



Ecotourism and PA Management in Nepal

(Experiences and Lessons Learnt)

A Report on the WWF Study Tour to Nepal
28 May to 9 June 2007



Prepared by WWF Cambodia Srepoc Wilderness Area Project Team

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The opinions expressed in this report are not necessarily those of WWF and it takes no responsibilities for any misrepresentation of material.

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Background:

A viable eco-tourism venture is part of the strategy being explored by WWF in its search for a sustainable financing mechanism that will support the Mondulkiri Protected Forest (MPF). The MPF is a protected area situated in the northeastern part of Cambodia and managed by the country's Forestry Administration in partnership with the WWF-Greater Mekong Cambodia Country Programme.

Since 2004, WWF Cambodia has been laying the necessary foundations for the creation of eco-tourism enterprises within the MPF. These activities including intensive patrolling of the park against wildlife poaching and the prevention of illegal forest clearing. Awareness raising among surrounding communities with an emphasis on the importance of biodiversity conservation has also been a priority. The strategy has also included capacity building for all stakeholders, community members, local authorities, park rangers, forestry administration staff, WWF staff and concerned government officials.

As part of this capacity building program, on 30 May to 9 June 2007, WWF sponsored an educational and exposure trip for a selected group. These included government officers from the Forestry Administration: WPO Deputy Director, Chief of Forestry Cantonment in Mondulkiri, Police Commissioner in Mondulkiri, a Provincial Judge and the Forestry Administration Project Officer for the MPF. Three WWF staff were also given the opportunity to go on this tour, the Technical Advisor to the project, the Community Extension Team Leader and a local 'Bunong' woman from a family indigenous to the area who is also part of the MPF Community Extension Team (CET) team.

The study tour had multiple aims:

- a) To provide participants with an opportunity to experience and explore high end eco-tourism operations.
- b) To interact with and learn from indigenous communities who are active participants in, or direct beneficiaries of eco-tourism projects in and around protected areas.
- c) To experience and learn from Nepal's long history of community managed protected areas and the country's success in maintaining its well known national parks. The benefits of visiting Nepal in search of these goals lay in its Asian context and similarities with the Cambodian experience.

The 9-day trip promised to be a full, informative, exciting and educational experience for all participants.

Day 1 Arrival and meeting with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and WWF Nepal

Our first meeting was with Dr. Shyam Bajimaya, Senior Officer and former Director General of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) who gave an overview of protected area management in Nepal - past and present. He explained how the 16 protected areas in Nepal were categorized. Of particular interest was the category, Conservation Area, which are managed by



organized communities with support from the DNPWC.

After the meeting at DNPWC the team proceeded to the WWF Nepal office for a short briefing on WWF's work in Nepal. After a warm welcome from Dr. Ghana Shyam Gurung, the Country Director, we were given an impressive presentation on WWF projects in Nepal. WWF has had the benefit of operating in Nepal since the 60's and it was interesting to note how their strategy has evolved from species focused conservation work in the 60-80s to an integrated conservation focus centred around habitat protection and community participation. The zoning concept which resulted in the establishment of large buffer zone areas (BZs) and conservation areas (CAs) in the 80s-90s enabled a far more cohesive landscape level conservation effort with an emphasis on maintaining broad ecological integrity with concurrent community support and development.

Lessons Learnt:

- Sustainable livelihood projects motivate community participation
- Indigenous knowledge is valuable
- Conservation education is a crucial element in effective conservation
- Communications and media campaigns are a powerful conservation tool
- Most community conservation projects took a minimum of ten years before effective community management could be said to be in place
- Zoning was a critical tool in allowing communities and conservation to come together harmoniously



Briefing at WWF Nepal Office

Day 2: Meeting with Officers of the Nepal Ecotourism Board (NEP)

We were privileged to have a presentation made to us by Mr. Rabi Jung Pandey, Program Manager for the Tourism Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP) in Nepal funded by UNDP, DFID and SNV. We also received a presentation on the Nepal Tourism Board Sustainable Tourism Development Unit (NTBSTDU) given by the Unit Manager, Mr. Lila Baniya.

Highlights of this presentation included the structure of the NTB and its role in promoting sustainable tourism activities (e.g. production of educational materials for tourists) as well as their role in channelling benefits provided to local communities. These included initiating energy-saving projects such as installing bio-gas plants and supplying fuel efficient cooking stoves. The TRPAP strategy is now being replicated in 13 other districts in the country.



Some examples of the Tourism Activities of NTB

1. Train community members as guides and porters
2. Help other community members establish adventure travel companies which they own (not just employees)
3. Train community members on basic hygiene and cooking skills needed to attract tourists
4. 'Trekking' Route identification with communities
5. Trail construction using local contractors
6. Use of local houses as lodges for home stays



A river rafting expedition seen during our bus trip, this is a relatively new tourist activity promoted by the NTB and has strong local participation in the form of guides and owners of rafting operations.

Lessons Learnt:

- Active participation and commitment of the private sector in supporting pro-poor tourism projects in Nepal is an integral part of their success. The private sector are responsible for organizing and leading almost all tourism development activities in Nepal.
- Good government support is critical to the success of community based tourism.
- Reward systems for people supplying information on illegal activities in conservation areas worked well.
- Site specific approaches were developed for different activities e.g. formats for what, how and who should run lodges, home-stays and campsites were used in the development of these facilities and this was a recipe for success.



Day 3—5 Visit to Pokhara Province, the most popular trekking area in Nepal

Our next stop was a three-day stay in Pokhara Province located in the western part of Nepal, here the team got the chance to interview private tour operators that are also involved in community development. Below is an overview of their projects.



The lodge operated by the 3 Sisters adventure trekking.



Forestry Administration
Deputy Director presenting memento to Mrs. Lucky Chettri

Three Sisters Adventure Trekking

This group is committed to empowering women in Nepal by training and then providing employment for female trek guides aimed specifically at the lady trekker tourist. Their training is free and is followed by a paid apprenticeship. According to the Director Lucky Chettri, 55% of the women who are enrolling in their training program go on to paid employment. A large percentage however stated that they joined the program for their own empowerment.

The training is undertaken over a year. The trainees have a month of class room lectures and spend the rest as of their time training practically on the job. The training courses include:

- Basic English
- Health
- Hygiene Awareness
- History and geography of the trekking area
- Culture and Religion
- Tourism—understanding the tourists and their expectations
- Environment and conservation including knowledge on flora and fauna of the area.
- Leadership
- First Aid and Emergency Procedures

Lessons Learnt

- Curriculum should be tailored to the needs and capacity of the women trainees.
- An effective monitoring system where qualified women guides from the course are tracked and the impact of their work assessed made demonstrating results easy.



From top to bottom clockwise: A villager cutting grass for cattle in the communal grazing area inside the community forest. A Nepalese woman on her way to fetch water from a pump funded by Pokahara Lodge Management. Rooms designed as a typical Gurung house situated around the hilltop offering breathtaking views of the area. The team experiencing a guided walk from the lodge to Pokhara town getting an overview of community life along the way;

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge

Situated on a spectacular hilltop ridge a thousand feet above the Pokhara Valley with panoramic views of Machhapuchhare and three other of the world's fourteen 8,000m peaks (Dhaulagiri, Annapurna 1 and Manaslu) Tiger Mountain Pokhara lodge offers a perfect stop for trekkers at the end of their journey. Aside from offering a luxurious rest stop and overnight facilities for hardcore trekkers, Pokahara also offers slightly easier tourist activities such as:

1. Ridge top walk and visit to local communities around the lodge.
2. A full day trek circuit exploring the picturesque communities and a variety of different ethnicities.
3. Naturalist guided nature and bird watching walks.

After an orientation on their various community projects and a brief history of Tiger Tops Mountain Group, the team had the chance to experience some of the trek activities and visit a community forestry project the lodge is supporting.

The community visited is managing a 135 hectare community forest. It has been 15 years since they participated in reforesting the area and they are now starting to reap the benefits. This area supplies firewood and generates income from timber sales. Tiger tops is subsidizing the salary of one community ranger and the other two ranger's salaries are covered by income from the community forest.

National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) Annapurna Conservation Area Office

During the teams time at Pokohara we also visited NTNC an NGO contracted by the government to manage a variety of protected areas in concert with communities. The objective here being to prepare local communities to be PA managers. One of the PA's being managed by this group is the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), the first community managed conservation area in Nepal. Management of the ACA was turned over to community members in 1986 after an initial pilot project with one village managing 290 km². This area was expanded to 1, 748 km² in 1990, covering around 19 (Village Development Committees) VDCs. This project is now in Phase 2, which involves a further 55 VDCs and extends the area by another 7,000 km² (estimated area).

Lessons Learnt:

- Be focused and don't try to do everything at once, don't be too ambitious.
- Don't confuse conservation and development and limit yourself to development projects that have conservation links and outcomes.
- There was a strong sense of 'volunteerism' among the members of the community forestry projects driven by access to the resources.
- Communities were involved in the inventory of the resource and in developing resource use policies.



Collage of views within the Annapura Conservation Area.





Day 6-7 Gaida: Two day stay at Gaida Wildlife Lodge in Chitwan National Park and meeting with the Village Development Committee which is managing a buffer zone of the park.

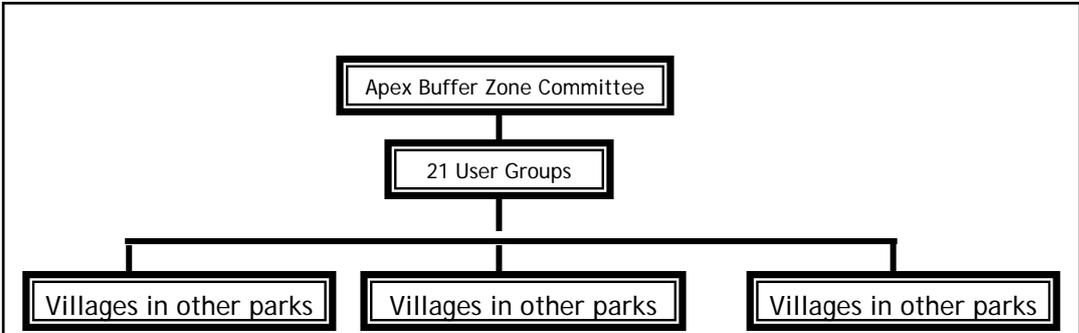
This section of the tour was a highlight for all the participants, the team visited the Sauhara tourist area located on the edge of the Chitwan National Park.

Activities here included:

- A crash course on elephant biology
- Elephant rides in tall grasses and evergreen forests of the park where the team got the chance to see Asian rhino, spotted deer, sambar deer, and a variety of bird species.
- Boat rides where more intensive birding was done.
- Exposure to a traditional Tharu dance group, one of the indigenous peoples living on the fringe of forest in Chitwan.
- A visit to the Elephant breeding center

Meeting with the Buffer Zone Committee managing the Buffer Zone on the western part of the Chitwan Natural Park.

While at Gaida we had the privilege of meeting the local president of the User Group Committee (USG) who gave the team an overview of the structure of the committees that are involved in the management of the Chitwan buffer zone.



The diagram above illustrates the basic structure of community committees managing the Chitwan National Park Buffer Zone.

The area the team visited has 36 VDC which the UNDP helped develop. We were given an informative tour by the president of the local USG of their projects which include: Biogas plants for around 500 families being 80% of the families targeted, electric fence to keep wild elephants from destroying community crops, veterinary services, handicraft making, wood carving, and commercial fish ponds.



Some of the different Projects initiated by the User Group Committees within the Buffer Zone of the Chitwan National Park.



The committee has recently started its own eco-tourism project inside the buffer zone where they have built a tourist watch/sleeping tower. Some of their conservation activities include building water holes in the buffer zones to provide more water for the animals during dry season. Most of their projects are being funded from tourism income and some by donors or individuals who were inspired by their accomplishments. There is also emergency fund for victims of human-wildlife conflict. Each VDC has their own specific project to complete.



Watch Tower inside the Buffer Zone



Biogas Plant



Water hole built by the user group committee to ensure availability of water for wildlife especially during dry season

Reflections: Day 8 - 9 return home.

After discussions on our way home it became obvious that this tour had exceeded both the expectations of the participants and its promoters within WWF. There was a high level of excitement and enthusiasm particularly amongst the government officials who were impressed with the obvious capacity and successes of communities involved in ecotourism and PA management in Nepal. The lessons learnt described in this report come out of discussions held within the group.

What stood out to the leaders of the group was the strong government and other institutional support for communities. The powerful role played by private enterprise as a catalyst and income generator and the willingness and enthusiasm of all community members the group spoke to, and their breadth of knowledge and capacity.



Another positive aspect, was highlighted by the fact that despite the recent Maoist insurgency and the political problems following this event, the tourism infrastructure and systems have remained in place - ready to pick up where they left off. This demonstrates a level of sustainability and resilience within the Nepalese tourist industry in all sectors.

While Nepal has had setbacks and not every project tried has succeeded, 40 years after the iconic Tiger Tops Lodge was built, ecotourism is alive and well in Nepal. It has created a myriad of opportunities and generated enough income in the case of the sites visited to make protected areas sustainable and substantially raise the standard of community living.

It was the opinion of the tour leaders that WWF definitely achieved the exposure and educational objectives of this tour. Paradigms were shifted and ideas generated on this trip will influence conservation decisions in government for years to come.

Conclusion

The benefits of this trip can be summed up in a comment by Hy Somaly, the Bunong member of our Community Extension Team. Sitting at the dinner table one night she expressed the view that she had heard us speak about ecotourism and communities being involved and she had also heard us describe community forests and how they worked but she never really believed it could happen. Now she has seen it happen with her own eyes and taken many pictures to show the other members of her team and her communities. She wants to show them and tell them that



all of this we have been talking about really can happen.

This is our hope too.

All participants would like to thank the Darwin Initiative for the opportunity to participate in this tour.

None on the tour will forget Nepalese hospitality.