changing energy is lost. The delay in implementing good management plans for sacred sites can rob Bhutan of the very authenticity and spirituality it treasures.

Bhutanese Reactions

“Bhutanese are nice to visitors. Since tourists are still considered guests, the average person does not openly criticise the rowdiness of regional visitors but are frustrated inside,” said a tour guide. “Even putting up a sign that says Silence! Will help,” says a trekker and guide on the Taktshang trail. “But it’s not just the tourists,” said former director of the National Museum, Mynak Trulku. “It’s us. We need better management. Our monks also need to learn how to handle the tourists.”

The good news is that the Culture Department’s Conservation Division has drafted the first management plan for the Punakha *dzong* with guidelines on escorting tourists and the creation of buffer zones around the *dzong*. This plan was drafted in collaboration with the local administration, the Tourism Council, the Home Ministry’s National Monument fund Supervision committee, and the Land Commission. A management plan is being developed for Taktshang monastery.

Respect Local Sentiments

As tourism grows as a foreign exchange earner there is a tendency to think that equitable tourism means opening all corners of Bhutan and every sacred festival and site to tourists. The government and the private sector have been deliberating on the opening of areas to tourists. A tourism policy can provide coherent direction and ensure that tourism benefits the rural areas with basic infrastructure, services, and facilities without immediately opening all places to tourists. The policy needs to consider the special needs of smaller sacred sites. A lama in Bumthang says that his monastery is “not for sale” and has not opened his monastery to tourists. Others have come up with ticketing plans for *tshechus*, with visitors also enjoying a local meal for the price of a *tshechu* ticket. “My village *tshechu* in Bumthang is small. We can’t open it up, since we’re just about 40 households,” said Lama Nuedup Dorji. “But tour companies call us and complain that we have not fixed dates for the *tshechu* as if it’s their right to bring visitors to our community festival.”

As the government talks about drafting a 2045 development plan for Bhutan, the Tourism Council of Bhutan needs to seriously consider how to keep up the HVLI policy. The TCB recently lowered its half a million tourists by 2023 target to 350,000 - 400,000, and this gives stakeholders time to put in place better management and regulations. A long-term observer of Bhutan's tourism development says "Bhutan needs strong political will." The challenge is for strong leadership to take some tough decisions so that the HVLI policy does not bend to market forces alone.

"The tourism sector works to market sites, we work on conserving the sites, and other ministries and local governments tackle waste management and infrastructure. We've all been working in silos," said Nagtsho Dorji, a conservator who worked with stakeholders on preparing a management plan to regulate and manage tourism as well as land and monument development. The Punakha *Dzong* Management plan¹³ is the first such comprehensive plan and its implementation can provide tourism guidelines to be replicated in other areas. This collaboration is a critical move and the royal government has acknowledged this weakness of working in isolation, and called for stronger coordination, collaboration, and consolidation in its development planning that gives impetus to collaborative management plans.

Recommendations

The following recommendations to improve the management of sacred sites summarises views from a cross-section of stakeholders:

- Adopt one approach for all tourists (international and regional) guided by the HVLI policy;
- Encourage continued collaboration amongst stakeholders to implement and monitor management plans -- the culture department, heritage sites, local trustees, urban authorities, the land commission and others, including civil society;
- Maintain caution in opening up untrodden , remote sacred *nyes*. Prioritise such sites for pilgrims and practitioners. Require permits and manage tourism numbers only after required services are put in place;

¹³The heritage site management plan completed in May 2019 aims to promote a value-based protection of cultural heritage, which expects a good balance between cultural heritage value and other values such as use and function, safety and security, or as a tourism resource. There are provisions for annual meetings amongst stakeholders to monitor implementation.

- Use evidence-based research to develop a masterplan for the opening up of selected sacred sites to “tourism”;
- Regulate and manage visitor numbers to sacred sites, respecting local customs and etiquette;
- Encourage Bhutanese to travel and visit the country.
- Assess the “carrying capacity” of all sacred sites, and develop guidelines before they are opened up to tourism;
- Close sites to tourism when silent retreats and ceremonies take place;
- Tickets and fees can be increased during peak season, including green taxes and SDFs;
- Require all visitors to come through local travel agents.

General etiquette, apart from a dress code and no photography in and around the vicinity, can be more specific:

- No sitting on sacred seats. No touching altars;
- No entry into a temple without a monk inside or a guide;
- Observe body language, like not sitting with your feet pointing at a monk and not pointing to the altar or members of the clergy;
- Control use of mobile phones, loud music in the vicinity of the monastery or retreat areas;
- All explanations to tourists to be done before entering monasteries. Keep explanations to a minimum once inside, so visitors can observe and feel the sacred ambience;
- Train not just guides, but also monks/nuns and local caretakers to manage tourists. Hire professionals to plan and implement site management;
- Tour companies need to go beyond the “cut and paste”¹⁴ itinerary and be more creative when leading groups (e.g. opportunities for other sights outside the monasteries) so that they are not crowding into the inner temples and altar spaces;
- Put in place monitoring systems.

¹⁴Observers say tour companies tend to follow a “cut and paste” itinerary which leads to tourists going to sacred sites at the same time each day and this adds to the crowding.

Where Next?

Strong and effective leadership will ensure that Bhutan is not turned into just an entertainment ground for tourists, and that a balance is found between developing tourism as a foreign exchange earner and ensuring we do not lose the sanctity of sites.

Visits to sacred sites should not be a “must-do” item on the itinerary. Can the tourism policy find ways to make visitors more aware of the true value and historical significance of Buddhist teachings and not just the aesthetic beauty of sacred sites?

Tourism planning and regulations can enable Bhutan to be carbon neutral, to be a spiritual experience and a genuine exclusive high end low impact destination. If anyone can do it, Bhutan can.

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Tourism and Transport

Phuntsho Wangdi, Nidup Gyeltshen

Transport is integral to the tourism industry. If tourism has grown, it is largely because of improved transportation. This holds true for Bhutan, yet access can make or break a destination. Today, as thousands of vehicles enter the country with the sudden growth in regional tourism, questions are being raised about whether Bhutan is also headed down the path of mass tourism that has destroyed the environment and local culture of many a destination.

Research suggests that a properly managed transport system is vital in keeping a destination sustainable and has a bearing on the tourism experience.

But transportation in tourism is often seen just as a means of getting to and leaving a destination. It is seldom considered in the perspective of the sustainability of a destination and, because of this, a number of bio diversity destinations around the world have reportedly been destroyed because of easy access.

As the spectre of mass tourism looms over Bhutan a transport policy in the context of tourism has become critical to minimise negative impact on the natural environment, degradation of tourist sites, and to ensure that tourists enjoy a high-end experience.

A Touchy Issue

In July this year, a taxi drivers' association in the Indian town of Jaigaon, bordering Phuentsholing, complained about Bhutanese road safety authorities.

In the letter addressed to the Office of the Consular General of India in Phuentsholing, they alleged that Bhutanese authorities were stifling the movement of Indian vehicles with regional tourists in Bhutan. The association threatened to call a strike and to do the same for Bhutanese vehicles travelling through Jaigaon and to other parts of India.

The association was reacting to a change in the issue of route permits for Wangdue Phodrang and Punakha districts, which would be done in Thimphu instead of Phuentsholing. Permits for Thimphu and Paro would continue to be issued from Phuentsholing.

Bhutanese road safety officials are outraged that a group of taxi drivers across the border can hold the country hostage over how Bhutan manages the flow of foreign vehicle traffic.

Such reactions are nothing new. “Every time we try do something, they make a noise,” said Prem P Adhikari, chief regional transport officer of the Thimphu region. “Given our limited transport infrastructure, we cannot have too many foreign vehicles entering the country, in view of congestion and safety issues.”

Managing traffic inflow from India into Bhutan is a touchy subject and is handled with sensitivity lest it impacts Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India every day, a majority in transit. Indian vehicles are given free entry into Phuentsholing right up to Rinchendeng checkpost, beyond which a permit is required.

But road safety officials say the number of Indian vehicles entering Bhutan with regional tourists are reaching a stage which, if not managed now, will cause serious problems in a few years. Former Secretary for MoIC, Dasho Kinley Dorji, says that this is the right time to re-iterate a clear and long-term transport arrangement between the two countries. Given the maturity of Bhutan-India relations, both governments will not allow a handful of profiteers to influence something as important as legal cross-border movement. Reciprocity based on the interests of the two countries has always been respected at the highest level.

By Air, By Road

Air and road are the only two modes of travel by which visitors enter and exit Bhutan. Air travel has been the primary mode for tourists since Bhutan began flight services in 1983. Arrivals by air have steadily grown with the increase in flight frequency, connectivity to more destinations in the region, and the start of a second airline.

However, in recent years, road has become the primary mode of travel with the growth in regional arrivals, mainly from India, with 99 percent entering via Phuentsholing, Bhutan's commercial hub and main road link to India.

For example, of the 274,000 visitors in 2018, 71,807 were international arrivals and 202,290 were regional tourists. While a majority of international arrivals flew in, 63 percent or 127,000 of the 202,290 regional tourists came by road.

This translated into thousands of vehicles entering Bhutan. Between July 2018 and June 2019, more than 12,000 route permits were issued for light vehicles, including two wheelers, coming from India.

“Bhutan cannot afford to have such huge numbers coming in,” said Bhimlal Suberi, Chief Planning Officer of the Ministry of Information and Communications. “Something needs to be done or it will become a huge mess.” As it is, traffic in Bhutan is worsening, with the government unable to control private vehicle imports in the absence of an adequately developed public transport system.

Besides putting a strain on Bhutan's limited road infrastructure, increasing vehicle pollution and congestion along highways and in urban centres, roadside waste has become a problem. Chukha district officials have had to clear trash left by regional tourists travelling on their own, only to see another pile the next day. It is one of the reasons why “no littering” signboards have sprouted along the highways.

Another practice coming with traffic from India is feeding of wild animals, monkeys in particular, along the highways, which is part of the tourist experience in the neighbouring Indian hill districts of Darjeeling. Signboards have been put up to discourage such practices but troops of monkeys sitting on culverts and looking expectantly at passing vehicles suggest it is ongoing.

Noise pollution is another issue, particularly with motorcycle tour groups. A novelty just a few years ago that residents marvelled at, it is now seen as a nuisance. People have lodged complaints against the loud noises of unguided motorcycle tour groups venturing into rural areas, camping

wherever they find a good spot and leaving behind a trail of trash. Close to 2,500 route permits were issued between June 2018 and July 2019 for regional motorcycle tour groups.

An even more serious issue with traffic from India is that it is becoming a front for illegal activity. According to road safety officials, registered Indian taxis, vehicles owned by tourists and private vehicles owned by local travel agents in Jaigaon enter Bhutan with regional tourists. Of this, more than 80 percent are private vehicles owned by Jaigaon agents operating commercially. By Indian motor vehicle regulations as well as Bhutan's, it is illegal to use private vehicles for commercial use.

Yet Bhutanese road safety authorities turn the other way, wary that Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India could get harassed if they take action. The recent protest by the taxi drivers' association in Jaigaon was largely by the illegal commercial operators.

Given the sensitivity, Bhutanese authorities do not strictly check vehicles entering the country with tourists for proper documentation, insurance and road worthiness. Sometimes, when documents are seized from Indian vehicles for traffic violations, no one shows up to claim the documents, according to road safety officials.

While local transport operators are not keen on catering to regional tourists -- particularly those coming on their own -- because they haggle over the rates, they resent Indian taxis being allowed to operate in Bhutan. A Thimphu taxi operator pointed out that even in India, taxis of one state cannot operate in another state. "Taxis from West Bengal cannot be used for local sightseeing in Sikkim," he said. "Here Indian taxis are given a free rein."

Reciprocity

A specific agreement on road transport, like there is for air services, does not exist between India and Bhutan. The movement of motor vehicles between the two countries is based on goodwill, according to officials of the communications ministry.

There is an agreement on trade, commerce and transit between India and Bhutan, which permits Bhutanese vehicles to travel through India on transit. According to road safety officials, more than 90 percent of Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India are on transit, and a small number travel to nearby Indian destinations in West Bengal, Sikkim, and Assam.

While the Indian side always insists on the principle of reciprocal services, road safety officials say that it is simply not practical, given the sheer difference in geographical size, population and vehicle numbers between India and Bhutan. Bhutan has always understood reciprocity in the context of the asymmetry in size and population. “Even if all of Bhutan’s 80,000 vehicles enter India, it will not be felt, whereas even 50 vehicles coming from India at one time can slow and jam traffic in Bhutan,” said RSTA’s Director General Pemba Wangchuk.

Policy

Road safety officials in Phuentsholing say that, without a standard operating procedure, they are not clear on how to manage the inflow of traffic from India with regional tourists. But something needs to be done quickly to stop the illegal practices before they become entrenched. West Bengal traffic officials have reportedly requested Bhutanese authorities to clamp down on private Indian vehicles being used for commercial purposes.

Even otherwise, the sheer numbers can overwhelm Bhutan and needs to be managed sooner rather than later, said RSTA’s DG. “Today it is 12,000, tomorrow it will be 30,000, then what do we do?” he questioned. He said that framing a transport policy in the context of tourism had become paramount not only to keep the numbers at a sustainable level but also to ensure that visitors are safe and have a good experience in Bhutan, and that Bhutanese do not resent their presence.

As the government fine-tunes its tourism policy, a key aspect should be a transport policy covering both air and road transport to keep tourism sustainable and of high value. Frequency of flights to Indian cities should be increased to make it easier for regional tourists to fly in, and reliability of domestic flights improved to spread tourism beyond the western region. The two airlines do arrange charter flights to Indian cities for regional tourists.

For road transport, the policy should insist on stringent emission levels, noise control, road worthiness, insurance and in improving the public transport system.

“There are regional tourists who drive their own cars all the way from Delhi and Kolkata and they are most welcome if they meet the requirements,” said Pemba Wangchuk. “But private Indian vehicles used for commercial purposes must be stopped, and local sightseeing should only be allowed through local transport operators. Tourists should also have a choice of options, to either travel in a small bus or, if they prefer, a chauffeur-driven luxury car.”

To ensure local communities in the interior also benefit from tourism, the policy should also insist on road travel stopping a few hours from the destination so that visitors can trek there using local services and resources for food, lodging and portage.

High-end Experience

Experts in the tourism industry and decision makers suggest that one way of defining the transport policy for the tourism sector is to simply apply the existing organised system for international arrivals for all tourists, irrespective of where they are coming from.

Most of the issues today with regional tourism pertain to the “unmanaged section” who are coming on their own through agents in the Indian border towns. If regional tourists also apply through the e-permit system to visit Bhutan, arrangements for their visit can be planned in advance and authorities in Bhutan can keep the numbers at a level that is sustainable for the industry and memorable for the visitor.

That way, when regional tourists arrive at the border, they need not go through the hassle of waiting for hours to get a route permit to drive into Bhutan. “At the border a guide will pick them up and everything else, from transport to hotel, will be taken care of,” said the DG. “This way their experience of Bhutan will be much better and safe as well. At the end of the day visitors must feel welcome and have a high-end experience and that must begin from the airport and at the borders.”

If the industry is to be managed well it must start with managing travel, said Damcho Rinzin, deputy chief marketing officer of the Tourism Council of Bhutan. “For long-term sustainability, systems must be put in place so that the local people feel tourism is important, and not develop a dislike for outsiders because of overcrowding and competition for resources,” he said. “If it is ‘business as usual’, sustainability of the industry will be at stake, there will be major implications on international arrivals and people to people relations with India could deteriorate.”

Experts point out that, in the final analysis, how people travel, how destinations are packaged and the policy of the government as reflected in regulations, will ultimately determine sustainability of tourism in Bhutan.

Tourism and Hotels

Ugyen Penjor

Retired teacher and businesswoman, Kencho, planned to build a huge residential complex in Babesa, along the expressway. With a shopping complex on the ground floor, she would never have problems finding tenants.

Then the idea changed. Three factors convinced her.

There is a cap on construction loans, and interest rates are high. A rough calculation showed that Kencho would be using all her rental income to repay her loan for the next 25 years. Her daughter was unemployed. She wanted to study hospitality.

Kencho decided to convert the massive five-storey structure into a 3-Star hotel. There were many advantages.

The conversion was not a difficult procedure, and the lending rates were a lot cheaper (eight percent compared with 12 percent for an apartment/commercial building). There was a subsidy and tax holiday. All the interior furnishings could be imported from India, Thailand, and China tax-free.

The hotel will be ready by the end of this year. Kencho is confident that it will do well.

When reminded of the five other three-star rated hotels within a square kilometre of hers, she paused. She was aware of that. Half of her building, minus the 30-room hotel, will be commercial space. “I can fall back on them to repay the loan,” says Kencho, who is also a single mother.

The hotel, not named yet, will be the latest addition to the five already operating in her locality in South Thimphu.

In the locality, planners initially had a different concept of development when the capital city’s structural plan was finalised almost two decades ago. It was supposed to be an urban village with amenities like clinics, nursery schools, solid waste disposal sites, fire fighting units, and more. There are none of those today. Plans, it seems, are reversed by landowners’ decisions. Constructing hotels is one.

A Vibrant Industry

The hotel industry is one of the fastest growing industries today. In the last six years, the sector grew by over 124 percent with an annual growth rate of over 14 percent during this period (HRAB, 2019). It claims to be the biggest employer of youths. According to the Hotels and Restaurants Association of Bhutan (HRAB), the hotel industry has provided direct jobs to more than 10,000 people as of March, 2019.

The industry had grown overnight. Going by building proposals the Thimphu thromde is approving, it is not going to stop. As of September, 2018, there were 276 hotels offering 5,868 rooms and 11,195 beds. The thromde approved another 50 constructions in 2017 and 2018.

About Nu 28 billion (B) has been invested in the hotel sector so far. It is estimated that another Nu 3 B worth of investments is underway.

It is not only in tourist hotspots like Thimphu and Paro. Many are lured into building hotels, including farmers who are waiting to turn their paddy fields into tourist resorts.

At Sophukha village, where tourists park their cars and walk through the paddy fields to the famous *Chime Lhakhang* (monastery), it is not only the tourists who are distracting farmers. Farmers envy those who bought parcels of their land and built hotels. At any given day, farmers are willing to build their own, or sell their land and “live more comfortable lives”.

What is Fueling the Growth?

The trend today seems to be investing in hotels. This is driven by the lure of dollar-paying tourists, where the income is better. The Tourism Council of Bhutan mandates that a hotel has to be at least 3-Star to cater to dollar-paying tourists. There were only 45 3-Star hotels in 2012. The number more than doubled in less than six years. As of September 2018, there are 105 hotels in the country.

Our policies favour the hotel industry. Banks give them generous loans with interest rates far lower than for constructing residential buildings, even when housing shortage is a major problem. It is no secret that bankers or promoters in the banking sector own or have shares in hotels.

About 24 percent of all credit in the country today has been extended to the service and tourism sector, of which a large majority is in the hotel sector (HRAB). As of August, 2019, one bank alone has lent about Nu 17 B to the housing sector, construction of residential and commercial buildings, which includes hotels.

There is a moratorium on government construction, but the economic affairs ministry and the tourism council approve licences for new hotel constructions without a second thought. The Thromde believes that they “shouldn’t stop construction of hotels as long as they can be sustained, because the hotel industry is employing the highest number of youths.”

Even as new hotels are being built or approved, there is a new trend dictated by mass tourism -- the conversion of residential buildings into budget hotels.

In Phuentsholing, where an acute housing shortage has forced Bhutanese to live in shanties and cheap places in neighbouring Jaigaon, many residential buildings in the core area of the border town have been renovated and transformed into budget hotels in the last two years (Kuensel April 2019). Thromde records show that 15 new hotels were constructed in the last five years and 11 residential buildings were converted into hotels.

The vision of high value low volume tourism has been thrown out of the window. Numbers are now determining the success of the tourism industry. The unchecked number of tourists demands infrastructure. Hotels are high on the priority list. We have more than 5,000 today, and some are still waiting for their first group.

A Poor Rich Hotel Industry

A joke among Bhutanese is that those in the hotel business come with the grandest proposal before starting a hotel, only to come in flashy Prados to declare losses, year after year.

This is the biggest irony in the explosive and lucrative hotel industry. Going by statistics, it is thriving only because of tax holidays and other incentives at the cost of the government exchequer. The latest national revenue report (2017-2018) states that 55 hotels have declared losses or not declared their income. Among the 55, there are many well-established hotels, including five-star hotels. They are rich until it is tax time!

In the year 2017, revenue forgone through fiscal incentive measures and exemptions increased by 14 percent to Nu 4,442.6 million (from Nu. 3,901.1 million in the income year 2016) mainly on account of increase in sales tax by 16 percent and customs duty by 21 percent. Of the total, the highest tax forgone was from sales tax at 58.9 percent, followed by customs duty at 39 percent. A huge chunk, it would be accurate to surmise, is in the hotel industry.

In addition to a 10-year tax holiday, hotels enjoy exemption on import of sanitary wares, to luxury furniture and fittings imported from third countries. This is the reason most of Bhutan's foreign direct investment is in the hotel business. There is a policy to encourage private home ownership, but it is not working because they do not enjoy facilities like those in the hotel business.

There is no doubt that the industry is absorbing unemployed youth, contributing convertible currency to the government, and helping the tourism industry, but at the rate the hotel industry is booming the bubble, experts caution, will burst soon. This will have a ripple effect, as banks will be affected. The economic affairs minister, Lyonpo Loknath Sharma, soon after taking office, had warned of an economic crisis: "They (hoteliers) projected the demand but not the supply and if there is no solution, it would lead to an economic crisis."

On the outskirts of the capital city, a hotelier is worried about the monthly salary of her seven employees and a chef. The monsoon this year had been dry for her. Her 13-room hotel was not occupied in a month. She gave up a flat she had rented for laundry and store, had downsized her staff, and is in close contact with administration officers of the government and corporate offices in the city. When tourists are low, government meetings and seminars come as saviours!

There is a risk here. This arrangement could brew corruption. There is credible information on collusion with public servants who are paid commissions for booking hotels for seminars, official dinners, and meetings. In their line of business, it is called contact building or networking.

The unchecked growth of hotels, especially in places that are already crowded, like Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha, is exacerbating the low occupancy rate.

Mass Tourism and Hotels

From the records of tourist arrivals, it is the regional tourists who have dominated the market. In 2018, Bhutan received 274,097 tourists, out of which, about 73 percent, or 202,290, were regional tourists.

The hotel and the tourism industry are closely related. What happens in one affects the other. If travel agents are not bringing in guests, there would be no-one staying in the hotels. The low occupancy rate is already hurting those in the industry. There are many hotels to choose from, and this makes them vulnerable to the whims and fancies of the travel companies. There is an explosion of star-rated hotels, especially 3-Star, and those in the business are already feeling the heat.

To stay in the business, they cater to regional tourists (non-dollar paying). In fact, most hoteliers interviewed for this article said that, without regional tourists, they would have long gone out of business.

Regional tourists are important for the hotel industry. Even if they are not reaping the benefits like the tour operators, they would want the influx of regional tourists. This is notwithstanding concerns of regional tourism beginning to change the tourism scenario of Bhutan, of losing Bhutan's brand as an exclusive high-end tourist destination, and the end of the "high-value low-impact" vision.

In the absence of a tourism policy, the hotel industry is lobbying not to change the trend related to regional tourists. Regional tourists play a key role in ensuring the financial viability of the hotel industry.

In the regional tourist game, without regional tourists paying royalty or the minimum daily fee, tour operators make money from the hotel industry. Operators negotiate room rates and charge a higher rate to tourists. The profit is made from the difference, sometimes a few hundred Ngultrums. The margin is from volume, not from value.

Hotel occupancy by dollar-paying tourists is minimum. HRAB estimates it at around 16 percent, which is not financially viable for hotels. They need the regional tourists to improve occupancy rates.

HRAB is a close-knit association. They have common interests and they know how to lobby. In the absence of studies or surveys for decision making in the service sector, the association is influencing polices or decision makers.

They are recommending changes in tourism tariff as well as taxation policies and government subsidies. They are questioning immigration rules and regulations. Debunking the myth that fiscal incentives for hotels have led to revenue forgone for the government, the association claims that the fiscal incentives is the driver for the tourism sector, which helps the industry to grow at the rate of about 17 percent annually (HRAB 2019).

Although there is no evidence, some believe that the hotel industry has threatened political parties that industry members would not support them. The industry is also warning decision makers about geo-political ramifications of controlling the inflow of regional, especially Indian, tourists. “Bhutan would have too much to lose if India also reciprocates with a similar move on the movement of Bhutanese nationals in India.” (HRAB, 2019).

Conclusion

Tourism in Bhutan started in the 1970s. There is no written tourism policy even after five decades. Tourism developed in a sustainable and manageable way under the guidance of the farsighted visions of the Kings.

The industry is changing and under a lot of pressure. The sustainable tourism we took pride in for so long is under threat, as we are now lured by the temptations that mass tourism is offering.

The warnings are clear. We are losing our brand and our vision. Not long ago, tourists saw their visit to Bhutan as a trip to the last Shangri-La. It was an exclusive destination. They wanted to see the Shangri-La which isolated and exotic Bhutan presented.

The tone is now changing. Bhutan is losing its exclusivity. Every monastery, handicraft shop, and *tshechu* is crowded with tourists, to the extent that some are seeing the same face at all tourist hotspots.

Some big agents who send rich tourists to Bhutan are rethinking. They cannot sell Bhutan as an exclusive destination. Some are attracting tourists with their luxurious property, not with Bhutan.

The message is that there are too many tourists. The numbers may translate into revenue but there are costs that are beyond the revenue earned today.

A foreign tour operator who has been to Bhutan 39 times since 2001 announced that he is ending his tour as of April 2020. “A major part of the reason is that Bhutan has lost its appeal to high-end travellers who want to go to less travelled places, which Bhutan used to be.” (The Bhutanese, March, 2019).

The hotel industry might have helped create jobs and earn revenue for the government coffers but the trickle-down effect remains questionable. Apart from making some people in Thimphu rich, it has not benefited the rural populace. It makes no sense if remote communities do not benefit from tourism.

In 2018, 92.22 percent of regional tourists visited only five dzongkhags -- Thimphu, Paro, Wangduephodrang, Punakha and Bumthang. Tsirang’s and Samtse’s share of tourists was 0.1 percent. In 2018, only 24 tourists visited Dagana.

The risk of mass tourism can be summed up in the words of a tourist guide catering to regional tourists. “It is scary to see so many people flock to our lhakhangs and dzongs. From the recently built Kuensel Phodrang to the Taktshang, every place is crowded.”

Concept of Ecotourism

Ngawang Gyeltshen

An old Asian saying aptly warns: “Tourism is like fire; you can either use it to cook your food or burn your house down.” This is relevant in the tourism–environment discourse because they are intricately interlinked. Many studies warn us about the negative impact of tourism on the environment while others indicate win-win possibilities. The proponents of the latter propose tourism policies as a mechanism for improving livelihoods and enhancing environmental conservation. Such aspirations are evident in the concepts of sustainable tourism, ecotourism and community-based tourism.

Bhutan faces challenges in sustaining high economic growth and improving living standards while protecting its rich natural resources. Complex challenges of ecosystem degradation, biodiversity losses, and climate change need to be addressed to avoid higher economic and human costs, and ecotourism is a green solution to these problems. On the other hand, if not carefully planned or executed, tourism can destroy the very environment on which it primarily depends. Currently, the ecotourism sector in Bhutan is underdeveloped. Despite nature being one of the two main attractions for tourists coming to Bhutan (the other being culture), nature-based tourism¹ accounts for only about 12 percent of tourism activities.

This article discusses examples where tourism has positively or negatively affected environment and local livelihoods including attracting investments. This then connects to UNDP’s global work on sustainable tourism and a new national ecotourism initiative jointly proposed with the government.

Tourism is a Fire that Burns the House Down and a Bad Master for the Environment

While tourism depends on the quality of the environment, increased tourism activities can damage the environment it depends on. Environmental damage occurs when visitation levels are higher than the environment’s capacity to manage its use, either through increased visitation or creation of infrastructure. In other words, when the carrying capacity of an environment is exceeded, it exerts increased pressures on natural resources

¹Bhutan Tourism Monitor includes trekking, adventure tourism, birding, flora and fauna tours as sources of nature-based tourism.

and the scenic beauty. For example, the famous Boracay island of the Philippines and Maya Bay of Thailand recently succumbed to the toll of heavy annual tourism. Both were closed to visitors after thousands of visitors put increased pressures on the coastal environment and marine life. The former was re-opened recently after its rehabilitation, and the latter is still recovering.

Increasing tourists means overuse of water and increasing pressures on water availability through intensive use by accommodation, swimming pools, laundries, etc. For towns in Bhutan already facing localised water shortages, it is only evident that increasing tourist numbers will exacerbate water scarcity. We do not have to go far for such examples. In 2018, a hill station in India faced acute water shortages, leaving home taps dry for a week. During that time, hotels had signs that read: “We are in a water crisis; don’t come to Shimla”.

Bhutan is a veritable trekking destination. With increasing trekking intensity and numbers each year, there are environmental problems. Over 3,500 tourists trek on 23 trekking routes annually in the country, including the popular Jomolhari base camp and the Druk Path. These tourists generate considerable amount of waste, as they carry mostly packaged foods and drinks. Concerned agencies and volunteer groups have to carry out regular cleaning campaigns along the routes. Last year, a cleaning group collected over 80 sacks of litter at one time from the Druk Path alone.

In addition, transport animals (yaks and horses) are used with the ratio of tourist to transport animals increasing to as high as 1: 6² for long treks, trampling vegetation and soil along their way. The lessons of heavy environmental damage are visible not very far from here. The majestic and sacred Mount Everest is now turned into a dumping ground and is losing its mountaineering charm.

For a biodiversity-rich country like Bhutan, increased visitation increases pressures on biodiversity through trampling of vegetation and soil and cutting of trees and shrubs near campsites. Trekking usually occurs at higher altitudes, where plant growth is slower, putting more pressures on plant vigour. Trekking groups can also come into conflict with local users of natural resources and its biodiversity on which highlanders depend. Although not evident or common in Bhutan now, increased tourism can also result in

²Ecotourism as a mechanism for sustainable development, Rinzin et.al (2007)

poaching of wildlife or high-value plants. For example, there is a proposal to close Indonesia's popular Komodo island in 2020 because of wildlife smuggling which has resulted in the serious decline of its Komodo dragons.

Pollution is another problem of mass tourism. Noise pollution in natural areas can disturb the wildlife, particularly birds. Often, out of place tourism structures in the middle of natural settings -- those that do not blend with local structures and landscape -- can clash with and spoil the beauty of a place, an example of aesthetic pollution. It is only matter of time when Bhutan's authentic destination, the picturesque Phobjikha valley, may succumb to increased sewage and wastewater pollution. The sprawling of hotels in the valley without proper standards means its sewage and wastewater are draining into the valley, altering its wetland ecosystems on which the Black-necked cranes roost. It may be an irony that the hotels that attract tourists to the wetlands may make them disappear.

Mexico's Cancun city is a classic example that Phobjikha can learn from, where increased tourist activities in the last four decades have eroded its beaches. The Independent once called it "a beach holiday without a beach"³ as the city was battling with the environmental issue. Wildlife feeding is increasingly becoming common along Bhutanese highways, with increasing tourist and other traffic. There are many adverse impacts of wildlife feeding, including disease transmission to wildlife.

At the global level, increasing tourism is also linked to greater greenhouse gas emissions from land, water and air transportation, and accommodation. Recent studies confirmed that global tourism accounts for about eight percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, climate change will also have an impact on the tourism industry, with many destinations, such as coastal areas and high mountains, vulnerable to climate change. Carbon neutral tourism is, however, possible, with several options that the tourism industry could apply to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the World Travel and Tourism Council has pledged carbon neutrality by measuring its greenhouse gas emissions and taking measures to reduce or offset them. At the recent Startup Weekend Competition held in Thimphu, the Carbon Neutral Bhutan idea bagged the winning prize. Their idea was based on how tourism can help achieve Bhutan's carbon neutrality pledge.

³The Independent, 2010. The battle for the beaches of Cancun

Tourism can be a Good Servant to the Environment and Cook Food for Local Communities

If carefully planned, tourism can have a significant positive impact on the environment. Revenue generation from tourism has directly benefited environmental conservation in many ways. Most notably, park fees, concessionaries, and other forms of user fees make direct contributions to government revenue and environmental conservation efforts. The Galapagos National Park of Ecuador charges an entry fee of USD 100 (there were over 275,800 tourists in 2018), one of the highest, and these funds are used to finance the conservation of biodiversity and social services in the island. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, wildlife viewing generated USD 120 billion last year, significantly greater than wildlife trade.

The Bwindi National Park in Rwanda attracts around 20,000 tourists annually and its mountain gorilla treks cost USD 600 ⁴per permit, with super luxury tours rising as high as USD 4,000 to USD 6,000 per person. Although wildlife viewing is not feasible in Bhutan, high-end birding can be promoted. Bhutan also has the golden mahseer, which is considered a rare and the most valued game fish which can attract high-value angling tourism. Yeti-tourism can be another major nature-based expedition in Bhutan.

Tourism is an important component in creating and financing many protected areas, including incentives for the growth of private parks and community wildlife conservancies, particularly in Africa. In these natural areas, tourism also includes informative tours on wildlife and ecology by skilled naturalist guides and park rangers. Costa Rica is a very good example, where tourism has helped raise environmental awareness for both tourists and the locals. Costa Rican schools and Universities offer environmental and tourism courses, which see an increased visitation by locals to national parks and natural reserves.

Tourism brings people closer to nature, revealing the true value of the environment, which brings positive human behaviour towards the environment. Based on the lessons from negative impact of tourism on the environment, many new laws and regulations have been enacted to ensure the preservation of natural areas, and tourism is the main driver for

⁴Set to increase to USD 700 per permit from July 2020 as per web sources.

many of these. Costa Rica boasts that tourism is the factor that helps their tropical forests remain intact today. New regulations have protected many rainforests and coastal areas.

Tourism can also cook food for rural communities while protecting the environment. Tourism generates significant revenue for the local communities through both formal and informal employment. Tourism services and infrastructure, including recreation, create local employment opportunities and increasing tourist expectations create new businesses and procurement opportunities for local communities. When an area is exposed to heavy tourist traffic, the local communities may also benefit from improved services in the areas, such as transportation and medical facilities.

Concepts of Ecotourism and Bhutan's Experiences

Ecotourism is a tool that can make tourism a good servant–fire for positive impact on the environment and at the same time cook food for local communities. The fruition of ecotourism first introduced in early 1980s is often attributed to the tourist's conscious link to environment and communities -- it evolved from early nature tourism to the need to include consideration of local host communities and their culture.

There is a plethora of definitions and variance of ecotourism today. The International Ecotourism Society in 1990 defined ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”. The International Union for Conservation of Nature elaborates 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”.

There are several good examples of ecotourism and lessons to draw for Bhutan⁵. Costa Rica is often considered ecotourism's poster child, given the integration of ecotourism principles in the wider tourism market. Its astounding national parks attract most international tourists today. Similar to Bhutan, tourism is the most important foreign exchange earner and development pillar for Tanzania. In recent decades, the country is strongly

⁵Martha Honey's Ecotourism and sustainable development – Who owns paradise, 2008 provides a good overview of ecotourism practices around the world.

pursuing ecotourism, including nature-based travel and local communities' engagement in the tourism industry. Tourism revenues also fund the national parks through increasing park fees to discourage overcrowding. Kenya, which is a pioneer in wildlife and community-based tourism in Africa, provides several lessons and good practices for many others. However, greenwashing is not uncommon in ecotourism. Many travel industries tend to use ecotourism for mere greening of conventional mass tourism today.

While the concept of ecotourism burgeoned only in 1980s, Bhutan's onset of tourism based on "high-value low volume" policy in 1970s was already in line with the principles of ecotourism. This was apparently premised on the principles of Gross National Happiness, as indicated by a recent national definition based on earlier definitions⁶. It defines ecotourism as "high-value low impact" travel that supports the protection of natural and cultural heritage, provides positive and enriching experiences for visitors and hosts, assures tangible benefits to local people, and contributes to the Gross National Happiness⁷.

Bhutan's Ninth Five-Year Plan identified tourism as a priority economic sector and emphasised the development and promotion of sustainable tourism in the country for the protection and integration of Bhutan's unique culture and natural resources. As a new approach to tourism for improving services, promotion of seasonal and regional balanced development, and diversification of products for tourists, and increasing the involvement of local communities and benefit-sharing, the Department of Tourism⁸ conducted a pilot study to test the feasibility of developing community tourism.

In 2004, the pilot public-private partnership approach project, the first of its kind, was implemented in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (JSWNP) in the central part of Bhutan. The project covered 209 households with 1595 people from six villages, and accumulated USD 149,240 as revenue for the government and USD 21,357 for the communities. The model was subsequently replicated in Merak-Sakteng in 2011. Deemed as an exclusive destination then, followed by adequate investments and rigorous marketing, the Merak-Sakteng Trek received less than four percent of the total trekkers in the country in its first few years of operations.

⁶Ecotourism was earlier defined by Department of Tourism in 2001 and 2005)

⁷Department of Forests and Park Services, 2012)

⁸Currently Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB)

In 2011, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature initiated an ecotourism project in Phobjikha, the largest wetland in the country. The ecotourism activities in the valley are planned for livelihood development of communities, towards supporting wetland conservation for protecting the habitat of the Black-necked cranes. However, other commercial hotels are now sprawling in the valley, adding pressure to the valley.

Two recent ecotourism initiatives -- the CBST in Haa and My Gakidh Village in Punakha -- are showing early signs of successes, but not without challenges. Nature tours, which were conventionally based on trekking, are now diversifying to include other experiences with nature. There are approximately 23 approved trek routes in the country, which are basically traditional routes that connect rural settlements. Recently, several nature-based activities have been introduced, including bird watching, rafting, botany, mountain biking, butterfly, and other wildlife tours. A few festivals too have been developed to specifically promote tourism, with the objective of encouraging community benefits. These festivals include the Takin festival, Nomads festival, Rhododendron Festival, Mountain Festival, Bird Festival, Mushroom Festival, and Haa summer festival.

Despite efforts by the government, ecotourism has remained in a pilot phase for the last 15 years, with only a few success stories, and is still not scaled up to harness its full potential. There are limited tourism facilities available in protected and natural areas across the country, a lack of diversified tourism products and activities, and limited involvement of rural Bhutanese in the tourism value chain. Compounding these challenges, there are few opportunities for high-value private investment and public-private partnerships in tourism in protected areas, and areas rich in natural and cultural attractions. Furthermore, there is limited and fragmented application of sustainable tourism practices within the private sector, in part due to a lack of awareness, skills, and equipment.

A New Era of Ecotourism for Bhutan – Bhutan’s Golden Goose?

The government has identified tourism as a flagship programme in its 12th Five-year Plan with significant investments planned for tourism growth in the country. If not planned carefully, it is likely that Bhutan will find it difficult to invest adequately in pre-empting the adverse impacts on its environment of expanding tourism.

Bhutan's tourism is dominated by its cultural attractions (*tshechus*, *dzongs*, monasteries, etc.) which account for about 90 percent of the tourists. This indicates that the ecotourism and nature-based tourism are yet to be explored. Given the intact natural landscape and the significant global value of Bhutanese biodiversity, there is tremendous scope for ecotourism to provide long-term solutions for sustaining the protected areas, biodiversity, and community livelihood development actions. This provides a mutual opportunity for generating much-needed environmental financing, as well as a mechanism to engage communities in environmental conservation. Doing so will also support the realisation of Bhutan's development goals and GNH.

Tourism today is one of the most dynamic and largest economic sectors in this modern age. Recognising its global impact, it forms an integrated part of the Sustainable Development Goals for Agenda 2030, adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2016. Subsequently, the United Nations declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, to advance the contributions of the tourism sector to reaching the SDGs, including on climate change (SDG 13), biodiversity (SDG 15), eliminating poverty (SDG 1), and generating decent work (SDG 8).

This year, the Royal Government of Bhutan and its partners, including the United Nations Development Programme, are implementing a new-generation Ecotourism project. This is not to reinvent the wheel, but to get back on track, building on 15 years of ecotourism testing in Bhutan. Such an initiative is expected to unpack and implement Bhutan's ecotourism aspirations. In doing so, it will focus on national standards and safeguards to ensure environmental protection and benefiting rural livelihoods by mainstreaming environment into the tourism sector.

It will reinforce the interventions at the national level, including investing in regional circuits through improved product diversification and marketing. From economic perspectives, it will explore how ecotourism can be a "green product" based on Bhutan's natural assets, create potential for public-private partnerships through ecotourism concessions in ecologically rich areas, and encourage tourism operators towards environmental and social considerations. Initial estimates⁹ reveal that PPP concessions in

⁹Preliminary estimates using international models and local rates and higher range of investments and PPP characteristics

Bhutan's parks and natural areas can generate a capital investment of USD 150 million (M), cumulative PPP fees of USD 5.2 M per year. If unleashed to its full potential, the impact on the local economy is estimated at 1,400 new jobs, with USD 19.8 M in wages and benefits to staff annually, and local procurement value of USD 3.3 M per year.

Bhutan's tourism policy provides a perfect platform to pursue and promote ecotourism. Bhutan has a great potential to build on its current strengths and lessons to create exemplary ecotourism projects, given the national priority to protect environmental and cultural heritage while promoting equitable socio-economic development through GNH. However, existing gaps and challenges need to be addressed to steer ecotourism development in the right direction.

Ecotourism in Bhutan was first started to address human-wildlife conflicts by offsetting or compensating the losses for farmers, but much remains to be done to converge the two. For Bhutan's rural communities, which bear the daily brunt of strict conservation policies in human-wildlife conflict, ecotourism holds tremendous potential to improve their livelihood. Lessons on ecotourism across the globe shows that it is not unusual to confront challenges and issues in the early stages. But with 15 years of experience in the field, significant changes to the system and meaningful investments in the tourism sector can transform Bhutan into a model ecotourism and carbon-neutral destination.

The Sacred Mountains of Bhutan

Reprints of Past Articles

Kuensel 10/7/1984

Twenty-one snow-shrouded peaks in Bhutan, all over 7,000 metres, which have for centuries afforded the country an impassable natural protection and been the essence of its “Shangrila” image could now be almost worth their weight in gold, with mountaineering fast developing as the main activity of Bhutan’s tourism. “Our virgin mountains are everything today’s mountaineer could hope for”, says BTC General Manager, Jigme Tshultim, indicating a tray-full of correspondence on his desk from veteran climbers and major mountaineering institutes all over the world, requesting permission to attempt some Bhutanese peaks.

Not so surprising a fact... what could be more attractive to a mountain-lover than an untouched peak in the Himalayas itself? But if Bhutan’s serene peaks appear to draw expeditions and dollars to them it will not be a random exploitation of the “fast buck”. Besides the systematic, professional exploration of mountains as financial assets, the mountaineering policy indicates a profound reverence for nature’s significance in Bhutanese culture and the spiritual dependence of some Bhutanese on their mountains and the deities who are believed to reside on them.

With the overall policy of the Government encouraging revenue generation His Majesty the King commanded H.E Lyonpo Sangye Penjor, Minister for Communication and Tourism, to introduce the commercial development of mountaineering, initiating the present system of organised expeditions. Still within the policy of controlled tourism, “selected peaks will be introduced to climbers”, says Jigme Tshultim, “but only very gradually: one mountain every two years”.

The history of mountaineering in Bhutan before 1983 is very sparse. In the earliest recorded British expedition in 1937, F. Spencer Chapman and Pasang Dawa are believed to have climbed Chomolhari. Chomolhari was climbed again in 1973 when three members an Indo-Bhutan army team reached the summit. In 1983, two groups attempted Jitchu Drake (about 7,000 m), a Japanese group of women climbers led by Mrs. Junko Tabei,

the first woman on Everest, and an Austrian group led by a Kanchenjunga veteran, Mr Sepp Mayavi. Another four expeditions came to Bhutan in 1984 to attempt Jitchu Drake, Namshila in Lunana (6,000 m), and Kangbum (or Gangphu - almost 6,000 m). Expeditions are escorted to a mountain after it has been professionally surveyed and routes selected. Gangkar Puensum, (7.541 m), which has been surveyed by two Japanese teams will be attempted next year by expeditions from the Himalayan Association of Japan and Kyoto University. Among the applications for future expeditions, Reinbold Messner, an international mountaineering figure, and Dr Corchen, President of the Explorers Club, USA, are expected next year. As a financial resource, mountaineering has great potential, says Mr J. Tshultim. Expeditions come in groups of seven to 20 and normally take about six weeks. Every member of the group pays USD 85 (Nu about 950) a day, excluding the royalty paid for the expedition—Nu 18,000 to Nu 52,000.

Other benefits from mountaineering expeditions include cash income for villagers in the vicinity of climbing routes who hire labour or pack animals, and sell domestic produce - a contribution to the development of rural economy. Firewood is supplied to the expeditions by the villagers. According to Mr J. Tshultim, there is enough dead wood to provide fuel for about five years and villagers have been instructed not to cut fresh wood, to preserve to ecology. “We will provide other types of fuel when this is exhausted”, says the BTC General Manager.

The significance of mountaineering, however, is by no means confined to terms of profit and loss. It is a highly respected sport where participants believe in it to an obsession. It is also a serious sport, where risks are far greater than most others. Whole expeditions have been lost on mountains whose natural characteristics attract the special breed of tough athletes—the mountaineers.

The Chomolhari expedition in 1971 lost three men on the mountain and the recent Italian group on Jitchu Drake lost two young climbers. But as most mountaineers believe, “the greater the danger more attractive the challenge”. A gratifying effect of the introduction of mountaineering in Bhutan could be the emergence of Bhutanese climbers of international standards. As “mountain men”, with physique, stamina, lifestyle tempered by the mountains themselves the only absentee, perhaps, is formal training.

And it is not too distant a realization. The BTC has four guides trained in basic mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. It is now a policy of Tourism to train all guides in a basic course in mountaineering say the General Manager and the organisation is looking at possibilities of courses in Japan and France. Trained guides, Yeshey Wangchuck and Singye Dorji, joined an expedition to Namshila and reached the summit, and the recent expedition to kangbum comprises two Bhutanese guides Yeshey Wangchuck and Nim Gyeltshen.

And potential? In 1970 Lt. Chachu (now Major Chachu) of the RBA, accompanied the Indo-Bhutan expedition to Chomolhari. A popular local story describes how the untrained Bhutanese man, who was at first puzzled even over his bootlaces, climbed without much difficulty along with the trained mountaineers: among the most impressed was Expedition leader, Capt. Kumar, who expressed healthy respect for Major Chachu's natural prowess. Capt. Kumar's report also describes the last leg of the climb where Major Chachu, stopped before the top and refused to step foot on the summit for a unique reason: "Chomolhari is sacred".

Bhutanese mountains are a part of Bhutanese culture, and the introduction of peaks to climbers is done in consultation with local beliefs. On the command of His Majesty, H.E Lyonpo Sangye Penjor and BTC, General Manager, Jigme Tshultim, met in June this year with the people of Lingshi and Thimphu dzongkhag to discuss the sacrecy of Bhutanese mountains and the effect of mountaineering on local feelings. According to Mr Jigme Tshultrim, while the people are glad to cooperate with tourism in most areas, they expressed some reservation on Chomolhari, which has now been temporarily closed to climbers. Says Naro Gup, Phub Thinley: "Chomolhari is the residence of 'Chomo' the deity who watches over our herds. We have a monastery on Chomolhari where we got to worship. The people of Soi perform an annual ceremony for Chomo."

As per His Majesty's command, mountains will not be introduced at the cost of spiritual disappointment of the people, and official policy reflects this priority. This, however, might be a matter of time. As Japanese team leader, Mr Sagahara Nagahisa says: "Hundreds of years ago our shepherds were disappointed with the "intrusion" on the mountain by climbers. It is common everywhere".

Mountaineering in Bhutan: Protected Peaks

Inside Himalayas 10 April 2015

Though Bhutan did briefly open up for mountaineering in the early 1980s, by the mid 1990s climbing peaks above 6,000m was prohibited and in 2003 Bhutan mountaineering was banned altogether.

This was done primarily to respect the beliefs of the local communities who attached strong spiritual value to the mountains, and wanted to protect the peaks for their own culture and for future generations.

As a result, Bhutan is home to Gangkhar Puensum – the highest unclimbed peak in the world. As the ban shows no signs of being lifted, it is likely to remain unconquered for many years to come. However if you want to go mountaineering in Bhutan, don't despair. There are still plenty of high-altitude treks and high passes that you can explore. And as there are so few other visitors in this remote country, you'll have them all to yourself as well.

One of the most scenic treks is the Druk Path which links the capital Thimpu with the town of Paro in the east of the country. The route passes through traditional villages and some spectacular mountain scenery as well as passing beautiful monasteries, perched high up in the mountains on the way.

During the trek you'll climb to an altitude of over 4,000m, which may not be a mountain peak but will still give you some great views and give your legs a good work out. The trek can be completed comfortably in around five days, but you can take more time if you want to make some detours on the way.

Another great region for trekking is around the traditional valley of Gantey. Home to some of Bhutan's most beautiful monasteries and religious sites, this area is ideal for exploring on foot. If you want to go mountaineering however, Bhutan may not have a huge number of opportunities to conquer Himalayan giants, but what it has on offer is fairly spectacular and will more than make up for the lack of giant peaks.

Tourism in Nepal

Sujeev Shakya

Nepal opened up to the world in 1950 and has a history of nearly 70 years of tourism that has been filled with multiple layers of challenges and growth. Therefore, it will be interesting to understand Bhutan's tourism development and growth compared with Nepal.

Bhutan Tourism As We Understand

From being almost invisible in the world map in terms of people wanting to visit the country to being one of the most popular go-to nations, Bhutan has come a long way in just a few years. The development of tourism in Bhutan has been significant and rapid given that it opened up only in 1974 in an attempt to increase revenue and introduce Bhutanese culture to the outside world. The total number of tourists visiting the country has increased from 287 in 1974 to 274,097 in 2018 and an increase in total receipts from USD 2 million (M) in 1980 to USD 85.41 M in 2018 alone.¹

Tourism in Bhutan has changed over the years and the change has brought many positive outcomes for the nation as well as to the world as a whole. Specifically for Bhutan, after the privatisation of the tourism industry in 1991, many Bhutanese entrepreneurs are investing in the tourism sector, which has created visible high profits. With increased tourism, a large number of Bhutanese have received employment opportunities as well, in the form of guides, cooks, transport/tour operators, communication services, hotel and restaurant owners. Overall, the living standard of the nation has improved. The boost that the cottage industry and handicraft shops in Thimphu and other popular tourist areas have gotten, because of increased tourism, is laudable as they have contributed to the socio-economic development of the nation as a whole. However, gripped with socio-economic development is the cost associated with the transformation of tourism.

¹"Bhutan Tourism Monitor 2018", Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2018; Retrieved from- https://www.tourism.gov.bt/uploads/attachment_files/tcb_xx8r_BTM%202018%20_final.pdf

Nepal's Tourism Journey

Nepal was initially known for trekking, adventure and expeditions on the Everest and the Annapurna range. High-end tourists who visited the country paid for expensive air travel and hotels. They spent nearly a million dollars in just over three months in the Everest expeditions during the 1970s. Tiger Tops in Chitwan, breakfast in Lukla through helicopter rides, lunch in Nagarkot and expensive dinners at Bhaktapur Durbar Square were the most attractive trends back in those days.

Nepal's mass tourism history began with the arrival of the hippies and backpacker tourists in the 1970s who came in search of instant nirvana as marijuana and other drugs were not yet illegal in Nepal then. However, objections were drawn to the poor quality of budget tourists in Nepal as the hippies and backpacker tourists outnumbered the high-end tourists and the former were serving as a primary marketing tool for the country. In the mid 1970s after a popular Bollywood film, Indians started traveling to Nepal. With the Nepali government encouraging imports of foreign goods to be sold to Indian customers and smuggled across the border, Indian tourists came in droves. The opening of the Casino was the final nail in the coffin for quality tourism as it attracted a breed of Indian tourists that were not interested in Nepal's culture, heritage, or natural beauty but made dingy gambling dens a status symbol. With restricted foreign exchange, Indians could not travel to countries that required foreign exchange, therefore Nepal also became a shopping haven. A journey to Pashupatinath became a religious break between shopping sprees.

In the 1990s, trekking became a mass product as many trekking routes were developed with comfortable lodges and palatable food. With the advent of the Internet and smartphones, everybody has become a journalist nowadays and has made these destinations with low carrying capacity explode with tourists. Cheaper air travel and better connectivity brought in many people who wanted to immerse themselves in Nepal's natural beauty, culture and heritage. But the patterns have changed over the years. With the arrival of young travelers who are more interested in trekking and adventure tourism, this segment became the area of focus. After Chinese were allowed to travel outside China, Nepal became an easy destination and they started arriving in droves. As a different segment that has a sort of herd mentality, they look at product and services completely differently from other international and regional tourists.

With the growing affluence of Nepalis, and a population of 28 M ready to spend, a rising number of diaspora and youth (70 percent of people are under 35 years of age) starting to travel across the country, domestic tourism has now overtaken revenues from international tourists. However, this has come with huge costs.

Namo Budha, which stands as a well-maintained beautiful place, built in Nepali style architecture and surrounded by an amazing view of the hills and mountains and filled with nature, has now become a mere picnic place. Mostly business people, who are basically elected representatives leveraging power associated with the political position, take the government land under the purview of local governments on lease and run picnic spots. Local items and branded alcohol are sold; loudspeakers and microphones are rented in the “picnic spirit”. Noisy Nepalis blast loud music, almost as if challenging the beautiful place and the nature surrounding it. Further, drinking and brawling in hotels or homestays are also common.

Thus, while domestic tourism is a growing positive step, the values and impact it brings needs careful scrutiny and rethinking. Priority should be given to promoting value-based domestic tourism. If domestic tourists are environmentally responsible and socially aware, then as would be expected, domestic tourism can clearly grow and thrive. An inward focus on tourism is just as essential as a focus on international tourism.

From Product to Experience

Tourism has always been associated with a certain kind of product being “sold” by a country through various advertisements. Examples can be drawn from Nepal where tourism has been product-driven ever since the industry formally began in 1950. The religious places, world heritage sites, and mountains attract tourists. Although Nepal began as a high-end tourist destination, with more backpacker tourists in the hippie days due to the freedom of smoking pot and visiting religious temples, Nepal began viewing tourism as a mere sector being sold on these products. Longer-term perspective seems missing wherein tourists are offered experiences of a lifetime which ultimately draws them into repeated visits.

More than temples being sites for sightseeing, Nepal needs to learn to offer stories behind the existence of temples and shrines. Similarly trekking, nature, culture, and spirituality should all emphasise the meaningful experience instead of the entertainment.

After years of relying on the same marketing tool to lure tourists focusing on the segment which outnumbers others - Nepal needs a paradigm shift in its concern for quality tourism. Focusing on the quantity of tourists is simply not the right strategy in the new era of tourism which prevails today. Merely setting a target of “two million tourists a year goal” for 2020 and achieving that target should not come at the cost of quality tourism. Quality has to go hand-in-hand with quantity. Dealing with the quality of services to be provided, be it by addressing issues that the high-end tourists face, i.e., of changing SIM cards because of high telecom charges or making luxury vehicles available on hire or rediscovering premium segments of its past, a start must be made if quality tourism is the objective.

Comparing and Learning

Consumption has increased over the years. Undoubtedly, the trend in tourism is changing globally as well. There is increased numbers of young tourists every year who now come for trekking, adventure tourism, local cultural dishes and eco-tourism. These young tourists have been able to boost the lives of Sherpas and Gurungs living in the Himalayan Range. Had it not been for tourism, the varied culture and adventure in the Himalayan and Hilly range would still be untapped and the possibility of uplifting their lives would be a distant dream. It is, thus, not uncommon that consumption is a driver for tourism.

However, while the increased consumption boosting the tourism sector is apparent, at the same time, the cost at which the pace of consumption is eroding the value of tourism is misguided. For instance, when we talk about uplifting the Hill economy in Nepal through tourism, we cannot decouple the unscrupulous buildings, increased wastage, and environment degradation that come with it. Addressing consumption by understanding the spending patterns of tourists is the need of the century to drive tourism. But at the same time, the value brought forth by this consumption should

be compared with the costs associated with it. This haphazard development of tourism in Nepal has been in sharp contrast to Bhutan, where there is caution when it comes to opening up areas for tourists. Similarly, in contrast to Bhutan's policy of restricting climbing of Himalayan peaks, Nepal has seen revenue from climbing permits as one of the core sources of revenue for tourism. In this way the perspective of tourist and tourism in both countries vary considerably.

For instance, in another landlocked country, Rwanda, tourism has grown due to more regional and international tourists and their changing spending patterns. Rwanda was popular due to its iconic gorilla tourism. Like Nepal, Rwanda has a lot of eco-tourism destinations too. But the difference comes in addressing the tourism sector and consumption pattern. People from rural areas of Nepal refrain from trekking as they have been walking all their lives something which the urban population is not used to doing. Rwanda, on the other hand, has been able to attract a large number of its growing urban population towards eco-tourism in the home country itself. They have also drawn attention to the canopy walk within the Nyungwe Forest National Park and taken leadership in developing eco-tourism.

While tourism is indispensable for Bhutan, there is a lot of lessons that Nepal can learn from Bhutan. The spending pattern of tourists in Bhutan is also changing regarding its pristine environment, religious festivals, historic monuments and its rich and unique culture. In an attempt to address rising consumption in tourism, Bhutan introduced a policy of "high-value, low-volume" tourism policy which seeks to attract only the most discerning visitors with a deep respect for cultural values, traditions, and natural environment. The policy also complements the government's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which builds on the pillars of sustainable tourism. By maintaining high-end brands and luxurious lodging facilities, minimising fees, curtailing western low-budget backpacker travel while simultaneously imposing high tariffs to keep the volume of tourists low due to environmental and cultural concerns, Bhutan has used its tourism to create an image of high-end tourism and formed it as a part of their national identity.

Nepal, thus, does not have to go to faraway destinations to learn about addressing concerns in tourism sector. It can learn from countries like Bhutan and Rwanda, which have implemented policies and achieved great

heights in the tourism front. For a long time, the key performance indicator of tourism has been the number of tourist arrivals, irrespective of the kind of impact made by them and the quality of experience offered to them.

Nepal can also opt for building its tourism business by investing in people and the service industry. Upscale hotels, high-end restaurants, and better transportation services are needed. Improving the quality of tourism and the concept of eco-tourism should not be a long haul if Nepal is not to be promoted as a “low-end” destination. The “need” for quality tourism is clear; the “how to” and “will” less so.

The new tourism agenda of developing quality-driven as well as economically and environmentally sustainable tourism builds on new marketing strategies. Earlier, Bhutan relied on the “high-value, low-volume tourism” policy. The policy generated enormous progress and represented the first attempt of Bhutan to address its tourism sector. Implementing the policy in Bhutan was not just about providing a future of prosperity. An introspective look was required because one of the consequences of this policy was resulting in a very low percentage of repeat visitors in Bhutan. Only 13 percent of tourists were repeat visitors and the rest were first timers. The controlled policy in tourism was not driving new product development processes required for defining new tourism destinations from a consumer perspective.² Also, while the focus on minimising environmental and cultural impacts through western tourists was happening, what was also visible was the ignorance regarding the same from a growing number of regional tourists. The policy coming to life within each western as well as regional tourist can only bring the desired outcomes for Bhutan.

To address this, an emphasis on new marketing strategy was required. The policy of “high-value, low-volume” tourism policy was replaced by “high-value, low-impact” tourism. The new approach made possible a transformational shift away from keeping the number of tourists minimal to increasing them in order to promote greater economic growth, while still aiming for low negative impacts on environment.³ However, much needs to be done.

²Ibid [2]

³“Cultural Values and Sustainable Tourism Governance in Bhutan”, International Development Institute, 16 December 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/7/12/16616/pdf>

A critical revolution in terms of tourism in Rwanda, which is two-thirds the size of Bhutan and whose population is one-third of Nepal, came from thinking big and changing the view about tourism altogether. Rwanda tourism signed sponsorship deals with renowned football clubs and world leaders, built an airline hub, positioned its capital- Kigali, as a conference hub, advocated for clean tourism, built roads, managed its popular gorilla tourism through promotion and conservation, and most of all, worked at maintaining what they have built. The kind of strategies that they've used to build all of these comes with a perennial exercise of keeping up with the latest trends, keeping an eye on global stage, and addressing required changes in behaviours.

Nepal Needs to Learn

All that being said, these countries show that setting marketing strategies for quality tourism works well. Nepal, too, should learn from them and strive to be on the global centre stage. A plethora of tourism associations present in Nepal only relegate the Nepalese tourism and entrepreneurship sector. Evidently during and after the earthquake and blockade in the late 2015 and early 2016, the tourism associations created a price cartel and fought for the share of opportunity. Recalibration in thinking and moving ahead through new marketing strategies to put Nepal in the forefront as a destination for tourism is, thus, needed. Strategies to strengthen the tourism sector and increasing the share of the overall tourism pie are more beneficial for the tourism sector.

Moreover, in today's action-oriented and global century, everything is just a click away. Tourist guides in Nepal should be able to take advantage of the anecdotes and stories about the rich heritage of the country which are not available online. Nepal should be able to promise a truly enriching stay for the tourists through its tourism sector rather than just selling stories to get the extra money from them. Focus on experience and strengthening the country's Unique Selling Point can be a turning point for the tourism industry in Nepal.

More knowledge transfer needs to happen in Nepal as a part of the changing era and changing strategies for tourism. Hospitality industry of the country needs to strengthen from within. Unions and political associations only make productivity and efficiency in delivering quality and

timely service difficult. Thus, one of the marketing strategies can also be focusing on bringing global players in the industry and partnerships with foreign firms to compete in the marketplace. Rent-seeking mentality needs to be alienated from the tourism industry overall.

Revolution Through Recalibration

The tourism sector of any country encompasses a wide-ranging and ambitious possibility of revolution. That revolution can only happen through a “recalibration” in the thinking process.

Integrated and transformative thinking is required at this stage. Integrated, because all of the strategies to push for quality tourism are inter-connected and we cannot aim to achieve just one goal. Transformative, because achieving these strategies and goals means changing the very way we live our everyday lives.

The first step to travelling is researching the destinations you want to travel to. The research has now a face for many, named Tripadvisor. People decide on travel options and plan their itinerary based on the contents they see through Tripadvisor. They plan their accommodations in Airbnbs, which have practical benefits like inexpensiveness and convenience in location. They choose to travel through Uber which reduces the worry of getting from one place to another and helps focus on the business matter only. The kind of revolution brought forth by recalibration has changed the facet of tourism, employment, and the way of living.

Conclusion

Moving forward, the future of tourism should entail a paradigm shift on managing tourism and bringing forth sustainability. It is required to unlock the potential and possibility that this sector carries in achieving the desired benefits. For instance, Bhutan’s promise of an exclusive and distinctive experience through its tourism has been portrayed as more than a mere agenda of the government. Similarly, for the policies and efforts being made to truly unfold the tourism sector beyond the current dynamics in Nepal, a business-as-usual approach will simply not work. A transformational shift from quantity tourism to quality tourism needs to happen beyond words to real implementation with lasting impact if the nation hopes to avoid a

nightmare of negative externalities on its environment, culture, and values. From a tourism perspective, nobody had dreamt that travel and tourism would be the talk of the century. But, here we are today! To address the ever evolving and growing world tourism alongside environmental concerns, the kind of tourism which only targets quantity won't fructify long enough. While in theory the more the number of tourists, the more prosperous a country, sustainability and quality tourism has proved them to be wrong.

Overall, dedicated consultations, negotiations, careful planning and design targeted towards developing sustainable tourism have to be conducted. Homework regarding the kind of tourists to target, infrastructures to develop for the target segment and syncing practices with the globalising world is essential. Regular maintenance and further evolution in tourism governance is truly required.

Tourism in the Himalayas

Lisa Choegyal

Since opening its doors to the outside world in 1951, Nepal tourism has weathered the onslaughts of political upheavals, regime change, national insurgency, earthquakes and floods, as well as external forces such as wars, blockades, terrorism, and plagues that have affected global travel patterns. In 2018, foreign arrivals to Nepal reached a record high of 1.17 million (up 25 percent from 2017), and increased another 13 percent in the first half of 2019. Next year's Visit Nepal 2020 programme aims to boost these numbers to 2 million (M), at the same time addressing some of the sector's intrinsic weaknesses. These include a dearth of new quality products around the country, and a dismal average daily expenditure of only USD 44 (down 23 percent from the previous year).

One third of tourists in Nepal come from India and China, and many others are short-stay pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar taking brief overnight visits to Lumbini. Of the 1.5 M visitors to Lord Buddha's birthplace, 1.4 M are from Nepal and India, spending less than one day, and the rest stay an average of only 1.8 days.

Does Nepal need more and more visitors if they are not paying a fair price for the superb cultural, mountain, adventure and wildlife products that we have to offer? I do not believe so. With potential negative environmental and social impacts from "over-tourism" in many destinations, tourism policy makers realise it is desirable to target a wide range of visitors to contribute greater benefits. We have forgotten that Nepal used to be good at appealing to high flyers as well as hippies.

My first month in Nepal, I was charged by a rhino, survived a small plane crash and helped douse a kitchen fire in the jungle of Chitwan National Park. It was spring 1974 and I had trekked the deepest gorge in the world, shadowed between the massive bulks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, to the windswept valley of Jomosom. The silver glint of the Kali Gandaki fanned out below, flowing through the grey moraine from forbidden Mustang, tantalisingly close behind the crystal peaks with the high wastes of the Tibetan plateau beyond.

The unpaved roads of Kathmandu saw little traffic, and I cycled narrow trails through the rice terraces of the emerald valley to visit temples, palaces and medieval bazaars. The air was as pristine as my naïve enthusiasm, fresh from my rural Northumberland upbringing.

I first stayed in City Lodge off Freak Street, which cost six rupees for a room with a narrow hard bed and little else. It was Nepal's hippie heyday and joints were rolled on café tabletops between dishes of momos and Mom's apple pie. To the bemusement of Nepali youth, long-haired, beaded "swinging sixties" travellers soaked in the slow-moving lifestyle and endemic marijuana weed.

But I was more captivated by the soaring scenery and the ethnic mix of Kathmandu's cultural crucible. As an unsuccessful hippie, it was a relief to join the workforce and wildlife conservation cause at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, having persuaded Jim Edwards to give me a job. My Chitwan adventure and career in Nepal tourism had begun.

Himalayan tourism was in its infancy and I had arrived in Kathmandu just in time to rub shoulders with the early pioneers.

Boris Lisanevitch was the first to arrive in 1951, an ebullient White Russian whose exotic background included dancing with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris, and running the 300 Club in Calcutta, converting a royal palace into the Royal Hotel, introducing fancy foreign food and liquor.

Barbara Adams promoted guided tours and princely visits. Col Jimmy Roberts invented trekking and supported mountaineering to share the mountains he loved. John Coapman, Jim Edwards and Chuck Mc Dougal brought global attention to Chitwan's wildlife with the creation of Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge. As guests in this country, they realised that nurturing local people, their heritage and environment, was both good for them and for business.

These resourceful characters knew a thing or two about what was needed to attract high-paying visitors to Nepal's natural and cultural wonders. Together with some visionary Nepali entrepreneurs and energetic royals, they left a legacy that still resonates in a very different tourism world today. In those days, it needed imagination and resolve to lure the rich and famous

to the remote, mysterious Hindu kingdom, and tourist dollars started seeping into the economy. Boris's eclectic guests included Queen Sophia of Spain, Agatha Christie, Ingmar Bergman and Jean Paul Belmondo, who set the trend, and ordinary tourists soon followed.

Air travel was ponderous, roads were scarce, and communications were basic -- we relied on telex, telegrams and an unreliable crackly telephone line for reservations. Despite these hindrances, Nepal became a fashionable, sought-after spot for American and European vacationers. Reforming visa and drug regulations ensured that most hippies had departed by early 1975, in time not to discomfit foreign dignitaries invited to King Birendra's coronation. In their place came the celebrities, stars, Western round-the-world groups, trekkers, mountaineers and world travellers.

Nepal's tortuous internal transport logistics were a major barrier to tourism growth in those early days, hence the pace of development was slow. Nepal's first tourist group arrived only in March 1955. A small fleet of Douglas DC-3 aircraft brought visitors by charter flight via Patna in India.

There were no roads into the country, and the few vehicles in the Kathmandu Valley had not been driven there, but instead carried in, an epic effort by porters along the main trade route passing through the Chitlang Valley and over the Chandragiri Pass to Thankot. Elephants or horses were options in some parts of the country, but walking was still the norm.

Only in 1956 was the Tribhuvan Rajpath completed, the first road linking Kathmandu with India and the outside world. Rugged terrain hindered the road network, resulting in anomalies such as the western trading town of Pokhara becoming accessible by air well before it could be reached by car.

Clearly, domestic air travel would prove crucial to Nepal's tourism industry. The fledgling Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC later NAC) started in 1962 but it was not until the mid 1960s that regular domestic flights linked remote parts of the country with the capital. Twin Otters from Canada and Swiss Pilatus Porters were the aircraft of choice, most suited to the rugged conditions and rapidly shifting weather patterns.

Nepal continues to offer some of the most challenging flying in the world. Today, 20 domestic carriers operate both fixed wing and helicopter flights throughout the country, and Kathmandu airport receives scheduled services from 30 international airlines.

By 1962 Nepal had just over 6,000 foreign visitors, a significant number, considering the long journey and lack of tourist amenities once they arrived. Only in 1965 could Kathmandu claim its first modern hotel, the Hotel de l'Annapurna, followed in 1966 by the Soaltee Hotel and Yeti Travels, Nepal's leading group tour operator with the first fleet of tourist buses, managed by the energetic Jyoti Lal Khanna, all owned by Royal family members.

Since 1952, Dwarika Das Shrestha began collecting the exquisite woodcarvings that define Dwarika's, today Kathmandu's finest heritage hotel. Smaller and simpler lodges had opened in Basantapur, jocularly known as "Freak Street", to house the increasing number of hippies, mountaineers and overland visitors. In 1968, Karna Shakya, an environmentalist with a forestry background, opened the iconic Kathmandu Guest House, establishing the Thamel area as a vibrant world traveller hub that it remains today.

The promise of walking through natural landscapes and reaching untouched Himalayan villages has played a large part in Nepal's attraction for tourists seeking "authenticity" and "real" experiences, way before "experiential travel" became the buzzword. In many ways, Nepal's trekking industry has simply built upon elements of the country's spiritual and geographic history — from time immemorial, traders have plied the passes, and pilgrims have undertaken journeys of incredible hardship to attain teachings from gurus in Himalayan sanctuaries.

It was in 1965 that Nepal's first commercial trekkers arrived, a small group of six intrepid American women heading out to the Everest region, organised by Col. Jimmy Roberts, a dedicated mountaineer, military man and former British Defence Attache based in Kathmandu. With his company, Mountain Travel, Col. Jimmy not only created the trekking industry but also invented the term "trek", derived from a South African Boer word meaning "an arduous journey on foot".

Often staying weeks and returning annually, most of our Mountain Travel trekkers headed to the hills for seldom less than 14 days, and often for a month at a time. The introduction of trekking and its opportunities for employment was Colonel Jimmy's gift to the Sherpas, giving them an alternative and less vulnerable income from the dangerous work of high altitude portering. In a reversal of normal tourism development patterns, organised trek groups preceded individuals to use Nepal's network of trading trails and teahouses for multi-day hikes -- today, a serious business with over 200,000 annual trekkers.

Mountaineering tourism had made its first appearance in 1950 when a few teams with special permission had walked into Nepal. British and American expeditions were allowed to explore routes to Everest from the south.

On 3 June 1950 two Frenchmen, Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal, got to the summit of Annapurna 1, the first successful ascent of any 8,000-metre peak. Despite British and Swiss summit attempts on Everest in 1951 and 1952 respectively, it was not until 29 May 1953 that New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay reached the highest point on earth. Part of a British expedition, the joyous news reached London on Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation Day, giving Nepal and Everest more than usual profile and publicity.

Last year, Nepal's summits attracted 6,400 trekking peak climbers and 2,300 expedition members, with benefits accruing from their long stay patterns, high employment, and significant royalties.

Nature tourism began in Nepal when Tiger Tops opened in Chitwan with four treetop rooms in 1965. By the time I arrived, it was becoming a "must see" of Nepal tourism, with 40 percent market share from North America. We did not accept fewer than three-night stays, and the price of USD 300 per person (yes, USD 600 per room) included all meals and jungle activities. It must have been one of the higher room rates in 1970s Asia, especially as its 22 rooms lay deep in the forest and grasslands, constructed of local wood, bamboo and thatch.

The maverick Jim Edwards, who was my boss for 25 years, had taken over Tiger Tops in 1972 from John Coapman and his Texan owners, with American anthropologist and tiger specialist Chuck MacDougal. The

following year, Royal Chitwan National Park was gazetted as Nepal's first protected area, later declared a natural World Heritage Site protecting over 700 wildlife species, including endangered populations of Bengal tigers, one-horned rhinoceros and gharial crocodiles -- over 500 bird species that are more than in any other park in Nepal and about two-thirds of Nepal's globally threatened species.

Before the term "ecotourism" had been invented, Nepal was familiarising guests with environmental issues, justifying conservation and successfully contributing to local community livelihoods with tourism benefits. Chitwan became famous as one of the best wildlife viewing experiences in Asia.

Bhutan opened tourism in 1974 with 287 tourists, the same year Nepal received 90,000 visitors. It was not long before I had a chance to visit the newly emerging kingdom. Our client, the Swedish visionary entrepreneur Lars-Eric Lindblad, had an exotically decorated corner of his New York office as Bhutan's first representative in the mid-1970s.

Although I only got to Paro and Thimpu, I remember the tortuous roads, curious children, ever-fluttering prayer flags, and intense power of the fortress *dzongs*. Since those early days, much has changed in Himalayan tourism, including my own role in the business. From marketing Tiger Tops and Mountain Travel's brand of adventure, wildlife and trekking, I evolved over the decades to sustainable tourism consulting throughout the Asia Pacific region.

On several occasions I have been privileged to work in Bhutan, often under the eagle eye of Thuji Nadik and the Tourism Council. We happened to be in Thimphu as the drama unfolded on 9/11, impressed when the King personally condoled every American, and the monk body dedicated their prayers to those lost in the Twin Towers.

Les Clark and I were working on Bhutan's national ecotourism strategy in 2001. Amongst our recommendations was: "High Value, Low Impact", using financial mechanisms to control volumes to sustainable levels and achieve "low impacts" by ensuring visitors have a sense of care for Bhutan's culture and environment.

Even then, we worried that embracing tourism from India might not meet Bhutan's carefully crafted national objectives. Indians with disposable income have preferred overseas sophistication, whilst neighbours tend to receive the less affluent segments whose impacts threaten to outweigh their spending power.

Although much admired and even envied as an astute national policy, Bhutan's uniquely managed tourism with its low population density and gross national happiness brand is hard, probably impossible, to replicate in other destinations. I have observed that Nepal eyes Bhutan's blatant price elitism with envy, and in turn Bhutan has long been suspicious of Nepal, deriding it as selling out to commercialism and "mass tourism".

The reality is that travel operators have been collaborating for decades, and for many years, other Himalayan visitors have spent more than Bhutan's mandatory USD 250 per day. Overall Nepal is probably more successful at spreading tourism benefits throughout its scattered remote hillside communities, never a priority for the "top down" approach adopted in Bhutan, in which royalties are distributed by the government and much of the profits remain with the Paro and Thimphu travel operators.

Nepal's policy and the National Tourism Strategic Plan is enshrined in poverty reduction, allowing for rural tourism, encouraging village homestays, and recycling fees to buffer zone and forest user committees. For decades, tourism rupees have been filtering into local households, from employment and guiding, rural hospitality services, and sales of local produce and handicrafts. Some of the remote area outcomes may be unexpected or inequitable, and certainly not immune from less desirable impacts unleashed by market forces, but the focus of using tourism to boost local livelihoods is well accepted in Nepal.

Domestic tourism has flourished as Nepalis increasingly discover their own country, but growth in international numbers largely comes from budget neighbours or short-stay segments that have cemented Nepal's reputation as a low-cost destination, with the resulting negative spiral and lack of innovative investment.

Since the dark days of the insurgency -- when security halved international visitor arrivals, circuits shrank to the relative safety of the Kathmandu Pokhara Chitwan triangle, and trekking was confined to Annapurna, Everest and Langtang -- today's distribution patterns have yet to recover. The important private-public platform of the Nepal Tourism Board suffered a hiatus caused by a corrupt CEO, but is now back on track, and there is criticism that government regulations have even had the effect of stifling high value quality tourism to Nepal, compounded by the devastating effects of the 2015 earthquakes and southern border blockade. Further constitutional confusion has resulted from unclear lines of responsibility between national institutions and the new Provincial governments whose tourism ministries are mad keen to attract visitors, but unsure how to proceed successfully.

A significant percentage of all foreign and South Asian tourists visit protected areas, which cover nearly a quarter of Nepal's landmass, but the wardens and government department have no tourism expertise or specific training to ensure visitor interests are considered.

In 2012, the world-renowned wildlife lodge and tented camp lease concessions were not renewed in Chitwan or Bardia national parks, driving accommodation outside the park perimeters and losing high-end wildlife tourists to competing destinations elsewhere. The result is a worrying drop in arrivals to Nepal's core wildlife attractions of Chitwan and Bardia national parks, that have lost a third of foreign visitor numbers since 2012, and continue to suffer declining arrivals of 15 percent and 62 percent respectively in 2018 over the previous year. Overall, the percentage of Nepal's total foreign tourists visiting protected areas has dropped from two thirds to one third of the country's total visitors since 2012.

The mountain protected areas with their unsurpassed views, villages and pilgrimage spots are doing better in terms of popularity, but many routes are becoming disfigured with concrete construction and unsustainable hill road developments. Over 90 percent of all trekkers still flock to Annapurna, Sagarmatha and Langtang despite the efforts of the Great Himalaya Trails and other programmes to disperse tourism benefits. In 2018 these three major trekking destinations saw growth in visitors of 20 percent, 25 percent and 29 percent respectively.

Overall, despite the convincing increase in foreign arrivals, Nepal's tourism industry is threatened with an unmanaged proliferation of licences, rampant competitiveness, and lack of environmental impact controls, resulting in oversupply, price wars, compromised safety standards, and declining quality in many of its sectors. Casualties include weak foreign investment, domestic air safety with a European Union ban still in place, and a glut of hotel rooms in Kathmandu and Pokhara, with not enough accommodation or developed attractions around the provinces.

There is little monitoring of the 3,500 travel agencies and 2,700 trekking companies, in terms of responsible operations, resulting in a lack of quality services and complaints of “over tourism” on Everest. As we head into VNY2020, a recently announced tourism tax would appear to be in direct contravention of our goal to attract more visitors.

Surely there is a better way to sell the magnificent scenery, compelling culture and adventure attractions, activities and assets of our beautiful Himalaya? The political will supporting VNY2020 is a great opportunity to expand the country's product offering to appeal to higher value visitors -- growing the pie and appealing to a wider spectrum of visitors, rather than squabbling and undercutting to attract our current domestic and budget tourist markets on which the industry has come to depend. More effective and trusting partnerships between the public and private sector could improve the investment climate, joining hands to market with neighbours and helping engage our rural communities in more tangible benefits.

I continue to be optimistic. Perhaps we should allow the original foreign investors to have the last word. “After a few hours I fell madly in love with this country,” Boris declared in a 1961 interview. “I'd rather handle half as many tourists with each spending twice as much,” was Jim Edwards' mantra. And Jimmy Roberts used to rue: “Why are we selling our beautiful mountains so cheap?”

Note: Nepal Tourism Statistics 2018 and 2019 quoted are from Nepal Tourism Board, Ministry of Culture Tourism & Civil Aviation, Department of National Parks & Wildlife Conservation, Lumbini Development Trust and Nepal Rastra Bank.

Tourism Trends in India

Nandini Mehta

Once upon a time, not so long ago, one of the pleasures of going to Shimla was the picturesque three-hour drive from Kalka in the plains of north India, up to the Deodar-scented hills and bracing air of Himachal Pradesh. Last year, making that same journey, I found it had become a nightmare. The drive now took six hours, and it was one long traffic jam all the way. Honking horns of irate drivers created a hideous cacophony; people jumped out of their cars and got into ugly fights over right-of-way on the narrow winding mountain roads; packets of chips and empty mineral water bottles littered the roadside.

Finally reaching Shimla, one discovered what else the unregulated influx of tourists had done to the city. The famous Mall in Shimla, a stretch for pedestrians, was now so crowded you could no longer stroll there; you had to inch and elbow your way through the pressing hordes.

The town was also in the grip of a severe water shortage that has now become chronic. Tall apartment buildings and a rash of new hotels are perched so precariously on the edge of the Shimla ridge, and even on steep slopes, that it looks as though a strong wind or the slightest earth tremor would send them tumbling down.

Local shopkeepers told us that peak season in Shimla is now throughout the year. Every weekend from April to October, visitors from Punjab and Haryana drive up to escape the searing heat of the plains. June and July school holidays are another peak season, when whole families arrive for their annual hill-station holiday. Every October and November, the Dussehra-Diwali holidays is yet another peak season. Every winter, thousands of tourists drive up to marvel at the sight of snow, or to escape the pollution and smog that is at its worst during the cold weather in the plains.

Thanks to unregulated tourism, or “overtourism” as it is now called, Shimla has become an ugly, overbuilt, overcrowded town with its civic services severely strained. And it is pretty much the same story in so many other Indian hill stations, such as Nainital and Mussoorie. It is not just the

tourists who are the cause of Indian hill stations becoming overcrowded, with their civic infrastructure close to collapse, but also the increasing and unceasing flow of rural-urban migration, as young people from villages in the surrounding areas migrate to hill-station towns in search of jobs in hotels, as taxi drivers, guides porters, and other tourism-related jobs.

Is this to be the fate of Bhutan too, with the ever-growing number of tourists from India visiting the country? How long can regional tourism to Bhutan (as distinct from the high-end tourism which for years kept tourist numbers to Bhutan limited) continue as it is now, with no regulation of visitors and vehicles? Several other prime travel destinations are facing some of the same problems of “overtourism” that Bhutan faces today -- Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona, for example.

Everywhere, unregulated tourism is putting a severe strain on civic services, leading to a host of problems, such as water shortages, traffic jams, and an increase in petty crime. What is worse, it has led to a growing hostility from locals towards these visitors, because they feel that the visitors are pushing up prices, making their towns and cities unlivable and unaffordable, causing impossibly long queues at places of pilgrimage or historic interest that locals also visit, degrading the natural environment with litter and noise pollution, and in various other ways having a negative impact on the culture and identity of the host country. For the visitors too, in such circumstances, the experience of tourism becomes so much less enjoyable.

What is the solution? It is probably better to put regulations in place before the situation reaches a tipping point, when solutions become more difficult to implement. The burgeoning of regional tourists, especially from India, is a problem that Bhutan will have to confront, and the sooner the better. The growing affluence of the urban middle class in India has led to more Indians buying cars, and more and more of them travelling in those cars to neighbouring destinations in search of what they do not find at home -- in the case of Bhutan, a pristine environment, crystal clear air, beautiful climate, magnificent temples and monasteries, and distinctive and beautiful architecture and crafts and festivals. The Bhutanese also have a reputation in India of being the most courteous, warm and honest people in our subcontinent, who go out of their way to be kind to visitors. But who can blame the people of Bhutan if they, like their counterparts in Venice or Barcelona, soon start to harbour feelings of hostility towards Indian visitors?

Before things come to such a pass, something must be done. There could be a cap on the number of tourists' cars and group tour buses coming into Bhutan by road. These regulations must be communicated clearly and widely to travel agents and in the Indian media, lest Indian tourists face the sad disappointment of being turned back at the Bhutan border. Hefty fines should be imposed on anyone found throwing litter, honking horns, playing loud music, plucking flowers or in other ways despoiling the environment. Similarly, a cap could be put on the number of foreign visitors allowed on any one day at major tourist sites like Taktsang, and applications for visits to such sites should be made in advance. Again, this rule should be communicated widely to Indian media and travel agents. A number of major tourist attractions in Europe, such as museums and castles, have such a system, in order to avoid congestion, where tourists have to make advance bookings to visit such sites.

Greater efforts could be made to develop other tourist activities in Bhutan, such as birdwatching and botanical tours, because Bhutan is so amazingly rich in both fauna and flora. More opportunities for activities such as mountain biking, which is increasingly popular in India, could also be offered. So also for tours specialising in nature cures; I can vouch for the incredible therapeutic effects of Bhutanese stone baths and traditional medicine!

Village homestays too -- with some training programmes for host families in the basic facilities that must be provided to tourists -- could help avoid "overtourism", by offering tourists a wider range of destinations when they visit Bhutan. All these would also, of course, greatly enrich the visitors' experience of Bhutan and Bhutanese culture.

Responsible Tourism and Village Homestay schemes, launched with the help of state governments and the UN, have been very successful in India. At Kumarakom in Kerala, where many resorts and luxury hotels have come up around Lake Vembanad, the Responsible Tourism scheme has ensured that local residents, too, benefit from tourism. For example, a cooperative of local women has set up a restaurant at the lakeside serving a delicious local Kerala *thali* meal prepared by the women themselves, with ingredients from local farms and fresh fish from the lake, and business is booming. Customers from luxury hotels nearby are among the restaurant's most enthusiastic patrons.

At Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh, under the Rural Tourism scheme launched with help from the UN, a weavers' village on the outskirts of the town -- way off the tourist track -- offers charming, comfortable rooms for visitors, and an opportunity to participate in the daily life of the villagers, whether accompanying them on bullock cart rides, learning to cook local specialities or watching the weavers and potters at work. I was fortunate to experience both the Kumarakom and Chanderi schemes, and they remain among the most memorable and enjoyable experiences I have had in all my travels in India.

Bhutan's rich culture and unique identity, its verdant and pure environment, its guiding philosophy of Gross National Happiness, have been an inspiration and an example to the whole world. These attributes are too rare and precious to remain unprotected from the depredations of unregulated mass tourism.

Kerala's Responsible Tourism Approach

Saroop Roy B.R.

Tourism, a multi-faceted industry cutting across various productive sectors of the economy, plays a significant role in the growth of developing and developed nations. It mobilises resources, generates employment, and drives regional development. Being a capital-light and labour-intensive industry, tourism is also an effective tool to address issues related to absolute poverty.

Kerala, situated in the southern part of peninsular India, is widely known for its salubrious climate, backwaters, ayurveda, beaches and scenic beauty, yoga and culture. These natural and cultural endowments, along with educated and hospitable people, form the basis of its tourism business. Total tourist arrivals in Kerala in 2018 was more than 16.7 million (M), and 1.09 M were foreign tourists. The share of revenue from foreign visitors touched USD 1,318 M (INR 8,764.46 crores). Domestic tourist arrivals exceeded 15.6 M. Tourism's contribution to the state's GDP is estimated as 10 percent. (Economic Times, 2019).

The Kerala Policy Initiatives and Sustainable Tourism

Kerala declared tourism as an industry in 1986 and its first tourism policy was announced in 1995, focusing on infrastructure, product, human resources and market development. Although the policy focused on new investments and promotion of tourism in a big way, a separate section on "areas to be vigilant" brought out the vision of the state government to move on sustainable lines. Major recommendations of the policy include:

- Regulation of construction activities and entry of tourists in environmentally sensitive areas;
- No relaxation of building construction and environment rules for tourism development;
- Vigil against drug traffic and sexually transmitted diseases; and
- Enforcement of the Tourism Registration Act to inculcate an added sense of responsibility among the traders and an increased feeling of security among the tourists.

The second policy document, Tourism Vision 2025 announced in 2002, aimed to make tourism a private sector activity, with the state playing the

role of a facilitator. In spite of this, the state's leaning towards sustainable development was visible in the policy document. The tourism vision slogan was "Conserve Nature & Culture and Promote Tourism". The Vision document had the following statements on sustainability as its objectives:

- To promote sustainable and eco-friendly tourism based on the carrying capacity of the destinations;
- To conserve and preserve the art, culture, and heritage;
- To identify, conserve, and preserve special tourism zones; and
- To involve PRIs and NGOs in the development of tourism infrastructure and tourism awareness.

Although both the above policy initiatives were intended to implement a sustainable model of tourism, the focus shifted to creating more infrastructure, product development and marketing efforts. This resulted in attracting more tourists to the state with negative impacts on the economic, social, and environmental fronts. The tourists were neither high-yielding nor did they have the sense to conserve the destinations.

An action programme for practising Responsible Tourism (RT) was developed in 2007 to promote tourism along sustainable lines. The success of its implementation in a few pilot destinations gave policy-makers the confidence to adopt Responsible Tourism as a blanket programme while framing their subsequent state tourism policies in 2012 and 2017.

The 2012 state policy urged to strengthen and promote Responsible Tourism and called for tourism development in any destination to benefit the local community on economic, social and environmental fronts. Major recommendations include:

- Generation of local employment opportunities;
- Formation of a Task Force against Trafficking and Abuse, and to prepare action plans to implement and monitor zero tolerance on trafficking and substance and child abuse in tourism. (Kerala is probably the first state in India to make such a strong statement against child abuse in its tourism policy);
- Active involvement of local self-governments in tourism development;
- Initiating a campaign, "Kerala Waste-Free Destination", in association with local self-governments, self-help groups and NGOs for waste management;

- Measures to promote local handicrafts and local cuisines; and
- Initiating life-saving initiatives, like deploying trained life-guards and life-saving volunteers in waterfront areas, and creation of Contingency Response Cells at the state level to act quickly to manage such eventualities.

The current tourism policy, which was released in 2017 -- basically a continuation of the 2012 policy -- states that Responsible Tourism (RT) is the official tourism policy of Kerala. The major recommendations include:

- Formation of Responsible Tourism Mission to extend the programme from pilot destinations to the entire state;
- Linking the RT project with the existing poverty alleviation programmes in the state;
- Making the state a Carbon Negative Green Capital and attracting tourists;
- Conducting carrying capacity studies in major tourism destinations;
- Implementing a green protocol at destinations, and promoting tree-planting, use of non-conventional energy sources, rainwater harvesting and scientific waste management techniques;
- Actions to curb illegal activities conducted on the pretext of wellness/health tourism; and
- Formation of a Tourism Regulatory Authority to improve efficiency and avoid exploitation.

Kerala's Responsible Tourism Initiative

Responsible Tourism is an approach to manage tourism and maximise economic, social, and environmental benefits while minimising costs to destinations. The initiative was launched in February 2007, wherein 203 delegates -- comprising representatives of Government departments, including tourism, local self-governments, Non-Governmental Organisations, tourism industry, academicians, media, etc. -- met and discussed thoroughly for two days the negative impact of tourism. A State-Level Responsible Tourism Committee was formed, with representation of all stakeholders, to take forward the initiative. The implementation of the RT project at field level was initiated in 2008 on a pilot basis in four destinations, known for beach (Kovalam), backwater (Kumarakom), wildlife (Thekkady) and hill station (Wayanad). The action plan for practising RT was implemented through a consultative process, keeping in mind the basic tenets of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria.

The preparatory stage involved scientific assessment of the daily requirements of hotels, resorts, accommodation establishments and other service providers in tourism. Concurrently, a tourism resource mapping of the locality identified areas where the community could fit into the tourism business. This was followed by a sensitisation programme among community and industry to accept and practise this in the larger interest of the society, tourist and tourism business.

Looking back at the last eleven years' experience in implementing RT initiative in Kerala, one finds that both society and industry have marched ahead, making visible contributions to ensure sustainable development of tourism. A brief account of benefit to society, industry ownership of the programme and the way forward reveals how Kerala is managing RT for ensuring sustainable tourism development.

Benefits to Society

Using inputs from tourism resource mapping at local level, various programmes have been implemented under three major headings -- economic, social and environmental -- and the resulting benefits to society is given below.

Economic Benefits

To provide economic benefits to the hitherto excluded in the tourism sector, suitable programmes were designed, which faced many operational difficulties. Feasible solutions were adopted, with stakeholders' participation, which ultimately resulted in institutionalising the system with well-defined roles and responsibilities. It is estimated that the total economic benefit to the community through local sourcing is around USD 3.50 M (INR 25 crores). The major initiatives and systems developed in connection with economic benefits are briefly discussed.

Formation of Production Groups

The preliminary assessment of daily requirements of hotels and resorts at each destination revealed that these were met by agencies outside the local community. Considering the potential for the local community to enter into economic activities related to the operation of hotels and resorts, a system has been implemented which ensures a regular supply

of products. New production groups have been formed, in addition to the existing Kudumbashree Groups (Self-Help Groups) of the State Poverty Alleviation Mission. Farmers Groups were formed and households were encouraged for homestead farming. Micro Enterprises were started to supply products like curry powders, flour, meat, fish, candle, *chappathi*, *pappad*, etc., to hotels.

Formation of Supply Groups

To ensure a timely supply of vegetables to hotels, supply groups led by panchayat (Local Self Governments) called “Samrudhi”, collect products from farmers for hotels, ensuring regularity of supply. Excess produce is then sent to local market outlets.

Institutional Mechanism

To ensure a sustained operation of the system, and to effectively address issues likely to emerge, the following systems were also developed.

Constitution of Price Committee

Accommodation units were following a centralised purchasing system in which the prices of almost all products were fixed well in advance, at least for six months. Local communities could not supply farm products under this system, as they were not carrying out agriculture on a purely commercial basis. The RT initiative only gave them an opportunity to strengthen their livelihood activities related to farm products. Hence, they were unable to supply their products at a fixed price for a fairly long period, as commercial operators did. Through discussions with the accommodation units, a consensus was reached to review the market price of agricultural products and fix a price for local products agreeable to both local farmers and the hotels. Price Committees were constituted, with the President of Local Self-Government as Chairman, and representatives from hotels and resorts, farmers and the Department of Tourism. The committee meets periodically to review and fix the price of products.

Constitution of Quality Assurance Committee

To address issues likely to arise in connection with quality and standards, Quality Assurance Committees were also constituted with the President

of Local Self-Government as Chairman. The other members include chefs of hotels and resorts, health inspectors, veterinary surgeons, agriculture officers and representatives of farmers and the Department of Tourism. They ensure the quality of products and gives confidence for hotels to purchase locally produced goods.

Social Benefit

While developing tourism, it is imperative that utmost care is taken to conserve the social and cultural aspects of the destination. Steps have been taken to ensure conservation of art and culture. In order to enhance the capacity of the local community to link with various jobs and to develop as tourism entrepreneurs, a number of training programmes have been given to them, including on manners and etiquette for auto, taxi and boat drivers, food production, candle making, *pappad* making, glass painting, life guarding, escorting, guiding, souvenir making, etc. So far, 5,206 people have been trained in these various aspects.

Art and Culture Promotion

A detailed study was undertaken to identify the local art and culture. Meetings were conducted with local women and children to form cultural groups. They were given training, and women cultural groups were established to perform traditional art forms like “Thiruvathira” and “Kolkali”, and a Children’s Group was formed to perform the “Singari Melam” at Kumarakom. For promoting local art forms like “Paniakkali,” “Vattakkali,” and “Kolkkali,” separate groups have been formed at Wayanad to perform for tourists. These groups are linked to hotels for performance and participants are remunerated.

Souvenir Making

Skilled handicraft makers were identified and skill development programmes conducted to develop local souvenirs, made out of different materials like wood, coconut shell, paper, coir and clay. There are artisans who earn more than USD 3,000 per month selling their products to tourists, which many hotels showcase.

Village Life Experience Packages

Village Life Experience is an innovative package developed to showcase rural life and sustain traditional occupations. Tourists are taken around villages to experience village life, enjoying a visit to a fish farm, vegetables and fruits farm or paddy fields, and learning about coconut leaf weaving, broom-stick making and screw pine weaving, and traditional fishing techniques like bow and arrow fishing, net fishing, pottery, etc. The average cost for a half-day trip is USD 15 and money earned is equally divided among villagers who participate in the tour. In order to develop the package, training was given to local community members, on the new products, and manners and etiquette while dealing with tourists, and guiding skills, etc.

Samrudhi Ethnic Food Restaurant

One major issue at Kumarakom was that it did not have a place where traditional food was available. As part of the RT initiative, ethnic food items of Kumarakom were identified, and an Ethnic Food Restaurant was established, managed by the women from Kudumbashree, in 2011. This has become a major eating spot for tourists, with reasonable prices. Kudumbashree members were trained in micro enterprise development, accounting, and aspects of food safety and hygiene. The enterprise, initiated with an investment of USD 4,170 (INR 0.3 M), has grown into a business worth more than USD 21,000 (INR 15 M) in the last eight years.

Labour Directory

A labour directory of unemployed professionals and skilled and unskilled labourers of each destination was set up to help the industry identify suitable candidates for specific jobs.

Environmental Benefits

One of the major issues of tourism is environmental problems like waste management, land use change, pollution, threat to flora and fauna, etc. Major activities to address environmental issues include the following:

Waste Management

Awareness campaigns for public and other stakeholders were conducted on proper waste treatment and disposal. Household and industry surveys have identified the average waste generated daily. Biogas plants and pipe composts have been supplied to households and industry at subsidised rates. Collection of non-biodegradable wastes was also introduced. Steps have been taken to promote alternative materials like paper and cloth bags, and products made of areca nut, bamboo and screw pine, by training local community members.

Protection of Mangroves and Local Trees

Mangroves play an important role in the protection of the ecosystem in backwater areas, but many mangroves were destroyed by tourism and related activities. Awareness campaigns were conducted and 1,600 seeds of mangroves have been distributed to resort owners and local community members to plant near the backwater frontage. Concurrently, planting of local species of trees like mango, jackfruit tree, etc. has also been undertaken at various destinations.

Reconversion of Fallow Land to Cultivable Land

Although the traditional occupation of the local community is farming, many owners have been keeping their land fallow to sell for tourism development. Data was collected on available fallow land, and with the help of Kudumbashree units at Kumarakom, 55 acres of fallow land were converted into a good harvested paddy field. Another 30 acres owned by a church was reconverted into 10 Kudumbashree group's vegetable cultivation land.

Role of Industry

The industry plays a decisive role in strengthening and promoting the RT initiative. The micro, small and medium enterprises developed with community involvement, and the initiative taken in social and environmental fronts, will be sustained only with the support and co-

operation of industry players. Hence, steps were taken to incorporate the activities of RT initiatives with industry operators by suitably designing a framework for their operation.

RT Classification Criteria

The RT Classification for hotels and resorts was developed imbibing the principles of GSTC Criteria. This new classification is to ensure that hotels and resorts are committed on socio-economic and environmental fronts. A detailed check-list of activities applicable to hotels and resorts was prepared under four headings -- sustainable management, socio-cultural responsibility, economic responsibility and environmental responsibility. Activities that are expected to be initiated/supported by property owners are clearly spelled out under each heading and credit points are assigned. The maximum total score is 1,000 and the minimum requirement for being classified is 50 percent of the total score. A separate minimum was also fixed for each segment, as shown below:

Table 1. Distribution of Scores for RT Classification

Criteria	Total Score	Minimum Requirement
Sustainable Management	200	60
Socio-cultural	250	75
Economic	250	75
Environmental	300	90
Total	1000	
A minimum total score of 500 is needed for qualifying a unit for classification		
Classifications	Total Scores	
Platinum	750 - 1000	
Gold	600 - 749	

A comprehensive awareness programme on the roles and responsibilities of hotels and resorts to promote sustainable tourism development was given to all property owners in the state. With a view to bring more properties within the ambit of the RT initiative, the Government has linked subsidies and incentives to various parameters that will protect environment, heritage, culture and economic interest of local community.

Agenda 9 – The CSR Charter

Imbibing the principles of Responsible Tourism, Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) Society, the forum for all tourism service providers in Kerala (including Hotels, Resorts, Tour Operators, Travel Agents, Airlines, Ayurveda Centres, Farm-stays, Homestays, Houseboats, Organisations promoting Eco/Adventure/Culinary tourism, Speciality Hospitals, etc.) has adopted Agenda 9 -- the CSR Charter:

- To undertake solid and liquid waste management in our establishment and partner with the local body for the waste management initiatives at the destinations;
- To plant trees within our establishment and associate with growing trees at the destination;
- To reduce water usage and conserve water through rain water harvesting and recycling;
- To promote organic agriculture and encourage using organic produce;
- To reduce energy use by using energy from renewable resources, energy efficient lights and equipment;
- To reduce the use of plastics;
- To do local procurement, wherever possible, and encourage local produce;
- To create livelihood opportunities for the local community; and
- To promote local arts, crafts and cuisines.

The adoption of CSR Charter stands as a testimony to the wide acceptance of RT initiatives, principles and classification by the industry.

Moving Ahead

Enthused by the overwhelming acceptance of RT initiative from local community and industry players, the Department of Tourism is designing projects and programmes to be implemented at destination level, so as to convert each and every destination in the state -- a better place for people to live in and better place for people to visit. A Ten-Point Action Programme called “Green Carpet” was developed in 2016, covering all aspects that have a direct or indirect bearing on visitors to a destination. It includes the following:

- Clean and hygienic environment with a scientific system for collection and management of solid waste;
- Well-maintained public toilets;
- Improved accessibility and well-maintained lighting system, pathways, signage, tourist facilities and equipment;
- Safe drinking water and food;
- Adoption of green principles and moving towards carbon neutrality;
- Safety and security arrangements along with contingency response system;
- Facilities for authentic information, feedback and complaint redressal system;
- Trained and Responsible staff, volunteers and service providers with distinguishable name badges;
- Community participation in development, operation and management;
- Designated Destination Managers for effective co-operation and management.

These programmes invite the voluntary co-operation of all stakeholders in 79 destinations across the state. This Green Carpet initiative is the first step towards developing a Classification system for Tourism Destinations in the state.

With added confidence gained from international awards and recognition, including the UNWTO Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance (2013), PATA Grand Award (2011), PATA Gold Award (2014), PATA CEO Challenge Award (2015), World Travel Mart – International Travel & Tourism Awards (2017 & 2018) for the RT initiative in Kerala, the Government of Kerala is all set to bring the entire state under the concept of Responsible Tourism. The Government has established a RT Mission under Department of Tourism in June 2017. In the last year, the RT Mission was able to generate 12 crores (USD 1.6 million) economic benefit to the community through local sourcing, which is almost the same amount generated in the last ten years since 2008.

On the social front, the Mission was able to train 2,269 local community members in the first year itself. At present, there are more than 6,161 registered units under homestays, farm stays, tented accommodation units, local tour operators, shikkara (a kind of boat) operators, country boat operators, RT chauffeurs, art & cultural units, handicraft & souvenir units, paper bag & cloth bag, perishable products like milk, vegetable, value-

added food products like pickles, supply units, weaving units and so on. A total of 12,322 people directly -- and 32,838 indirectly – benefit from the activities of the units registered under the mission.

As part of environmental responsibility, the mission mainly focused on the reduction of waste, especially plastic. As part of the Clean Vembanad initiative, the mission, in association with industry partners, local community, and related organisations, removed 55 loads of plastic waste from the Vembanad Lake at Alappuzha region. A unit registered under RT Mission is collecting plastic waste from Kottayam and Alappuzha and converting it into plastic bricks. With the continuous effort of the mission and the support of the industry at Thekkady, all resorts there have replaced plastic straws with environmentally friendly straws made of coconut fronds or bamboo. All resorts at Kumarakom and Thekkady have removed plastic water bottles and started using glass bottles. (Radhakrishnan, A. S., 2018).

The policy initiatives of Kerala Tourism and the Kerala RT experience undoubtedly prove that Sustainable Development is not a *mantra* to recite, but a concept that can be practised in tourism.

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Chinese Tourists in South Asia

Zhou Shengping

China remains the world's biggest market in outbound tourism, with nearly 150 million (M) Chinese travelling abroad in 2018, up 14.7 percent year-on-year, according to a recent report by the China Tourism Academy and Ctrip.

In 2012, China became the world's top spender in international tourism and continues to lead global outbound travel in terms of expenditure. A report of United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states the total amount of overseas consumption by Chinese visitors in 2018 was as high as USD 227.3 billion (B), against USA holiday makers in the second position with USD 144 B.

Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, Cambodia, Russia, and the Philippines were the top 10 destinations for Chinese travellers in 2018. No South Asian country ranks in the top 10. At the same time, however, the sub-continent is seeking increased Chinese visitors in recent years. Countries in South Asia, closer to China than many other countries, are making every effort to attract the rising tide of Chinese outbound tourists.

Nepal

Since China declared Nepal as an outbound destination for Chinese tourists in 2001, the Himalayan country has witnessed a steady rise in Chinese visitors until 2014, when total Chinese visitors reached 123,805, according to Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.

After the deadly earthquake in Nepal in April 2015, Chinese tourists visiting the Himalayan country slumped to 64,675, but this trend was reversed with tourist numbers reaching 153,633 by 2018, according to the Ministry. China has consistently been the second largest source market for Nepal's tourism in the last several years, after India.

Organising the “Visit Nepal Year 2020” campaign, Nepal aims to boost arrivals from China several-fold to reach the target of attracting two million foreign visitors in the year. The Nepal Tourism Board last year launched its website in Chinese. In July, the two countries revised their air service agreement, to increase bilateral flights to 98 per week. The Nepal-China joint venture airline, Himalaya Airlines, is planning to introduce direct flights to Beijing in October. Nepal’s national flag carrier, Nepal Airlines, is also planning to fly to Guangzhou.

India

India has not been the top destination for Chinese tourists so far, but it also wants to attract Chinese visitors. China stood as the 11th largest source market for India in 2017, with the arrival of 247,235 Chinese tourists, according to India’s Tourism Ministry.

Of the total more than 10 million (M) tourists visiting India in 2017, the China market occupied 2.46 percent share of the Indian market. While it is a downturn in arrivals from China compared with 2016, it is a substantial rise from 2014, when a total of 181,020 Chinese tourists visited the country.

India has set up a dedicated tourist office in Beijing to promote its tourism, and has been conducting various promotional activities in China. Training Mandarin-speaking guides and hosting Chinese media are among the measures taken by India. In September last year, former Indian Tourism Minister, K.J. Alphons, told Xinhua that China was the only country where India had hired a public relations agency to advertise Indian tourism in various cities. India seeks to grab at least a one percent share of China’s 150 M outbound travellers, as it plans to double foreign tourist arrival to 20 M by 2020.

The Maldives

China, which has made substantial investment in The Maldives, is also sending a large number of tourists, contributing to Maldives’ economy, and the Island nation is benefiting from a good flow of Chinese visitors in recent years.

According to tourism statistics published by The Maldives government in 2018, more than 300,000 Chinese tourists have visited Maldives four years in a row since 2014. In 2017, a total of 306,530 Chinese tourists visited Maldives. But, over the period, the number of visitors has declined marginally since 2014, when Maldives had welcomed 3,63,626 Chinese visitors.

Pakistan

Chinese tourists also visit Pakistan in increasing numbers. Figures have increased several-fold from 2014 to 2017, according to the Pakistan Statistical Year Book published by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. In 2014, there were only 70,000 Chinese tourists but this increased to 223,000 in 2017. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, once constructed, is expected to further boost Chinese arrivals.

Sri Lanka

The number of Chinese tourists visiting Sri Lanka remains impressive over the period from 2014 to 2018. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, a total of 128,166 Chinese tourists visited this island nation in 2014. The number increased to 268,952 in 2017, though it slightly decreased to 265,965 in 2018.

According to the Annual Statistics Report 2017, published by the authority, China is the second largest source of tourism in Sri Lanka, after India. In 2017, Sri Lanka attracted 1.41 M tourists and Chinese tourists came in at 12.7 percent of the total foreign tourist arrivals. Sri Lanka has taken a number of measures, including increased flight connections, welcoming more Chinese tour guides accompanying the tour groups, and teaching the Mandarin language, as well as organising various tourism promotion activities in China.

Bangladesh

Statistics are sparse as most arrivals are for business purpose, although the leisure segment is increasing year-on-year, as more Chinese visitors provide good information about the availability of touristic attractions of the country. General feedback is that Bangladesh is a “green” tourist destination, unspoilt and rich in cultural and historical heritages.

Bhutan

Bhutan's popularity amongst Chinese tourists grew after one of Hong Kong's leading celebrity couples, actors Tony Leung and Carina Lau, were married in Paro in a Buddhist-inspired ceremony in 2008, said Dr Kalyan Raj Sharma, whose Kathmandu-based company has been sending close to 1,000 Chinese tourists to this Himalayan nation annually.

According to the Bhutan Tourism Monitor Report 2018, published by the Tourism Council of Bhutan, China is among the larger source markets for Bhutanese tourism. While India is predominantly the largest source market, China came fourth in 2018. India sent 191,836 tourists in 2018 while there was a total of 6,878 Chinese tourists in the same year.

The number of arrivals remain significantly low and, in the past five years, Bhutan received only around 45,000 Chinese tourists. According to a travel agent in Thimphu, the number of tourists visiting Bhutan from its northern giant neighbour had been declining over the past two years, despite China's booming outbound tourism.

It goes without saying that something is wrong with Bhutan's tourism industry and many respondents interviewed by this writer provided their analyses and answers.

Politically Isolated

Between 2013 and 2018, China entered a "new era", under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping, with a commitment to "build a community with a shared future for humanity" through the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" and other ways. As a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development, BRI is so popular that more than 150 countries and international organisations have signed agreements with China.

Keeping aloof from the Belt and Road cooperation, Bhutan inevitably is at a disadvantage while doing business with China, a global economic driver. Some Thimphu-based travel agents attribute the down flow of Chinese visitors to this factor.

In comparison, Yogesh Kumar Bhattarai, Nepal's newly appointed Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, told this writer that Nepal aims to attract more than 500,000 Chinese tourists in 2020 to realise the goal of Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign of two million foreign visitors. With Chinese President Xi Jinping possibly paying an official visit this coming October, Nepal's China arrivals are bound to achieve this target.

Misunderstandings and Communication Gap

If it were not for the fun of anticipating the pleasure of travel and the fun of talking about your journey when you get back, nobody would ever venture very far from home. One reason for Chinese holiday makers not choosing Bhutan as their destination is a misunderstanding caused by a communication gap.

When this writer shared his pleasure of travel to Bhutan in October, 2015, many friends living in the Chinese mainland were surprised, because they thought it was meaningless to visit Bhutan which, in their impression, was not different from China's Tibet, where they had already visited. People living in the modern cities of the Chinese mainland fail to differentiate between Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal.

High Tariff and Low Services

According to the Minimum Daily Package Price (MDPP), an international visitor has to pay USD 200 per person per night during the lean season and USD 250 per person per night during peak season. This charge is for a stay in a three-star hotel, while tourists can enjoy excellent hotels at this price in other countries. Because of this, some tourists think the tariff they pay to visit Bhutan is not comparable to the service they get, according to Dr Sharma, Managing Director at Adventure Outdoor of Nepal. His comment is echoed by William Ma, a tourism entrepreneur in Nepal, who has been sending tourists from across the world to Bhutan for several decades. According to him, the quality of three-Star hotel category used as the basis of this tariff is not standardised. Room sizes, amenities and services available in hotels differ in every location. Despite Bhutan's focus on bringing in high-end tourists, their focus also revolves around Indian tourists who are exempted from the royalty and need no visas to enter the country.

Other Complaints

Not having enough air and land connectivity between two neighbours is a bottleneck to increase tourism. Visitors from the Chinese mainland have to transit and spend nearly four days to reach Bhutan, and this is a considerable time for short-stay packages, according to William Ma who added that, while most Chinese visitors are happy with their Bhutan travel, some complain about meal standards and repetitive menu.

A travel agent in Thimphu said most Chinese tourists visiting Bhutan are impressed but they face a language barrier, and food is the main problem. According to sources from the Guides Association of Bhutan, there are approximately 30 Chinese language tour guides in Bhutan. Very few language training institutes in its capital offer Chinese language training for local tour guides.

How to Turn the Table?

It is reported that Bhutan's new government has plans to expand diplomatic relations. If true, China should come first in the diplomatic circle expansion. As the Chinese government pays great attention to the safety and security of its travelling citizens, the lack of consular services is a chief concern. In case of contingencies and calamities, Chinese visitors can reach out for help without having to worry about too many linguistic issues and bureaucratic hassles, if there is an office.

Buddhism being the widely practiced religion in Bhutan and China, having more than 244 M Buddhists, both countries could leverage Buddhism to strengthen their ties and promote religious tourism through people-to-people approaches. Exchange of visits by monks and nuns could be organised periodically, while Bhutanese scholars should be invited to China and Chinese visitors should visit Bhutan to hold seminars on various issues of mutual interests. Cultural exchange programmes could also further strengthen ties of both countries at the people-to-people level.

The Chinese government could offer scholarships to Bhutanese students and Bhutan should welcome Chinese students and researchers willing to expand their knowledge and understanding of the land dubbed the Last Shangri-la.

Enhancing air connectivity is a must. Thimphu should try to link Bhutan with China through direct flights. It should also build, improve and expand a good road network in and around Bhutan for overland visitors from its neighbouring countries such as Nepal, India, China, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Bhutan should train more Chinese speaking tourist guides. Currently, with only 30 trained Chinese speaking guides, how can Bhutan cater to around 9,000 Chinese tourists annually?

Adopt Culinary Diplomacy

Since a majority of Chinese tourists have expressed disappointment over the unavailability of Chinese cuisine in Bhutan's hotels and restaurants, the Bhutanese tourism officials could adopt culinary diplomacy to attract more Chinese, who believe that "Food is God for the people".

Hotels and restaurants in touristic spots in Bhutan should incorporate Chinese dishes in their menu, preferably with authentic Chinese taste. More chefs could be trained in Chinese culinary skills, or Chinese chefs could be appointed in hotels with high Chinese occupancy. Thus Bhutan, as a host, could reach out and win the hearts of Chinese visitors by way of catering to their food preferences.

Creative Marketing

Dr Sharma said that Bhutan's promotion of itself as an unspoilt destination is working, but it is yet to reach an international level for the services it provides. A unique, creative, appealing and customised marketing strategy should be implemented by the Bhutanese private tour operators as well the concerned tourism agencies.

Bhutanese tour operators should organise more tourism promotional events, not only in the Chinese capital city, but also in other parts of the country, aggressively and strategically, to attract more and more Chinese tourists, especially targeting the people of Buddhist faiths, whose number stands at 244 M in China.

The Bhutanese private tour operators as well as Bhutanese tourism agencies could also leverage ICT to attract targeted Chinese populace, since more than half of their population has access to Internet, and China's online penetration stands at 55.8 percent, as unveiled by the Internet Society of China in 2017.

Highlight Bhutan's Unique Charms

Bhutan, a country with 71 per cent forest cover, could brand itself as an exotic hideaway for the growing number of luxury travel seekers in China, just a stone's throw away from Bhutan. The ultra-high value individuals, especially the urban ones who seek to escape the hustle and bustle of their cities and hectic lives, could consider Bhutan for weekend retreats, given the proximity of the country, its lush greenery and serene natural environment.

Professor Di Fangyao, Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at Tibet University for Nationalities, who travelled to Bhutan for the first time for few days this June, said that tourism promotion has not developed, despite the original ecological forest landscape of the southern slope valley of the Himalayas, which is unique with rare species rich in vegetation. These are unique natural scenery and cultural characteristics of Bhutan that should be brought to the notice of Chinese travellers.

Some friends, including William Ma, contributed to this article.

Then and Now – Here Come the Japanese

An interview with Michiko Wakita who pioneered early journeys of the Japanese tourists to Bhutan and has been a regular visitor to Bhutan since the 1970s.

The Druk Journal: Why did you first decide to organise tours to Bhutan ?

Michiko Wakita: Bhutan was well-known among the fervent but few fans of the unexplored regions of the Himalayas, through Dr Sasuke Nakao's book. He was a famous Japanese botanist who visited Bhutan in 1958. In June 1974, the news about the Coronation of His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck was reported in Japan, and we came to know that Bhutan had opened to tourism.

My first visit to Bhutan was in December 1976 as a tour leader. My travel agency had already sent the first group of Japanese tourists to Bhutan in 1974. My group was the third one. When we passed the colourful Phuentsholing gate after completing the required immigration formality, we felt as if we had slipped into another world.

The Bhutanese tour guide, driver, immigration officials and hotel staff were very polite and welcomed us. We were amazed to see the hotel staff hand over the room keys to us with both hands in almost a reverential manner. We were treated like VIP guests. Most employees of Bhutan Travel Agency were trained at work while preparing for the Coronation of the Fourth King. The hotel staff, guide and driver were trained to offer a warm reception to guests from all over the world.

In the 1970s, the average daily travel expenditure to visit India with four-to five-star hotels was about USD 40 to USD 50, while it was USD 130 to visit Bhutan. Compared with deluxe hotels in India, guesthouses in Bhutan was insufficient, but our members were very much satisfied with the services. My conviction that I could promote tours to Bhutan was confirmed during my first visit.

The Druk Journal: What was most interesting about Bhutan for the Japanese visitors?

Michiko Wakita: In the 1970s and 1980s, tourists were interested in looking for a sense of “Japan in the good old days”, which was already lost in Japan. They enjoyed traveling through Bhutan because of their nostalgia. Many aged tourists were moved to tears when they met Bhutanese children with runny noses and wearing dirty old *gho* and *kira*. They told each other: “We were exactly like them.” In fact, Bhutan was full of Japanese 1930s-1960s nostalgia. But gradually, Bhutan has been developed and this kind of nostalgia became dim.

Japanese tourists are impressed with Bhutanese religiousness as Buddhists too.

The Druk Journal: Did they see any similarities between Japan and Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: We have a lot of similarities in food, clothing, and personality. Landscape and vegetation are also similar to Bhutan. Our staple food is rice and we are wearing the same type of dress, *kimono*, and we are also particular about the materials of *kimono*. Japanese worry about formalities, especially courtesy, manners, and etiquette very much, too.

Generally, most Japanese do not have a strong faith in any religion because Shintoism and Buddhism are practiced in their daily customs instead of as a religion. But I believe that Buddhism forms the basis of the Japanese moral sense.

The Druk Journal: How has Bhutan changed from a tourism perspective?

Michiko Wakita: The tourism infrastructures, such as air service, road, hotels, electricity, internet and mobile network, were improved drastically. Immigration formality became much easier and it does not take time. Now there are excellent Japanese speaking guides too. The number of international tourists increased a lot: There were only 274 in 1974 but 71,700 in 2018. There were 202,290 regional visitors in 2018. The problem is that these regional visitors are exempted from paying royalty to the government but international tourists must pay a royalty of USD 65 per night/per person.

But the tour price and hotel quality are imbalanced. Tourists who pay USD 250 per night can stay in Three-Star Hotels only. Most of these Three-Star Hotels provide basic services only, so although they pay more than USD 200 per night, tourists are budget tourists in Bhutan. There are luxury hotels, but tourists must pay extra charges for these higher standard hotels. If we need to feel happy as VIP guests like before, we must pay a lot of money.

Compared with the past, Thimphu has become a very ugly town, with too many buildings and cars, and it seems there is no proper town planning.

The Druk Journal: Are the changes positive or negative?

Michiko Wakita: The tourism policy of Bhutan is “high value, low impact”, but if tourists visit only Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha, there are too many tourists, and the hotel facility is not worth USD 200-250. Taktshang monastery is no more a sacred place because the noisy music which regional tourists play disturbs us. Even a small local temple like Chime Lhakhang in Lobesa is overcrowded, and local couples who are carrying babies have to wait outside modestly. Now the tourism policy of Bhutan has changed into “low value, high impact”.

On the other hand, eastern Bhutan has much fewer tourists even during the *tshochu* season. The number of tourists in Bhutan vary widely with the seasons and area.

The Druk Journal: Do you think that the high-end tourists are still interested in Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: I myself do not understand why high-end tourists pay more than the tourist rate, which is USD 200 in low season and USD 250 in high. If I visit alone, I must pay USD 40 surcharge per night. It is too expensive already, but high-end tourists pay an extra charge, sometimes five to eight times more than the tourist tariff. The difference is only in hotel and food, and they will see the same scenery and visit the same tourist spots as regular tourists. I do not know whether those tourists are really satisfied with Bhutan or not. I can say if I have enough money to spend for these high-end hotels, I will make a contribution for local schools and monasteries.

The Druk Journal: Has tourism benefitted the rural parts of Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: It must depend upon the places. In the early 80s, there were no hotels in Bumthang and we had to stay in tents, but now there are more than 15 to 20 hotels and home stays. These hotels employ local young people as their staff. It must benefit the rural parts. In eastern Bhutan, Merak and Sakteng were opened for foreign tourists on 1st September 2010. Before the opening of the area, I asked the local people what they expected from tourism. Some horse owners said that they may earn by carrying tourists and their baggage. But there were more negative comments, because not every family has riding horses and, according to the TCB rule, tourists had to use horses at Chaling, Merak and Sakteng. Because of this rule, horse owners could not use all the routes, and later became susceptible to bribery.

TCB built tent campsites but tourists do not like to stay there. Most of the campsites are far from villages and toilets, and other facilities are not well maintained. TCB trained local young people as trekking cooks and local guides, but most of the tour operators sent their own guides and cooks. The local young people had no chance to work for tourists and gave up. I recently interviewed a gup of Merak; he said that tourism never benefited his village, and tourists only left waste.

The Druk Journal: What kind of tourism will work now?

Michiko Wakita: I believe in the high potential for tourism in Bhutan. For example, there are countless religious pilgrimage sites, or “*nye*” in Bhutan. In central and eastern Bhutan especially, there are many secret *nyes*. Tourists can enjoy nature and Bhutanese religious culture both at these *nyes*. But so far, most of these *nyes* have no proper car road or walking trails. It is necessary to build some huts for overnight stays too.

In Japan, we have various pilgrimage routes that are hundreds of years old. The local guides escort visitors and they benefit the local economy, such as restaurant, hotels and porters.

The Druk Journal: What would you advise the government to do as it introduces a tourism policy?

Michiko Wakita: Since last year, TCB has exempted the royalty of USD 65 for tourists who visit eastern Bhutan. This idea is highly regarded and I wish this system will continue in the future. I even wondered why they did not introduce this earlier. The Bhutanese mono-tourist tariff system has reached a turning point.

Tour operators must arrange tours with the mono-tariff which was fixed by TCB, but the tariff should be discussed with tour operators, hotel owners, and TCB together. Then tariff should be fixed based on the area, season and purpose of operating tours. If the government aims to develop the local culture and benefit the local community, the rate must be calculated accordingly. If the government wants to encourage local employment, the tour price must include labour costs. I believe that it is necessary to reconsider the tour tariff now.

Regarding the regional visitors, it is a matter of foreign relations with Bhutan and neighbouring countries, so I have no idea what to do. But it is necessary to make some rules for controlling the numbers, specially the number of cars. Instead of royalty, the government can charge them a kind of environmental tax.

Then and Now – Adventurers Lead the Way

An interview with Brent Olson, Managing Director of Business Development at GeoEx, a San Francisco based travel company that for the past 35 years has been a leader in adventure travel and in introducing American travellers to Bhutan.

The Druk Journal: Why did you first decide to organise tours to Bhutan?

Brent Olson: I consider my deep connection to Bhutan as one of the great blessings of my life and it all started with my first visit to Bhutan in 1985 to visit my sister and brother-in-law, Deanna and Edward Kelley. My sister was a paediatrics nurse in Thimphu, and her husband taught at YHS and then worked for the Royal Government under the Social and Cultural Division. During my first stay of nearly four months, I was continually aware of how fortunate I was to experience Bhutan in this way and to travel as extensively as I did.

Meeting new Bhutanese friends, visiting remote villages and temples (often we were the only visitors) and driving the national highway, sometimes for an hour or more without meeting another vehicle, I realised that, while not Shangri La, Bhutan was a very special place that fascinated me. I was also struck by the limited number of international tourists visiting Bhutan (I think the number was less than 2,500 at that time) and the lack of expertise and knowledge of the Western guides leading Americans around the Kingdom.

Back then, it was very difficult to learn anything about Bhutan, as there were no guidebooks, not many books or magazine articles (apart from a few National Geographic pieces) and of course, no internet. The only way to educate oneself about Bhutan was to spend time in the country and learn directly through your own experience and from the Bhutanese people.

After staying for several months and travelling quite extensively throughout the Kingdom, I realised that I had developed a unique insight and perspective that I could offer American visitors. With the encouragement of my friend, Dago Beda, then the head of Bhutan Tourism, I decided to find a way to continue visiting Bhutan.

When I returned to the US, I landed a job with InnerAsia Expeditions (now Geographic Expeditions) in San Francisco, and led my first group to Bhutan in the fall of 1986. Since then, I have made around 50 visits to Bhutan over 35 years.

The Druk Journal: What was the profile of the average tourist then?

Brent Olson: They were hardy, adventurous travellers, who were deeply curious about the remote corners of the world. They were good sports (mostly) about the basic level of accommodations (there were only a few governmentally owned and operated hotels and guesthouses, with simple cuisine), as they were well travelled enough to recognise just how truly special and unique Bhutan was at the time, and how lucky they were to be able to visit such a (then) little known country with such a rich culture, little affected by the outside world.

The Druk Journal: How did they react to Bhutan?

Brent Olson: I think they were amazed by the natural beauty of the Kingdom, impressed by the stunning architecture of the temples and *dzongs*, and were moved by the gracious hospitality and kindness of the people they met.

Everything moved much slower at that time, and each traveller felt like an honoured guest. In marketing, they say that “word of mouth” is the best form of advertising, and I think these early travellers came away with such wonderful memories and unique experiences that it created a “buzz” in the travel world, as Bhutan slowly became more exposed to the outside world.

The Druk Journal: How do tourists react now?

Brent Olson: While much has changed since those early years of tourism, with some tremendous improvements (hotels, food, transportation), along with some less wonderful aspects (like overcrowding, traffic and urbanisation, etc.), I still hear a recurring comment from my guests after they leave Bhutan: “I’m so glad that I was able to visit Bhutan before it really changes....”

I think that is an important perspective to remember. While those of us in the travel industry might bemoan the rapid changes facing Bhutan, those guests who are visiting for the first time are inevitably still “wowed” by the wonder of Bhutan. Of course, it now takes some careful curation of their experience to make it a very positive one, but the underlying beauty of the landscape and richness of the ancient culture and Buddhism is not lost on these visitors. I think it is vitally important to travel outside of the tourist circuit to expose travellers to the more traditional Bhutan, and to avoid the overcrowding experienced in Paro, Thimphu and Punakha.

The Druk Journal: What is your opinion of Bhutan today?

Brent Olson: Bhutan continues to experience exponential change. As an unabashed Bhutan-o-phile, I have watched this pace of change with a mixture of wonder and concern. The things I love about Bhutan -- the pristine natural beauty, the traditional culture and the vibrancy of Buddhism -- are all being affected by this rapid modernisation.

Likewise, thanks to greater exposure through social media and world-wide press, Bhutan is attracting more and more visitors each year. I think Bhutan faces great challenges in how to preserve and protect the priceless aspects of the country and culture, while moving forward economically and socially. I am impressed by the leadership of Their Majesties, the current Prime Minister and the government in addressing these concerns, and I trust that those who are truly concerned for the country’s welfare and the goals of GNH will find a way through these thorny challenges.

Speaking specifically about tourism, I think that competing forces are wrestling for the control and direction of policy. On one hand, Bhutan promotes the ideal of “low impact, high value” tourism that is in line with the philosophy of GNH, while at the same time, there are many other stakeholders who want their piece of the tourism pie, and yet the only avenue open to them involves catering to the exploding regional tourist market.

For example, the dramatic increase in the number of guesthouses and hotels that have been built in Thimphu and Paro in the past few years is staggering. I wonder -- given the realities of occupancy in the face of such a glut of properties -- if the lending institutions are putting themselves

at risk, potentially endangering the entire Bhutanese economy? Once the guesthouses and hotels are built, the owners have to desperately fight for occupancy, and the only viable occupants for these properties are regional tourists. It is a challenging dilemma with no easy answers but it needs to be addressed if the government plans to maintain their “high value, low impact” tourism policy.

The Druk Journal: Do you think that the high-end tourists are still interested in Bhutan?

Brent Olson: I think a distinction needs to be made. There are three categories of tourists visiting Bhutan:

- There are the regional tourists, travelling in their own vehicles, eating in local restaurants and paying a few dollars for a local hotel. These are budget travellers who are travelling to Bhutan in large numbers, but yet generate little revenue for the government or profit for local businesses.
- Next, you have the international group tours and private tours. These travellers pay a minimum of USD 200 to USD 250 a day (and up, if they opt for better hotels, etc.). These “high-end” tourists are the largest share of revenue generating travellers, and are most deeply affected by the challenges posed by the flood of (mostly unregulated) regional tourists.
- Finally, you have the “ultra high-end” traveller who stays in luxury properties like Aman, Como or Six Senses. I think that the “ultra high-end” tourists are still very interested in Bhutan. With the advent of yet another wave of ultra luxury properties popping up across Bhutan, there will be a continued draw for the wealthy and privileged traveller. The experience of staying in these properties, (which truly are some of the most spectacular luxury venues in the world), and the types of experiences offered to their guests, will remain a draw for high-end guests who are looking for that type of escape. Some of these properties are such destinations in themselves that, apart from a visit to a temple or the hike to Taktshang, these travellers are fairly well “insulated” from the pressures placed on Bhutan by the overcrowding caused by regional tourists.

I think that the real challenge facing Bhutan is how to continue to draw the types of travellers described in point 2 above. These are the travellers who are paying a premium to visit Bhutan, and yet are the ones most likely facing the largest impact by the regional tourist market. If not addressed, the issues facing these travellers will inevitably create a downturn in their numbers due to negative experiences.

The Druk Journal: Has tourism benefited the rural parts of Bhutan?

Brent Olson: Yes, to a small degree, I think tourism has benefited rural Bhutan. However, I think there is a tremendous opportunity for increasing this benefit. Presently, there are some efforts at developing community-based tourism, homestays and creating new tourism product, like rafting in Pangbang. I think there is much room for improvement and coordination with TCB, NGO's and the government, to help support and promote these projects and create others.

Most tourists only visit a relatively small portion of Bhutan, and opening up more rural areas to tourism might help in this endeavour. An analogy that I like to use is my experience of flying in a helicopter from Paro to Eastern Bhutan. As I looked down, I saw the thin ribbon of the national highway, and the few towns in the valleys, but apart from these signs of human habitation, there were mountain after mountain of dense forest, small scattered villages, beautiful alpine regions with lakes and glaciers -- most of which I had never visited.

I thought I knew much of Bhutan, but in reality, I had only visited those places along the national highway, and a number of treks I have taken over the years! There is so much more of Bhutan to explore and experience. While challenging, I think that there is much potential for carefully planned rural tourism projects that could benefit local people and show visitors a truly wondrous and unique side of Bhutan.

The Druk Journal: What kind of tourism will work now?

Brent Olson: I think the question should be: What type of tourism will Bhutan decide is best for the country and the Bhutanese people? Unless a clear and strong message is set forth from the highest levels of government,

tourism will continue to develop reactively organically to market forces (like the large numbers of regional tourists) -- and perhaps in directions that are not beneficial to the goals of the country. As long as I am able, I will continue to encourage people to visit Bhutan in a thoughtful and meaningful way because, regardless of current trends, I think Bhutan has a tremendous amount to offer.

The Druk Journal: What would you advise the government to do as it introduces a tourism policy?

Brent Olson: Regional Tourists: I think the major challenge is how to address the regional tourist issue. Thanks to the rise of social media and all of the favourable reports on Bhutan in the Indian press, etc., the proverbial cat is “out of the bag” in terms of the appeal of Bhutan. As India continues to grow its economic power, and the rising middle class start to desire more places to travel, more and more people will come to Bhutan. Given the historical and political sensitivities, it will be challenging to ebb the flow of Indian budget travellers, but I would think of it this way: Everyone wants Bhutan to remain an attractive place to visit. To achieve this goal in the future, some methods of regulation need to be implemented. The only way to slow the rate of growth from regional tourists is to make Bhutan a more expensive destination for them and let market forces determine the flow. I would offer a few suggestions:

Fees

I think a daily fee for regional tourists should be considered. Every international tourist pays a fee of nearly USD 70 per day, and these funds go directly to the government. I think it is only fair that the government should earn some revenue from the regional tourists as well.

All arriving regional tourists should be educated on the rules, regulations and etiquette for Bhutan upon entry. Bhutan should not allow vans or buses carrying tourists from India, but insist they hire Bhutanese vehicles, or a separate “vehicle fee” should be charged on a per day basis. Entry fees should be charged at the most impacted temples and sites in Bhutan. One issue faced by Bhutanese guides leading groups visiting various temples is that they are constantly asked by regional tourists about the history and importance of the site. Perhaps the government could assign guides to escort these tourists and provide some basic information.

Limit Hotel and Guesthouse Construction

I think there needs to be some tighter controls on the construction and permitting of new hotels and guesthouses. I think this glut is creating the demand for occupancy, which is creating the need for regional tourists to fill these properties.

Off-season Travel

Encourage, through education and possibly through financial incentives, more travel during low season, and discourage peak season travel.

More Rural Tourism Development

Continue developing new destinations and activities outside of the current tourist circuit.

Managing Numbers - An Environmentalist's View

Environmentalist and sustainable tourism development activist, Karma Tshering, believes that progressive development can be easily met simply through pragmatic approaches, consensus, and partnerships.

The Druk Journal: You believe that the Bhutanese identity, stemming from our environment and our culture, has made Bhutan a tourism hotspot?

Karma Tshering: Exactly. Basically, every travel destination tries to create/promote its attractions and niche. Bhutan has been very fortunate that, because of our visionary policy, we have emerged as a very exotic tourism destination. And why? The two main pillars of culture and nature. The world knows about Bhutan's rich culture and nature, for example, the significant over-72 percent forest cover with half the country defined as protected areas.

The Druk Journal: We are talking about the Bhutan brand -- our identity?

Karma Tshering: The Bhutan brand has emerged because of our rich biodiversity and unique and intact culture. Our culture is not a commodity to showcase to tourists. It is a living culture. We were hardly known 10 to 15 years ago but we have now come into the limelight because of this identity. Identity is so important -- and the vision of GNH -- negative carbon -- all these have made Bhutan a "must go, must see" destination. These have given us a special brand.

The Druk Journal: People are beginning to worry about a growing trend towards mass tourism. What impact is this going to have on Bhutan's cultural and environmental heritage?

Karma Tshering: While tourism can generate huge benefits for the economy, the environment, the culture, it has a lot of negative impact if not managed properly. There is a rapid increase in visitation numbers -- we are just a small country, our absorption capacity is limited; further limited

because of our economic status. Some small countries like Iceland get a five-fold visitation in terms of their total population and yet they are able to offer quality experiences, because they have the economic power and systems in place to manage. It may seem that we don't have the capacity and techniques in place so, in this current situation, 300,000 or 400,000 becomes a high number. However, we have the opportunities to positively benefit from the increasing numbers if we are smart enough to focus on proper planning and management. We have opportunities to even handle greater numbers.

The Druk Journal: Looking at current trends, it seems like we are moving away from the policy of high value low volume tourism and going for mass tourism.

Karma Tshering: I don't think the current numbers are so high that we should start becoming alarmed. In fact, we should take it as an opportunity. I am very passionate about the environment, about responsible tourism that can generate positive benefits for our environment, culture and economy. But to really have effective positive benefits, we are reliant on viable numbers. With low volume, it's very difficult for the economy to become vibrant. So I don't see 300,000 to 400,000 tourists being high. In 2018, we saw the highest number -- 275,000 tourists -- of which a little over 200,000 were regional tourists and 70,000 plus were international. Now many people think this is too much, especially the regional tourists, and that we need to start downsizing. But I think it's because we do not have the system to absorb that capacity, and if we can minimise impact by having infrastructure and facilities in place, we can still afford to go beyond those numbers.

The Druk Journal: So what is happening? People feel that we are going into mass tourism... they are worried... why?

Karma Tshering: Not properly managing our sites gives the impression of mass tourism. People say what they see. Mass tourism is building up, but mass tourism, in my opinion, in Bhutan is related to site visitation and this is where we need to focus on -- proper management. Taktshang is one of our key iconic sites, where 99 percent of tourists who come to Bhutan visit. Places like Taktshang have mass tourism. Another example is the National Memorial Chhorten in Thimphu. It is a very small space, and even with 100 people it looks overcrowded. But we have way beyond 100. If you go to

central or eastern Bhutan, there is no issue of mass tourism -- the numbers are so small. It's because numbers are concentrated in a few areas. So it is not an issue of mass tourism or over-tourism; rather, it's the concentration of visitation in a few sites, and the lack of proper site management.

**The Druk Journal: Apart from numbers, what are the other issues?
Opening up different regions?**

Karma Tshering: Yes, seasonality and geographic spread. One way to spread is seasonality. A problem with Bhutan's marketing strategy is that we have the most ridiculous way of marketing. We tend to say that Bhutan is six months' peak season and six months' off season. It is ridiculous because countries and destinations look into ways to even promote "off season" as "on season". We classify as off-season the three winter months -- December, January, February -- and June, July, August, because of the rains. If we look at our winters, for many people in Europe our winters are quite luxurious -- to see blue skies, sunshine every day, and day temperatures of 15, 16 degrees C, good views of mountains. In summer Bhutan is green and lush. Of course we have the monsoons, but we can handle it because of better roads... before, we would get stuck at landslides and road blocks, and we had no machines to clear them. Now, it is great time for a visit. So all seasons are good.

For the regional spread, the government is trying to go beyond the "golden triangle" of Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha. Now tourism can spread way beyond this. Bhutan has come a long way with infrastructure and amenities -- roads and flights. The time is right to put management systems into place.

The Druk Journal: What do we need to do to protect the two pillars?

Karma Tshering: On nature and culture -- a recent media dialogue was organised on the theme "Is tourism heading in the right direction?" This is a good time to think about it -- are we heading in the right direction? If we are not, what do we need to do? To reflect on this, in my opinion, we can look at it logically. As a tourism destination, what is our attraction? Why do tourists want to come to Bhutan? We know that our two main attractions are the natural and cultural heritage. From a logical perspective, we can take two examples to represent these pillars and see for ourselves whether we are heading in the right direction.

For the environment, take Phobjikha valley, as Bhutan's largest wetland and the Black Necked Crane valley. It is a thriving tourism spot. For the cultural site, take Taktshang. To see how well we are doing in tourism, we can reflect on these two examples. I think we are not doing it right. There is a lot of adverse impact on both these areas. Taktshang is overcrowded and commodified. The moment the guest steps out of the car, he is confronted by 27 households selling artifacts, 99 percent of which, unfortunately, come from Nepal and India. It is an immediate deterrence to the spiritual journey of the guest. The trail is not very good -- muddy in the rain. Regional tourists come wearing office shoes. Inside the Lhakhang it is overcrowded. I saw the CCTV guy trying to keep watch on all the temples -- worried about artefacts being lost -- a lot of negativity.

Having been to Phobjikha many times, I am amazed at how we manage this most ecologically sensitive area, which we should be showcasing to outsiders on how we conserve Bhutan. They come with high expectations to see how we do it so well. Unfortunately, Phobjikha is one area where we are doing everything wrong. How they operate tours in Phobjikha is no different from how tours are operated in Thimphu. The hotels release their waste and detergents into the wetlands.

I went to a biosphere reserve in Iran -- in an arid place. When we reached there, we were briefed on the do's and don'ts. They explain the ecological significance, so as a visitor, I felt the responsibility of conducting myself well. Unfortunately, in Phobjikha there is no interpretation. In tourism, it's not about the guest learning from the host or the host from the guest; it is mutual. Guests who come to Bhutan should take back good things about Bhutan, and hopefully become more responsible global citizens. And likewise, we learn from the guests and the good things they do. These are the good things that tourism can promote. Phobjikha is really a platform to spread awareness and concern about environment conservation but, unfortunately, it's not being done. I'm not being pessimistic but I'm worried, apprehensive, anxious -- we have a lot to do to make sure that our pillars of culture and environment are protected.

The Druk Journal: Talking about Phobjikha, what do you think about the choppers that fly there?

Karma Tshering: I was doing research on Phobjikha, on its carrying capacity. Talking to local people, one of my questions was on the chopper, to hear their views. One villager gave a very good insight. He says this is a sacred crane valley, and he's very disappointed with the chopper. When the chopper lands on the school ground, the birds go crazy. They are traumatised by the huge machine. The school is within the wetland. The villagers become emotionally disturbed. I suggested to TCB that choppers should land away from the valley floor, and visitors shuttled or walk to the valley. Environmental donors also come to Phobjikha to see for themselves the state of the environment and to contribute. If you want to encourage donors to contribute, don't think that taking them by chopper right to the doorstep will please them. They'll know that we are getting it wrong. They feel guilty flying in there.

The Druk Journal: You are basically saying that current numbers are not alarming. They need to be managed. But management would also include numbers in proportion to the population.

Karma Tshering: Yes, like Taktshang. Keeping a limit on numbers is a form of management -- after conducting thorough research, we may say that Taktshang, on any given day, can handle only so many people. But we should not zoom straight into numbers. There are so many issues to tackle. We have nature, culture, GNH, low carbon...also transport is a major sector -- and the vehicle quota is becoming a threat to the low carbon destination. One area I wish we could transform is the transport system. Now, with electric cars, hybrid cars; as an environmentalist, it amazes me how long Bhutan takes to adopt these good changes. For example, so many government officials get duty vehicles; why not give them electric or hybrid cars? Visitors are excited to see Bhutan -- a low carbon destination -- but they come to Thimphu and see so many cars, like any other developing country.

The Druk Journal: In short, you are saying we should identify Bhutan's strengths and protect them as our brand.

Karma Tshering: Yes, tourism should be promoted to make a positive contribution to our cultural and natural heritage, while ensuring quality

experiences for guests and host. The role of government is to provide enabling conducive policies...tourism very much a private sector driven industry.

The Druk Journal: Is the awareness setting in? In the past it appears that there has not been much thinking and no decisions being made.

Karma Tshering: While I see a lot of negative things happening, I remain very optimistic. I think concerned people coming together can do so much for Bhutan. While I may sound pessimistic, I have huge hope. We are also blessed with local deities, etc. I always believe that whenever something is going wrong we are blessed with timely intervention.

The Druk Journal: Can you give an example of this?

Karma Tshering: In tourism, there is so much focus on numbers -- especially after we became a democracy -- to fulfill promises, for example, short-term promises like hotel occupancy, because people have invested a lot. When McKinsey was here, they made a presentation stressing on numbers of arrivals as an indicator of achievement in tourism, by saying they can take tourism from 60,000 to 300,000 within a short period of time. Personally, I was disturbed by McKinsey's approach, as firms like them are more suited for corporate and commercial entities, and a misfit for our philosophy of development. One of their recommendations was to break the pricing system which anchored the high value low volume vision. At the most critical time, when the government seemed almost fully convinced, there was a last meeting with the tour operators, where everyone insisted on maintaining the pricing system. That literally saved the industry. Now there are timely reminders from His Majesty the King.

The Druk Journal: Given the current situation, what makes you optimistic?

Karma Tshering: There are so many things that glorify our country. We are in a luxurious position because we don't have to cling to one aspect. Many people look up to us as a model, saying "you guys are doing everything right". But I say "no, we have the opportunity to be a model but we are not yet a model". In the west they are trying to recreate nature, and recreated things are not authentic, although they spend millions of dollars. For

Bhutan, we have it all in the authentic form -- all that we have to do is to manage it...it's right in front of our eyes. It's all about how we manage it; that's what makes me very impatient -- there aren't enabling policies for proper management.

But having said that, there's hope and, with new faces, there is growing concern that that sustainability is being eroded and we have to focus on proper management. As a concerned citizen, I have established the Bhutan Sustainable Tourism Society, an organisation supported by voluntary members, with the aim to foster partnerships among all tourism stakeholders in the country, believing that concerted efforts and effective partnerships are the first steps to start the journey of sustainability.

The Druk Journal: Isn't it that, in the past, we were fortunate to have inherited everything intact. Perhaps we became complacent and didn't learn management. Now it's time to wake up?

Karma Tshering: In the past, our lives were so basic that we did not need any management. We just went with the flow. Now, with changing times, as a developing country with so much commodities coming in, we have to adapt to these new things that are coming. The challenge is that we are still in the adaptation phase.

The Druk Journal: Some of us know the problems. Some people know what needs to be done. But generally, our people don't seem to have it in them. One theory is that you need discipline -- very strict regulations. Take the example of Singapore fining and punishing people who throw things on the streets. Also, even our former *Tsilon* who beat people who dirtied the drains, etc...is that what's needed?

Karma Tshering: I'm fully in for that. If we wait for transformation through awareness, it's going to take a very long time. For example, even western societies with strong civil sense still have issues. While they have educated people who are fully aware, yet there are people who don't care. That's why they have the penalty systems. So likewise, we should have the so-called carrot and stick system. We should award people who are walking the extra mile. At the same time, for those who are lagging behind the system, we need to use the stick. While I support awareness programmes, at the same time, I'm fully in agreement with the need for a penalty system.

How Outsiders View Changes

Bjorn Melgaard, Claus Jorgensen

Introduction

We are friends of Bhutan. Our feelings for the country go back 27 years. We were then residents in Bhutan and have worked there for various periods since then. In between longer stays we have visited Bhutan numerous times. We have travelled to every *dzongkhag* in the country and each of us has written articles and books about different aspects of the country.

Here is how we see what tourism was like in Bhutan in the early 1990s, when we both lived there, and the impact of tourism over the years.

Back in the 1990s, the tourism vision of Bhutan was “high value – low volume”. International tourists paid, in addition to USD 20 for visa, a fixed tariff of around 200 USD per day, of which 35 percent was government tax and the rest covered accommodation, food, guide, and transportation within Bhutan. So it was relatively expensive to be an international tourist in Bhutan. Regional tourists (mainly Indians) were exempted from paying visa fees and the tariff.

Bhutan received just about 5,000 international tourists annually when we first arrived, 27 years ago, and around 30,000 regional visitors, of which 50 percent supposedly were tourists. The number of regional visitors did not increase much over the next 15 years. In 2007, there were about 34,500 regional visitors of which about 17,350 were tourists. During the 15 years however, international tourism increased by more than 400 percent, reaching 21,100 international tourists in 2007¹.

In recent years, the increase in the volume of tourism has been dramatic. In 2018 (in rounded figures) Bhutan received 202,300 regional and 71,700 international visitors, totalling 274,000 visitors, of which 241,400 were tourists, and the rest -- 32,600 persons -- were on official visits, business people and families of people living in Bhutan. Of the 202,300 regional visitors, 178,000 were tourists. Indians constitute approximately 95 percent of the regional visitors.

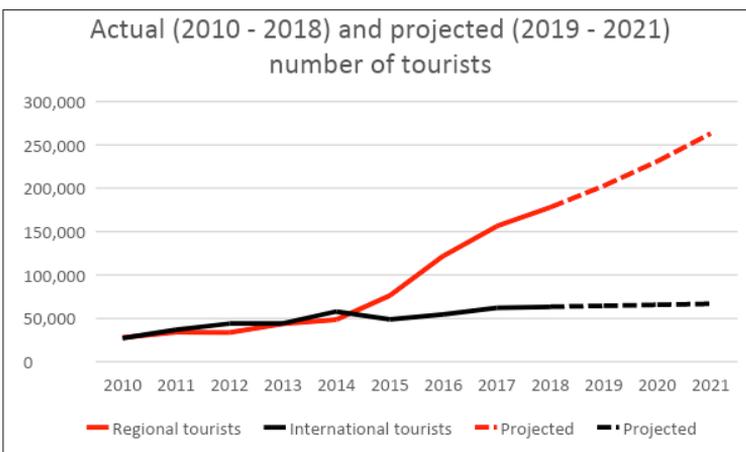
¹Source: International Tourism Monitor, Annual Report 2007, Kingdom of Bhutan, Department of Tourism, Ministry of Economic Affairs (April 2008).

While the increase in international tourist numbers, from 2017 to 2018, has been moderate (1.8 percent), the growth in the number of regional tourists (13.9 percent) in the same period is alarming. If this trend continues unabated there will be 2,63,000 regional and 66,800 international tourists arriving in 2021. The table presents the alarming number of visitors by category (tourists, non-tourists, regional, international) between 2010 and 2018.

Table and figure - Source: Bhutan Tourism Monitor – the annual reports from 2010 to 2018.

Visitors to Bhutan 2010 - 2018	2010	2014	2017	2018
Regional tourists	27.837	48.544	156.275	178.015
Regional non-tourist visitors	5.800	16.855	27.012	24.275
Total regional visitors	33.637	65.399	183.287	202.290
International tourists	27.196	57.934	62.272	63.367
International non-tourist visitors	1.267	10.147	9.145	8.440
Total international visitors	28.463	68.081	71.417	71.807
Total tourists	55.033	106.478	218.547	241.382
Total non-tourist visitors	7.067	27.002	36.157	32.715
Total visitors	62.100	133.480	254.704	274.097

Table and figure - Source: Bhutan Tourism Monitor – the annual reports from 2010 to 2018.



The tariff for international tourists has remained more or less unchanged during the past 20 years, so the increase of international and regional tourists reflects both global and regional wealth. Travel for leisure has become cheaper and more common and people, in particular Indians, richer. A trip to Bhutan has become more affordable to many people, as this posting on the Quora website tells:

“Bhutan is one of the most affordable and favourable destinations in the world. Unlike other countries, Bhutan doesn’t charge any extra fee for Indians visiting Bhutan. The total cost including Accommodation + Food + Cab [transport] will come around to 2–3K [2–3000 Indian Rupee] per person and will reduce to 2k on sharing basis”².

Consequently, the “high value – low volume” policy has shifted to “ordinary value – high volume” for international tourists and to “extraordinary low value – extremely high volume” -- and thus impact -- for regional tourists. This development has happened without a policy and strategy to safeguard Bhutan’s unique culture and nature.

Bhutan 25 Years Ago

Imagine landing in Paro. When the BA 146 aircraft’s motor is switched off, and you have passed through immigration -- individually or in very small groups -- you cannot hear anything but birds singing, and perhaps some quiet conversation, and the occasional deep and gentle sound of a *dung* (longhorn) from far up in the mountains.

In Paro, and in your house or apartment in Thimphu, you will breathe in the cleanest and most breathtaking air your lungs have ever experienced. In the evening, you might walk to the town centre, enjoying the calm city, searching for a nice restaurant. It’s not a difficult choice, because there aren’t many restaurants and the quality is not the standard you are used to from your home country, but it’s ok, though your stomach sometimes may disagree.

After work, you may decide to take a small stroll up to Changangkha Lhakhang with your wife and kids, to light candles for your eldest daughter back home, trying to pass her exams. You are nearly on your own -- no loud

² <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-cost-per-day-in-Bhutan-for-Indian-tourists-and-what-are-the-best-places-in-Bhutan>

tourist crowd. It's so calm -- you feel Bhutan's spirituality and culture, even though you are not a Buddhist.

In April and May, when the Etho Metho (Rhododendron) is in bloom, you decide to take a trek with a couple of your Bhutanese friends and kids. You do not want a difficult trek, so you contact a tour agent who recommends the Druk Path. When you camp at the shores of Bimmelang Tsho, you spot another small group on the other side of the lake, and local yak herders. But you can't hear them.

Nothing disturbs you when you sit down with a cup of tea, enjoying the pristine nature, the clean environment and the company of your guide and the horsemen. You think of how lucky you are, being part of something unique and secluded, and that you are one of the fortunate few to experience this. You may decide to visit a nearby *goemba* (monastery). You are not alone, because there are one or two other tourists who, like you, quietly and with respect for the Buddhist culture, join the local pilgrims.

You are a *pchilip*, a “grey haired foreigner”, but you do not feel like a foreigner. You feel that you meet on equal terms with the Bhutanese, who enjoy meeting and talking with you.

“You have the watches -- we have the time,” the Bhutanese said -- 25 years ago -- conveying the message that spiritual values were predominant in Bhutan, while material values reigned in our western part of the world.

Bhutan Today

The pristine nature is still there in the rural areas but, in many places, the scenario is adversely affected by ugly new buildings, including hotels, masses of tourists crowding for access to revered monasteries and polluting the place with noise and garbage. What we once experienced -- very special and unique -- that feeling has gone! The feeling of being part of something precious -- that has also gone.

The uniqueness of trekking in small groups -- enjoying nature, clean environment, and the relations with your guide and the horsemen -- this has vanished. Groups of tourists trek along the same routes, visit the same places at the same time, so trekking routes and campsites are overcrowded, and there are signs of gross human behaviour everywhere.

Today it is impossible to visit monasteries and *goembas* quietly, respecting the Buddhist culture and monks in residence. Hordes of tourists visit the same sacred places at the same time, spoiling the tranquillity, like visiting an amusement park. Sacred places have become tourist attractions rather than places of worship.

If you are going up to Taktshang, you will have a tourist group just in front of you and another group at your heels. We hear that even Bhutanese hesitate to visit Taktshang these days -- one of their most sacred places of worship.

If you visit Chhimi Lhakhang -- the place where one of us got our Bhutanese name, and to where Bhutanese couples with fertility problems used to come, where you could sit in peace and let your mind wander around the stories of the Divine Madman -- it's where tourists now flock. Guides entertain them with simplified stories of Dukpa Kuenley in Japanese, French and Chinese. We wonder: What do Bhutanese couples with fertility problems do these days?

Today we still have the watches but so do the Bhutanese... and now, do they have the time?

Conclusion

We acknowledge that there is a difficult balance between the expansion of the tourism sector that contributes to economic growth and creates employment -- especially for the youth -- and the adverse effect on society and the environment.

Mass tourism is not a unique problem to Bhutan. The massive impact can be seen in diverse places like Amsterdam, Venice, and Agra, and globally tourism will continue to rise. It is therefore important to identify precisely what are the core problems, and what steps Bhutan can take to mitigate those problems.

We opine that the core problem is that Bhutan now receives too many tourists, of which by far the most are regional tourists. We subscribe to what is said in the Bhutan Tourism Monitor Annual Report (2010):

“Bhutan continues with its philosophy of encouraging high-end, luxury tourism, with low environmental impact. It aims to become an exclusive destination that promotes culture, nature and wellness tourism. Bhutan has witnessed a terrific trajectory, reaching close to 41,000 tourists. 2010 has been a watershed year in the history of Bhutan, as the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan has taken great strides towards becoming one of the most attractive high-end tourist destinations in the world.”

But now (2019) it seems like the above vision is totally forgotten. The commercialism of tourism has taken over at the expense of the environment and culture of Bhutan. There is no doubt that the Bhutanese nature and culture are under pressure of being destroyed fast if nothing is done.

This development is linked to a gradual emergence of practices and behaviours that are very un-Bhutanese. Stories abound about tax evasion, where tourists pay cash and hoteliers give discounts because they can evade taxation, and where building permission and city services can be obtained in exchange for monetary or personal favours. Clearly, the integrity, morale, and ethical values which characterised Bhutan in the past are eroded.

A very relevant question is to what extent growing tourism affects Gross National Happiness (GNH) -- positively and negatively. It appears that at least two pillars of GNH seem to be under pressure: preservation and promotion of culture and environmental conservation. It might be argued that these are the pillars that define the Bhutanese identity and the uniqueness of the country. It is therefore a worrisome trend.

Some Ideas to be Considered

We are aware that the development of a new tourist policy is under consideration. The work should be accelerated and a new strategy put in place. Lessons may also be learned from other places where mass tourism threatens to overwhelm local venues. At Taj Mahal in Agra, Indian authorities are considering introducing two caps: A maximum of 40,000 tourists a day (from currently about 70,000) and a maximum stay of three hours. In Amsterdam, authorities have introduced a “City in Balance” programme, halting buildings of new hotels and tourist shops, as well as an “enjoy and respect” campaign to influence tourist behaviour.³

³ <https://www.iamexpat.nl/expat-info/dutch-expat-news/tourism-numbers-netherlands-set-explode-29-million-2030>

It is obvious that the “high value – low volume” philosophy has no substance in the Bhutanese context as long as the majority (75 percent) of the tourists, i.e. the regional tourists, neither pays visa fees nor the tourist tariff.

How can this trend be mitigated? Would it be an idea to substitute the present tourist tariff system with a tourist tax levied on hotels for each stay of night per guest?

Should permission for constructions of new hotels be stopped? Should access to certain areas and sacred places be prohibited or limited?

There are, in fact, specific measures to safeguard the environment and the culture that could be instituted. Such measures could include rigid and robust control with trekking companies, as well as caps, and perhaps payments, for visits to monasteries for tourists. Moreover, training in the tourist industry must be reviewed, adjusted, and strengthened to cater for the present influx of tourist crowds as well as for new policies. Such measures could be put in place at short notice.

Our bottom line is that the very identity and the uniqueness of Bhutan and its main attractions are under threat. We hope that solid steps will be taken soon to craft a national policy and a tourism strategy that, when instituted, can stem the tide and preserve the unique nature and the unique culture of the country that we love.

Contributors

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The Druk Journal is a space for thoughts and ideas. We aim to encourage serious conversations on issues that are important for Bhutan. Each issue carries a theme of national importance which is analysed and debated from different perspectives.

The 10th issue of The Druk Journal carries the theme, "Tourism in Bhutan". With this vital industry at risk of losing sight of the vision - "high value, low impact" - and being overwhelmed by trends that are indicative of mass tourism, there is an urgent need for a re-think of national policy and action. The articles in this issue aim to contribute ideas that enable policymakers to understand the current realities and to make the right decisions to ensure that Bhutan remains a high-end destination as a small country that dares to be different.