

Conservation or Cultural Dominance?:

The Future of Ecotourism in the Himalayas and Its Impact on Local Communities

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China, India, and the West

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April 18, 2014 was the single deadliest day in the history of modern mountaineering. Sixteen sherpas lost their lives that morning in an avalanche on Mt. Everest. Anita Lama, 23, Wife of a sherpa who lost his life in the avalanche told her husband's story amidst tears, "He started going to the mountains for work for the past four years or so. Before the accident he said he would come back after two months. He was planning to build our own house after a couple of years." News of the tragic event rocked the international climbing community and brought renewed attention to the wellbeing of the region's sherpas, a local population in the border region of the Himalayas between China and Nepal where the great mountain is situated.¹ There were protests among sherpas that the government insurance packages weren't sufficient, there were questions about safety of future mountain guides and whether the pay was worth the risk, there were questions of how sherpas might be able to further their education and escape the necessity of taking such dangerous jobs in the first place. Many of the issues raised have yet to be resolved. This instance is only one example of a much larger question about the impact of ecotourism and mountaineering on all local Himalayan populations. The primary issue that this paper will seek to address is not whether or not ecotourism should be permitted, but who should be entitled to make decisions about its future in the himalayan region. I will argue that because of their cultural and historical connection to the land, decisions about the land and how it is used should be made first and foremost by local communities and that in its current state ecotourism is robbing local communities of the right to make such decisions.

There is an incredibly long history in the Himalayan region of revering the natural world and more specifically the Himalayan mountain range as sacred. One of the most revered texts in

¹ Surendra Phuyal, "Sherpa Families' Sorrow after Killer Everest Avalanche." *BBC News Asia*, May 8, 2014.

the Hindu tradition is the *Ramayana*. In the *Ramayana* the monkey god Hanuman is sent to retrieve a special herb from the Himalayas to be used as medicine. Unable to find the herb Hanuman brings with him the entire mountain.² For one this demonstrates the tradition of revering the mountain as a sacred space capable of providing. It is also worth noting that these stories have been worked into local legend. In the village of Kopu legend holds that on his way back with the mountain Hanuman dropped a forest near the village. To this day that forest is revered by local communities.³ Another example from the *Ramayana* is Rama spending time alone in the forest upon being banished. When the Rama, the embodiment of Dharma, is cast out, he seeks refuge in the forest; the natural world.⁴ In another set of texts from the Indian tradition, the Dharma Sastras, focus is placed on the importance of the natural world for achieving moksha, the highest level of spirituality. As a part of his natural cycle in life a man must spend a certain amount of time as an ascetic, wandering the forests and spending time in spiritual discipline.⁵ A final example from Indian history of the importance of nature in Himalayan culture is in the poetry of Kalidasa. In his most notable work, *Meghdutam*, the exiled poet sends a message to his lover through use of a cloud messenger. The cloud relays all of the beauty of the natural world it sees on its journey over India. The most enchanting and beautiful part of India, the crowning feature, is the Himalayas:

² Will Tuladhar-Douglas, "Collusion and Bickering: Landscape, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Central Himalayas," *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 3 (September 2010), 322.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *Ramayana of Valmiki*, trans. Ralph T.H. Griffin, (London: Tribuner & Co.), 1870-1874.

⁵ Ainslie Thomas Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 209-233.

When o'er the wooded mountain's towering head. Thy hovering shades like flowing tresses spread, Its form shall shine with charms unknown before, That heavenly hosts may gaze at, and adore. . .⁶

There is without a doubt a historic connection between Himalayan sacred texts and love of nature. However, the love of and connection to the natural world is not limited to the sacred texts. It is also found within the culture and daily life of Himalayan peoples. In “Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas” Gerard Toffin and Joana Pfaff-Czarnecka make a case for the local Himalayan communities deep connection to their specific geographic place in the world. The authors state that “rural Nepalis continue to identify with their place of origin even if they have ceased to live there”, then go on to say that, “their existence seems closely associated with their native locality.”⁷ For local communities in the Himalayan region there is not only a long tradition of revering the natural world as sacred, there is a deep cultural connection to the land on which they reside. This is simply one of many reasons that local Himalayan communities should be given the role of determining the land’s future use. They not only respect the land, but they deeply identify with the land.

There is a recent trend in the Himalayan region of increasing ecotourism. While there are multiple definitions of ecotourism, the definitions provided by Rosemary Black and Hector Ceballos-Lascurain both offer a succinct explanation of the broad institution. Black defines ecotourism as follows:

an experience with a focus on the natural and cultural environment, ecologically sustainable activity, an activity with a predominant educative and interpretative

⁶ Kalidasa, *Megha Duta: or, Cloud Messenger*, trans H.H. Wilson, (London: East India College, 1843), 18.

⁷ Gerard Toffin and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics* (New Delhi: Sage, 2011), 3.

programme, and an activity that contributes to local community groups and projects and to the conservation of the surrounding environment.⁸

Ceballos-Lascurain's definition is slightly different, but the focus remains on conservation and sustainability of local communities:

environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local population.⁹

Working from these definitions we can see that in its current form in the Himalayas ecotourism is failing to live up to its noble intentions.

The institution of ecotourism robs local communities of the autonomy to make decisions about the future of land use. For one, ecotourism takes access to land away from local communities. Without their land, local communities not only lose their identity, but their way of life. In "Politics of Belonging" the authors bring attention to the paradox of Kaziranga National Parks in Nepal. Locals in Nepal are being edged out of their traditional ways of life and their traditional land in the name of preservation. The developed world claims that these spaces do not belong to anyone, but rather humankind as a whole and are best preserved for human kind in the form of national parks, not left to the devices of the locals. The irony however, is that in the park, "landscapes are being protected by cutting them off from the peasants who actually created them." and thus "[v]illagers no longer control the milieux they once used, which for them now

⁸ Black, R. 1996. Ecotourism. What does it really mean? Range 34: 4–7 quoted in Ravinder N. Batta, "Evaluating Ecotourism in Mountain Areas: A Study of Three Himalayan Destinations," *International Review For Environmental Strategies* 6, no. 1 (January 2006), 43.

⁹ Ceballos-Lascurain, H. 1996. Tourism, ecotourism and protected areas. Gland, Switzerland: World Conservation Union. quoted in Ravinder N. Batta, "Evaluating Ecotourism in Mountain Areas: A Study of Three Himalayan Destinations," *International Review For Environmental Strategies* 6, no. 1 (January 2006), 43.

lack any meaning and have lost their primary function of providing resources within a subsistence economy”.¹⁰ Instead of providing a subsistence economy for local communities, Kaziranga National Park provides for the economy of Nepal through ecotourism. Even if the land was being harmed by local communities or if in the hands of the government the land was going to be taken better care of it is hard to justify robbing local communities of their homes and ways of life. The reality however, is that opening lands up to ecotourism not only takes away from local ways of life, it actually can do more damage to the sacred land than good. “The studies on tourism reveal its negative impacts in terms of loss of biodiversity, deforestation, congested settlements, landscape alterations, slums, pollution of air, water and soil, siltation of water bodies. . . etc.”¹¹. One study of Himalayan trails found that, “the load of human induced pollution, solid waste, being deposited in these ecologically sensitive and topographically fragile areas of the mountains is also increasing.”¹² The amount of human waste on trails is increasing with the increased amount of use trails are receiving and there is no system in place to deal with the waste or to inform tourists/hikers on how to deal with their waste. To deal with the vast amount of waste already on trails, transportation access into remote areas would have to increase and the cost (environmentally and financially) required to do so would be burdensome. B.M.S. Rathore of Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi remarked at a meeting in December 2013 that interaction with the mountains used to be harmonious, but is now plagued by “rampant construction at religious/sacred sites, encroachment of river beds, improper waste management

¹⁰ Toffin et al, *Politics of Belonging*, 257.

¹¹ R Joshi and P.P. Dhyani, “Environmental Sustainability and Tourism - Implications of Trend Synergies of Tourism in Sikkim Himalayas,” *Current Science* 97, no. 1 (July 10, 2009), 33.

¹² Jagdish C. Kuniyal, “Solid Waste Management in the Himalayan Trails and Expedition Summits,” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 13 no. 4 (July 2005), 392.

and profit motives.”¹³ It is clear that despite its name, ecotourism, is in fact an ecological nightmare that creates a variety of problems for the land it attempts to preserve and set aside for recreation.

To make matters worse, not only does ecotourism rob locals of the land that they see as home and degrade that land, local communities barely participate or benefit from the positive effects of ecotourism. For one, ecotourism does not do a good job of providing for local Himalayan communities. A study of ecotourism in Himalayan mountain communities found that “in its current form, tourism in the study area has adverse as well as positive environmental impacts, contributes little to the local economy and conservation, does not elicit local community participation.”¹⁴ The problem with ecotourism is that the sorts of jobs made available are largely in areas that locals have little experience and “if local people lack the requisite skills, people from outside will grab the opportunities.”¹⁵ Most of the gift shops in the study areas sold goods that were not hand crafted in the local community, thus the capital made did not stay in the community. This was only one of many examples of leakage of capital from the local communities. Locals are not given priority in the economic increases that result from increases in ecotourism. The market has a tendency to overlook local populations. At a stakeholders meeting held in December of 2013 various groups of influence gathered to discuss the future of

¹³ Rajeev Semwal, Kireet Kumwar, and P.P. Dhyani, “Regulating Tourism and Pilgrimage in the Himalaya,” *Current Science* 106, no. 6 (March 25, 2014).

¹⁴ Batta, “Evaluating Ecotourism,” 42.

¹⁵ Batta, “Evaluating Ecotourism,” 51.

ecotourism in the Himalayas.¹⁶ One of the main points that was agreed upon at this meeting was that local communities needed to be ensured the financial benefits of ecotourism.¹⁷ It is worth noting that local voices at this stake holders meeting were either silent or absent as there are no remarks from them in the briefing. It is useful to see the big names in Himalayan ecotourism acknowledging the general failure of tourism to benefit local economies as directly as it should and attempting to remedy this problem. However, there still remains the fact that in deciding for the local communities that ecotourism is their most sustainable future, they are limiting local autonomy and stripping them of their traditional ways of life. Locals would mainly be involved in service roles like hotels, gift shops, and the like. A study in the *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* found that tourism can serve as a means of cross-cultural interface and subsequently detract from local culture. It found that, “the lifestyle of host population is highly influenced by host-tourists interactions and interfaces” and in fact, “repercussions of tourism on social as well as individual behavior are slow but penetrating and lasting.”¹⁸ Not only are locals losing their land and ways of life, their traditional ways of life are being overtaken by new and foreign ways. Globalization is not inherently negative, but ecotourism as a whole has contributed to the loss of traditional ways of life and the gradual replacement of these ways of life.

¹⁶ among attendants were representatives of the Mountain Division of G.B. Pant Institute of Himalaya Environment and Development (GBPIHED), the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), and World Wide Fund-India

¹⁷ Semwal et al, “Regulating Ecotourism”

¹⁸ Ramji Sharma, “Tourism and Lifestyles: Analysis of Cross-Cultural Interface,” *Himalayan Journal of Sociology & Anthropology* 4 (January 2010), 222.

The future of land use in the Himalayas should not be determined by the governments of India or Nepal, nor should it be determined by the forces of the market. The future should be determined by the local communities. Local communities are inextricably tied to the land and the mountains and their traditional subsistence lifestyles should be protected. In the name of conservation and increasing the national economy the industry of ecotourism has in fact destroyed local ways of life and local economies. Any economic stability for local communities is now dependent on jobs in the service sector that they are largely unqualified for. Ecotourism is not, in its current forms, as sustainable as it should be, nor does it provide for the continued existence of traditional ways of life. Decisions about land use and ecotourism should be made by local communities and for local communities. It is reasonable to worry that continued use of resources by local communities will endanger these delicate environments. However, cases like that of a forest near Kopu village provide hope for locally driven sustainability efforts. The story of Hamunan, the monkey god who created said forest, served as a rallying point among three local communities. With this story as a point of agreement,

three local villages – Kopu, Nimtol and Gopales'vara – had agreed, several years ago, to set up a cooperative arrangement to steward this particular forest, and as a result it had reverted to being a thick jungle, full of useful herbal medicines (jadibuti) and other non-timber forest products.¹⁹

Examples like this offer hope that local Himalayan communities could use their historic love of the natural world and the deep connection they share with their regions to promote similar local preservation efforts. If these efforts involve ecotourism, it should be decided by the local communities and implemented in a way that utilizes local strengths and provides for the local

¹⁹ Tuladhar-Douglas, "Collusion and Bickering," 322.

economy, not in a manner that degrades the natural environment and strips locals of their autonomy.

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