

“Panacea” or “Pandora’s Box”? Ecotourism in Nepal

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--”Trekking is the gift of Nepal to the world in adventure tourism. To be one with Nature, to regenerate one's own self-esteem, to rediscover oneself, to appreciate Nepal's beauty, to interact with its hospitable and friendly peoples are some of the highlights of trekking in Nepal. Trekking is one long-term activity that draws repeat visitors to the country. Therefore, Nepal is the ultimate destination for the trekking enthusiast. It offers a myriad of possibilities - from the "short and easy" walking excursions to the "demanding and strenuous" challenges of the snowy peaks and their foothills and valleys. But however easy, or moderate, or strenuous, there is something for every palate that goes with trekking in Nepal's hills, mountains and hinterlands. The most rewarding way to experience Nepal's indomitable combination of natural beauty and cultural riches is to walk through the length, breadth and the altitudes of Nepal. Trekking in Nepal is as much a unique cultural experience as well as an ultimate Himalayan adventure...

(<http://ecotourism.about.com/travel/ecotourism/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.welcomenepal.com/adven.html>)... Come “explore the full range of Nepal’s incredible environments and ethnic cultures: Hindu villages with terraced rice fields; deep river gorges, Tibetan villages replete with flat roofed stone houses, monasteries and “Man” walls, glaciers, high altitude lakes and views of some of the highest mountains in the world.” (Ecole Adventures International)

BACKGROUND

Nepal did not effectively come under the global system until fairly recently. According to one critic, “Nepal lived in relative isolation from world trends till the middle of the 20th century, when it abruptly got rid of the Rana oligarchs and decided to join up” (Dixit: 1997, 173). Long under the rule of hereditary prime ministers favoring a policy of isolation, Nepal remained essentially closed to the outside until a palace revolt in 1950 restored the crown’s authority. This end to Nepal’s long history of geographic and self-imposed isolation has brought with it new issues and challenges, and has contributed to popular identification of Nepal as “one of the least developed nations in the world” (Britannica: 1994, 777). In 1991 when nationwide social unrest forced then-King Birendra to accept the formation of a multiparty parliamentary system, the Kingdom of Nepal came into its current (and contentious) system of government. The King has remained head of state, but holds relatively little executive power. The fractionalized nature of the current system has made it very difficult to introduce the necessary economic and social policies to address the extreme stagnation and social inequities that face Nepal. Not surprisingly, foreign aid has played an increasingly vital role in Nepal’s economic “fix”.

In recent years many countries have provided economic assistance to Nepal. While Nepal has tried, rather successfully, to maintain political and nominal independence from India and China, it has become extremely economically dependent in other ways. “Modernization” has become part of the national agenda, and “terms like *bikas* (development) and *bidesi sabayata* (foreign aid)” have entered the national “vocabulary” (Dixit: 1997, 173). The early 1950s saw the first major influx of foreigners and foreign interest, and since then “Nepal has been in single-minded pursuit of *bikas*, most of it funded from donor’s pockets” (Dixit: 1997, 173). This continues and intensifies. The international community has funded more than 60% of Nepal’s development budget, and will likely continue as a major ingredient of growth (World Factbook: 1999, 5). “Modernization” and

“development” have become so foreign-funded that the very national economic policy has been predicated on garnering further foreign monetary assistance. The government has proposed a long series of what they term “Five year plans”, the latest of which is identified by the slogan “Visit Nepal ‘98”. One of the major goals of government backed “Visit Nepal ‘98” is to promote Nepal as an “all-year-round” tourist destination. The popular sentiment, informed by government policy, is that “the people of Nepal hope for a better future. Tourism so far is the only possible... Prosperity for the kingdom.”(Ismaelji: 1998, 3) While foreign aid does provide Nepal with certain development structures and agendas of urbanization and infrastructure (such as water systems, highways, electricity via hydropower projects, etc.), it presents great problems. In such a system, in the assessment of thinkers such as Cardoso and Faletto, development is rendered utterly “dependent”. Nepal is utterly reliant on external aid for its economic well-being in the present and future.

The “Five year plans” have provided directives on allocation of resources, social services, industrial development, agriculture, transportation and communication, but the primary (and contentious) successes have involved increasing foreign input, aid, and tourism (Dixit: 1997, 174). Some specific achievements of foreign assistance are two irrigation-hydroelectric projects funded by India, and another funded by the World Bank. The foreign-aid dependent economy has lauded these, along with the tourism increase, as important developments for “development”. Today, tourism is Nepal’s mantra, and is about to become the country’s single largest source of revenue (“PFM: Ecotourism...”, 1). Nepal actively seeks to transform its image and its infrastructure to draw large numbers of tourists, in the hope of an economic heal to its relatively recent history of underdevelopment woes.

But tourism is approaching a new frontier. While Nepal has been open to foreigners since 1951, the numbers of foreign visitors increasing profoundly through the 1960s and 1970s, it was in the early 1970s that Nepal’s popularity as an adventure travel destination emerged. Kathmandu soon became, in some circles, a favorite destination of the “counterculture traveler”, (Zurich: 1992, 613) a breed of tourist seeking a more atypical, “off-the-beaten track”, holistic travel experience. During the past two decades, the numbers of tourists entering Nepal has grown steadily and dramatically, exceeding a 500% increase. Of these visitors, well over 60% come for a combination of trekking, jungle safaris, river rafting and “ethnic touring” (Zurich: 1992, 613) in what is fast becoming the most preeminent (and contentious) industry in Nepal-- ecotourism. Nepal has recently embraced the growing industry of ecotourism as another harbinger of success. Ecotourism is more than an “eco”-oriented tourism. It is a “‘green’ tourism” (Bandy, 2) that carries with it implications and ideals of sustainable development, and a price tag of potential cultural and environmental disintegration. The definition of ecotourism is a broad one, encompassing outdoor activity such as nature and adventure trips, a conservation orientation, and “authentic” and “exotic” cultural exposure and experience (McLaren: 1998, 97). It is growing in popularity worldwide, and nowhere more so than in Nepal. The trekking industry alone is increasing 17% annually (Herliczek: 1996, 1). With 75% of the country blanketed by the world’s biggest mountains (Britannica: 1994, 777) this is no great surprise. In addition to mountains, Nepal boasts rivers, lowland jungle, rich and “ancient” Hindu and Buddhist traditions, and remote and exotic indigenous cultures. It is a virtual paradise for the affluent West’s “orientalist fascination[s] with subaltern peoples”(Bandy: 1996, 4) and landscapes. If ecotourism caters to this Western desire to experience the exotic, the adventurous, and a more holistic and integrative tourist-consumer experience in a place of exotic beauty, mystique, and extremity, then Nepal matches the typical ecotourism prerequisite to a “T”.

This “free market environmentalism” (Bandy: 1996, 10) brings together aspects of economic growth, sustainable development, environmental protection, and cultural definition in an extremely complicated milieu. Ecotourism has been called the “most enticing and problematic business in the third world”(Zurich: 1992, 610). It is heralded as the perfect economic-cultural heal, and denounced

as causing the destruction of any remnant of environmental and cultural well being. Is it merely a politically correct disguise for the same exploitative and Western-centric system that informs many developing countries' singleminded scramble for the holy grail of Development? Or is it a pronounced shift to a kinder gentler more holistic form of development and subsistence with real and lasting benefits for people, environment, and economy?

On the one hand ecotourism can be seen to represent a pronouncedly influential economic and social opporunity for Nepal. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the "global economic context of ecotourism" (Bandy: 1996, 3), the ways in which ecotourism is merely another notch in a long history of "(neo)colonialism, imposed misery, and ethnocentrism". A careful analysis of the assumptions that ecotourism rests on is imperative to any understanding of this new industry. Some argue that it is the best development option Nepal has right now, but many others argue that it is not good enough. Local people have joined with Indigenous Peoples, women's groups, grassroots organizations, environmentalists, and sometimes even tourists to challenge and denounce the negative impacts of global tourism and to seek alternatives. In this light ecotourism as economic development equals "forced underdevelopment". It is perhaps packaged more neatly and nicely, and seems to accomodate more and diverse people and environments on a smaller scale, but its difference from core-imposed austerity export marketing programs may be less pronounced than one might think. In the words of dependent-development theorists Cardoso and Faletto, "the dollar continue[s] to function as a compass to guide the health of the world economy" (Cardoso: 1979, 181). Himalayan Nepal is not necessarily exempt. Ecotourism is a contentious issue. Debate intensifies as more and more third world countries opt for this as an economic strategy. For, "tourism is a double edged sword-- able to save the day if skillfully wielded, but liable to cut one's leg off if it is handled carelessly."(Glick in Bandy: 1996, 11)

THE SCENARIO

A meeting is called in the mid-hill Sherpa and Tamang village of Simigaaun, where issues of ecotourism are nothing new. Trekkers are well known to the people of Simigaaun, though compared to villages in and around the popular Annapurna himalayan circuit and *Namsche Bazaar* in the Everest (*Solu Khumbu*) region, Simigaaun has yet to see extensive tourist-oriented development. Still, the issues surrounding ecotourism are nothing new to the region. Residents of Simigaaun have seen trekkers and their support teams (anywhere from one nepali porter to a fifty member trekking group with porters, cooks, English-speaking guides and more) pass through the village, replete with neon gore tex, loads of food and supplies, en route to the higher altitude destination of the Rolwaling Valley, or coming down from the high altitude pass that connects the *Gauri Shankar* himalayan system to the *Solu Khumbu* (Everest region) valley.

Many of the village's men have been working for the trekking industry in the popular Everest and Annapurna regions for many years. They have seen, and to a lesser degree have felt, the inescapable effects of ecotourism, from environmental degradation to a culture changed irrevocably by tourists. Simigaaun already has one lodge that caters to small-scale trekkers, and many local families with members actively involved in the trekking industry have felt pronounced economic benefits. With a prime location, an active *gompa* (Buddhist temple), and a fairly large and diverse village, the development of Simigaaun into a major trekkers' stop would not be a great stretch. The Nepali government agrees, and has sent a representative up to Simigaaun to discuss plans for development. Prominent members of the village have called a meeting in the *gompa* to discuss the fate of Simigaaun as a major trekking spot, and how and whether to go about it. Represented at the meeting is a member of *Nepal's ministry of tourism*, and a *trekking company operator* who has recently relocated to Kathmandu for business, both of whom argue that Simigaaun ought to develop its ecotourism-related appeal and infrastructure. Also present at the meeting are a group of highly

respected *Simigaaun villagers*, two of whom have been educated at Kathmandu's *Tribhubavan University*, and have returned home to live with their families. They articulate the sentiment of less than half of the village when they argue vehemently against expanding Simigaaun as a trekking site, citing many of the environmental, social, and theoretical problems that have come to the forefront in the Annapurnas and the Solu Khumbu. Finally, there is a representative from *A.C.A.P.*, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, an NGO that has made great strides in establishing the nearby Annapurnas as a recognized conservation area with ecotourism as a sustainable practice. Everyone present at the meeting has seen firsthand the changes and developments that an ever expanding tourist industry in small hill villages brings. The question is whether to accelerate or deny the expansion of this industry in Simigaaun. What are the effects and implications, the benefits and the problems? What do the proposed changes mean? What is to be done?

GOVERNMENT

Time and time again critics have noted that prospects for foreign trade and investments in most of our industrial sectors are poor and are likely to remain so. We must seize this opportunity to rise from what critics have called our "economic backwardness" and "remoteness" (World Factbook: 1999, 5). We are a poor nation. Many of our people do not have enough money to meet their needs. We have no access to the goods, opportunities or infrastructure that other countries' have. The fact is that tourism is a major force in global trade, and this is an unprecedented opportunity to usher in development. And what better way to integrate tourism with local community? The Nepali government, in concert with numerous foreign advisors and university educated officials, has concluded that we have nothing to lose and everything to gain (McLaren: 1998, 61). Experience and literature show us that this is *the* industry for us to expand. By opening this region up to tourism in a broader way, as the Annapurnas and Solu Khumbu have done before us, we move closer to a better way of living. We aim to reproduce the real successes of ecotourism. Ecotourism is growing as a major contributor to economic activity and growth in our nation as well as others. What we have here is a "seamless convergence of capitalist economy and wealth" (Bandy: 1996, 8), by merely bringing outside awareness to our very home environment. We can establish nature preserves in order to enhance ecological preservation, and in so doing contribute to the vitality of our local economy, as well as our national economy, and the global industry of tourism.

We are far from alone. For nearly the past decade, almost every "nonindustrial country" has been promoting ecotourism as a locally and nationally beneficial development strategy. After all, it is just one of a variety of "enterprise-based approaches to conservation that champion the marketplace and the private sector" placing the onus of economic growth closer to the localized community (Honey: 1999, 76). We support organizations such as UNESCO and others in putting all nascent trekking area of stunning environmental and cultural splendor, such as this will be with proper attention and development, on the World Heritage List (Vega: 1992, 5). In so doing, we contribute to conservation and awareness. By creating national parks and designating special areas conservation and heritage sites, we garner honor and prestige for Nepal, we promote tourism, and we obtain wealth. Foreign eyes, appreciation, and economic value will enter this community, as it has in other regions of the country. It will bring revenue and recognition to the community, and, moreover, advances that we all desire. One need only look to the Annapurnas and their new school and health center, as well as their water and electricity projects. Expanding ecotourism in Simigaaun will bring similar infrastructural developments. Do you not want electricity and medicine? What a natural and relatively effortless way to keep us on the road to progress, development and modernization. Ecotourism represents resource frontiers for national development on a localized scale. It is a unique opportunity for our "indigenous" peoples to come out of isolation and enter the world economy, and begin to know development.

In our most recent “Five Year Plan”, we whole-heartedly call for escalating tourism in all of Nepal. This is as important, or even more so, in such remote and attractive trekking locations. We are actively moving toward bringing attention to our diverse natural and cultural heritage. Our country is beautiful. We can have pride in this. We are actively calling for the diversification of ecotourism into newly-opened areas (Zurick: 1992, 613), such as this one.

Why paint ecotourism in the most negative light possible? I offer up a positive and encompassing definition: “ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.”(Honey: 1999, 25) We will develop the protective conservation structures we need, using A.C.A.P. as a model. Barring this, I see no reason why Simigaaun should hesitate for a moment in expanding into a natural and cultural reserve .

KATHMANDU TREKKING OPERATOR

I operate out of Kathmandu, but I was born in Simigaaun. I too want what is best for my village. At age fifteen I started working for a trekking company in *Solu Khumbu*. At the time I was a porter and a kitchen boy, and now I run my own trekking agency in the city. We have connections with American and Australian agencies, and I am able to send my two boys to school in Kathmandu. They will grow up with education, with the resources that the rest of the world has, and they will not lose their connection to the land they come from. This is possible for our whole village. In Nepal, ecotourism means local business incentives, education, health and infrastructure advances, inclusion in the developed world’s economy. We can have kerosene fuel and solar heating in our homes! When Westerners bring their attention and their money into our homes, a door is opened for us. They bring some problems, and some inconveniences, but efforts have been made to lessen these negative effects. Many trekking companies, including my own, recognize the need to give back to local communities even beyond the employment we offer. We operate, as a component of the tour package, a number sustainable development projects to improve the community’s health, education and environment. This can only benefit Simigaaun! My trekking agency has already completed, with the help of foreign advisers and money, a number of very successful water and school roofing projects (“Ecole” 1). Look again at the *Solu Khumbu*. and you will see that the rate of Sherpa affluence in the area has risen profoundly (Zurick: 1992, 615). At *Thyangboche Monastery*, the largest Buddhist temple in the area, international recognition has made it possible for nearby villagers to reconstruct local religious sanctuaries (Zurick: 1992, 618). These economic changes can be both large and small scale. On the small scale, the guaranteed employment can ensure that my brother and cousins in Simigaaun will be able to buy bags of rice for their families without fail. You will be able to have nicer homes and you will accumulate more animals and desirable goods. More young people will be able to seek greater opportunity in Kathmandu, and widespread recognition will grace our village.

Simigaaun has enormous potential appeal to ecotourists. They want a beautiful and dramatic area, and what better than our majestic *Gauri Shankar* himalayas. They want an authentic and friendly culture. We possess all the desirable qualities that would make Simigaaun a successful ecotourism region. Employment, economic benefit, and greater opportunity could be ours with very little effort. Imagine if roads could be built; we would not have to carry supplies up and down for weeks on end. The world is changing, and this is our opportunity to change with it without compromising our past and our culture and our magnificent mountain environment. But more importantly, it gives Simigaaun a livelihood.

This kind of ecotourism brings attention to Nepal, and to us specifically. It works towards,

not against, protecting our village and mountains in the form of national parks and conservation areas. There is much that we the proposed plan can offer us. Primarily, it offers Simigaaun villagers a livelihood. Imagine having a regular income. What other sources of employment will most Simigaaun villagers be able to find? It may not be perfect, but it is the best option we have.

REPRESENTATIVE FROM A.C.A.P.

The common belief that tourism necessarily “wreaks cultural havoc”(Zurich: 1992, 618) ignores the enormous potential for cultures to absorb tourist demands in creative ways. When poorly planned, unregulated and overhyped, ecotourism can (like all forms of tourism) bring only marginal economic benefits, as well as serious environmental and social consequences (Honey: 1999, 54). We can make tourism sustainable, and reap the benefits. The evolution of ecotourism in this particular area will reflect how well we can resolve two potentially conflicting interests: the traditional interests of local villagers, and national development goals. If we dictate, in large part, at the local level, how we want this evolution of ecotourism and development to go, then we win. If we fail to do this, to make our trekking eco-tourist industry sustainable, then we will suffer the destructive consequences that so many other developing countries have felt, including environmental degradation, the straining and exceeding of a small and highly precarious ecosystem’s carrying capacity, and the loss of culture. With the right regulatory systems and local input in place it *is* possible to “produce” culture for tourists and still maintain it for ourselves. In so many instances environmental degradation of the world’s supremely unique regions follows in tourism’s wake, but this is not written in stone. Localized management efforts are the key. (Zurich: 1992, 623)

Take the Annapurnas, where my organization has accomplished much, as a prime example of the problem and the solution. When this, the most popular himalayan trekking area, underwent a massive increase in the number of trekkers (an increase of 225% between 1980 and 1991) (Honey: 1999, 54), the impact on the fragile environment was immense. Trekkers strayed from trails, destroying vegetation, leaving behind litter, requiring more firewood via the lodge system than the environment could support, causing the timberline to recede several feet. Entire forests of wild rhododendrons disappeared, and species, like the snow leopard, went extinct, not to mention the loss of local authentic and traditional culture. In 1985, USAID and WWF helped provide funding for the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (an NGO) to establish the very successful A.C.A.P. (Annapurna Conservation Area Project). The Nepali government has authorized our organization to raise and use the money that the area generates for conservation. In our first decade, we trained 700 local people to work in lodges used by ecotourists, to build a visitor education and information center, and we established a conservation fee of twelve dollars, which generates more than half a million dollars annually for local conservation activities including tree planting and trail maintenance (Honey: 1999, 76). We have aimed to maximize the positive impacts (economic benefits to the local communities) and minimize the negative impacts in of tourism in the local ecology, economy, and culture. Some of our major categories of change have been in training and education of the local communities-- including management training for lodge owners, using local raw materials, and showing linkages between local nature, culture, tourism, and economic development. We launched an alternative energy programme, and now not one lodge uses fuel wood. Sanitation programmes have been largely successful. Soft interest loans have made possible the construction of toilets, and awareness and disposal methods have been established concerning the non-biodegradable products of tourism. An assembly of local lodge owners was formed, in which what is to be implemented and how is decided. Additionally, lodges have been spaced out strategically, for maximum benefit to landscape and tourists.

A.C.A.P. was originally designed as a ten year program, but it has been extended, and the

hope is that eventually it will be self-sustaining. We have given special attention to the roles women play in all of this, and we have created the “Developing Women’s Entrepreneurship in Tourism” program, which provides loans, training in marketing, accounting and other tourism-related skills. We have done more than simply generate awareness. We have established nurseries, and we teach new farming, composting and fertilizing methods (Herliczek: 1996, 3).

Educational information is available for trekkers at checkpoints and at the gateway to the Annapurna Sanctuary, providing trail conditions, trekking information, and the regulations that trekkers are expected to follow to leave the area as they found it. We believe that the work our organization has done in the Annapurnas is highly successful, primarily because projects, programs, activities, and awareness are initiated by locals, after an initial education and funding effort. Equally important, however, is that governmental regulations exist that enforce certain sustainability laws even if they seem to argue against short term profit. (“Ecotourism in the Annapurna Sanctuary in Nepal”) An NGO such as ours can mediate between the community in question and the government, and give the communities themselves the knowledge and tools to create a sustainable ecotourism that still provides economic benefits. That is my proposal for Simigauun.

SIMIGAAUN-PROTECTION COALITION

Tourism is a band-aid solution. Why are we taught that our country will suffer without tourism (McLaren: 1998, 62)? What long term solution do we gain by becoming steeped in loans and utterly dependent on foreigners for our development and wealth? If our economic strategy is to make ourselves appealing for others to invest in for leisure and entertainment, how are we empowering Nepali people? We vehemently oppose escalating tourism in our village. Our reasons are many, some simple, some complicated. We believe that the problems accompanying ecotourism are problems inherent in theory and actuality. With stringent regulations they can perhaps be mitigated, but they flow from the very base. A.C.A.P. and others argue for regulated and sustainable ecotourism so as to maximize economic benefit for the community, and minimize negative social and environmental impacts. We see a contradiction in this. Economic benefit will only be felt if ecotourism is carried out on fairly large enough scale. Localized management and imposed limits are well and good. But the eventual role of adventure tourism in Nepal’s economy is seriously limited if management is spatially restricted only to park-areas where local population needs, public lands management and tourism all converge within a strictly regulated public policy arena (Zurich: 1992, 624). As it stands now, villagers tend not to see pronounced economic benefit. Even if heightened ecotourism will provide jobs for our community, for cooks, porters, kitchen boys, guides, we must acknowledge that economic benefits are largely absent in villages like ours. The developed world appropriates most of tourism earnings, and not surprisingly so. The economic gains to be derived from the ecotourist industry tend to fall to those higher on the “commodity chain”, those in marketing, in selling and operating, those with access to and control over tourism infrastructure and industry support. The irony of local people active in the ecotourism industry failing to see real profit is merely a function of the ubiquitous, and intensifying, core-periphery dependent development relationship that characterizes all such interactions. Economic “leakages” are commonplace in the political economy of tourism (Zurick: 1992, 611). And even if it does bring us infrastructural developments, can our environment support things like airstrips, bridges, large trails, or hydroprojects?

Many trekking industry-oriented villages in the Nepal himalayas have fallen into the unfortunate position of transforming their culture into a tourism package. Implicit in such plans tends to be the commodification not only of nature, but of culture. Anything in the name of national modernization. Any effects of tourism are intensified when transposed into our vulnerable environment. As we subordinate our traditional subsistence activities, agriculture, animal husbandry,

to tourism-related activities, we lose more than we may realize. The village of Beding, just a day's trek up from Simigaaun, is a village of primarily women and children, as most able bodied men leave to work in the trekking industry, either in Kathmandu or other major trekking areas. Women are left with all the subsistence, home, and childcare work. Moreover, the monetary support, when it does finally come in, is minimal. Change is inevitable and necessary. But with the infusion of a major tourist industry, too much change is negative. The fate of other villages, especially in the *Solu Khumbu* region, has shown that out-migration skyrockets. We can already see many young people who want to leave Simigaaun for Kathmandu. Young people start to prefer tourist-related jobs to education. Our traditional houses will become fewer and fewer as lodges become more and more. Families will begin to separate and fall apart. Already I see some neighboring villagers return home after trekking for years and they are overly westernized. They have lost their roots and their values (Banskota: 1995, 68). We do not mention here the religious significance of these himaal. We do not mention the fact that our gods reside here. Our elders see nothing good that can come from insensitive tourists trampling on sacred spots. They will alter too negatively the way we have lived, and are supposed to live.

We appreciate the sentiments and actions of the leaders of ACAP, but the fact is that it is not sufficient. ACAP has not exactly provided the benefits anticipated. WWF investigation has provided "menial" jobs for porters who carry tourists' supplies up and down trekking routes. Other than the fifty odd families who actually live along the Annapurna circuit trekking route, "there has been minimal trickle-down economic benefit" (McLaren: 1998, 107). According to the WWF, ACAP has little real interaction with Nepal's tourism industry. Organizations such as ACAP need to adopt a broader scope, and look to larger constructs and effects. Despite their efforts, the amount of litter and pollution on trekking trails and villages has not been abated. Tourist litter-- plastic, glass bottles, foil, batteries, toilet paper-- is far more pernicious in fragile high altitude alpine environments. This environment cannot withstand the impact of the 70,000 plus tourists who barrel through major trekking routes, let alone culturally and ecologically insensitive people. (Banskota: 1995, 63) Our forests are being taxed too greatly. There has been a lack of any real or effective law enforcement in this respect. Yes, we all need firewood for cooking, but tourists need too much. Rhododendron forests in the Annapurnas are almost completely gone, and in many other places the treeline has actually shifted.

If ecotourism could offer pronounced local community benefit, I would have only secondary reservations. But, its very structure does not allow for this. We are entitled to better lives. We should refuse to take grants or loans for any so-called "development activity". Any changes, improvements, implementations must come from us if they will ultimately be beneficial. We are constantly told that we must "diversify" our economy. But if we continue to further diversify this kind of tourism to new fragile and remote areas, we are signing our death certificate. Once an ecotourism circuit becomes too successful, it loses its appeal of authenticity, and it is no longer a desired location. In the unlikely event that Simigaaun will profit from increased ecotourism, what will happen when it becomes too "common", and "economic opportunity" moves on? I am reminded of Kanak Dixit's assertion, that "at last count, Kathmandu Valley had eight master plans to guide its urban development, all of which have stood sentinel as the Valley converted itself into a toilet bowl"(Dixit: 1997, 175). Do we want this history of tourism's "successes" extended into our sacred mountains as well?

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