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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 22(2) : 110-112

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2002)022[0110:EIPAM]2.0.CO;2

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Mountain Research and Development Vol 22 No 2 May 2002: 110–112

Agha Iqrar Haroon

Ecotourism in Pakistan: A Myth?

"Integrated tourism, to be successful, must promote sustainable development by establishing a durable productive base that allows local inhabitants and service providers to enjoy rising standards of living," wrote David Barkin in 1996. Ecotourism delivers these results because it aims to ensure ecologically, economically, and culturally friendly tourism. Sustainable tourism can best be achieved when activities are controlled by the local community in which tourism activities are being generated. In ideal situations sustainability, sound environmental management, and ecotourism are closely linked. Tourism activities in Pakistan are currently far from sustainable, as in many other mountain regions worldwide: deforestation, uncontrolled land utilization, unplanned growth of tourism, mushrooming growth of accommodations, and, above all, outmigration of young, energetic people as a result of limited job opportunities and lack of local ownership and participation in tourism ventures make change imperative. This paper recommends strategies and measures that urgently need to be developed at all levels.

FIGURE 1 International tourists who visit the north of Pakistan no longer use local buses such as this one. (Photo by Andreas Rüfenacht, 1989)

"I do not think that there can be any law to stop this exploitation of locals because we are living in an open market era." (Amir Ahmad, Kaghan Valley, May, 2001)

Basic issues

The current realities of tourism—sometimes marketed as ecotourism—in Pakistan's mountain regions raise several fundamental questions:

- Are local poor communities in mountain areas involved in tourism decision making?
- Who plans tourism activities for mountain areas?
- Who benefits from tourism?
- Who sells tours to mountain areas?
- Who buys tours to mountain areas?
- Can sustainability be achieved without the active participation of local communities?

Tourism is marketed internationally, but it is "consumed" at the point of production, that is, at the destinations. Sustainable tourism is possible when consumers (tourists) respect the need for sustainable tourism, producers (operators) understand the threats faced by the area where they plan and operate tours, and products (destinations) are selected on the basis of awareness of sustainable tourism, care of the ecosystem, and respect for cultural norms.

Unequal sharing in the benefits of tourism

There is no doubt that ecotourism has become an important industry for developing countries seeking to maximize foreign exchange earnings, increase employment, and secure financial resources to conserve their natural and cultural heritage. However, the situation is different in Pakistan, where mountainous areas are owned by certain influential families who enjoy almost 70% of the benefits of tourism, whereas the general public has access to only 30%. Big tour operators and the government also take their share. The general public is given jobs on a daily or seasonal basis by private tour operators and by the government-run Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC), which owns the biggest chain of motels in the northern areas of Pakistan and operates Pakistan Tours Limited (PTL).

Tahir Azia Khan, a local transporter in the Kalam Valley, claims that the tourism industry has also faced another negative situation with money laundering during

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the last 2 decades. Investors' ill-gotten gains were invested in small and medium-size hotels. The investors did not care about the basis of tourism because they were interested in laundering their money and not in running hotels and motels. In the majority of cases, they contracted the management of these businesses to people from the larger cities, leaving only daily-wage job opportunities for the locals.

External marketing decisions and demands

Marketing is another key factor in ecotourism. Decisions made by tourists and by the industry in the tourists' countries of origin can harm local communities if the latter are not involved when tours are planned, marketed, sold, and bought. Inappropriate tourism development can result in local people losing access to water, land, and communal areas, and in the creation of tourist enclaves and social pollution. In the Kalam area, for example, almost 81 hotels and motels and other accommodations are owned or run by people living in big cities. The local population cannot stop the operators from sending more people to their already ruined, polluted, and degraded land.

In the days of British colonial rule the Murree Hills in Punjab Province were the most popular recreational spot in Pakistan. Murree sustained the pressure of tours without any major degradation until 1985, when a new all-weather road was built, and the area became a hub of year-round domestic tourism. This development caused a negative impact when big investors moved to Murree because of the rapid growth of tourism activities and the "instant" returns. A five-star hotel belonging to an international chain cropped up in Bhurban, followed by the mushrooming growth of small and large hotels. The share of profits accruing to local people diminished as they sold their establishments to investors, and money drained away to the big cities. After Murree reached the saturation point, investors moved on to Kalam Valley.

Tourism development frequently brings with it a demand for international goods and services. When the tourists buy goods imported from elsewhere, only a small portion of the revenue benefits the local economy. Ali Raza, the local owner of a small hotel with six rooms, complains that investors from big cities buy cooking material in bulk in the cities, and thus their costs are lower than the costs faced by Ali Raza and many others like him, who cannot afford to buy stock in bulk.

The need for local involvement in planning

"We are not involved in policymaking. We are not even involved at the level of local bodies because big businessmen have the resources to influence government authorities due to their wealth," complains Aslam Khan Abbasi, who owns local transport buses that are old and not air-conditioned (Figures 1, 2). An alternative development model requires new ways to encourage the direct participation of local people and indigenous communities in a program of job creation in mountainous areas, which will increase incomes and improve living standards. However, conditions in Pakistan are not conducive to this approach.

People who come to Pakistan from rich countries do not go where Pakistanis would like them to go. They are very inter-

"People live in big hotels because they provide the best services, which we cannot offer. They eat jams and breads of international quality. They travel in air-conditioned buses on the big roads. What are we receiving out of this massive tourism?" (Ali Raza, owner of a small hotel in Kalam Valley, September, 2001)

"We do not get anything out of tourism in our areas. We do only small jobs for daily wages, which we of course could get in big cities. They use our areas and give us peanuts." (Muhammad Ali Khan, Swat Valley, September, 2001)

FIGURE 2 With the increase in tourism, the demand for comfortable air-conditioned transport facilities has also increased, at the expense of local transport businesses that cannot afford such costly vehicles. (Photo by Manuel Flury, 1999)

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FIGURE 3 The pressure of international tourism on fragile ecosystems, such as the Hunza Valley with the famous Mt Rakaposi (7754 m) in northern Pakistan, has grown rapidly in the past decade. Ecotourism measures could help prevent excessive disturbance of the environmental, economic, and sociocultural balance in the area. (Photo by Andreas Rüfenacht)

ested in the north, which has the most fragile ecosystem in Pakistan (Figure 3). Pakistanis feel constrained to follow their instructions. Tour operators in big cities, such as Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore, decide the fate of areas without involving the locals when they send tourist groups to the north. Local people act only as porters, guides, drivers, and cooks, if at all.

There is no strategy for democratic participation in the diversification of mountain economies and the enhancement of production in Pakistan, and the newly developed Master Tourism Plan is completely silent on this very important issue.

What can be done?

Can government policies force tourists to eat locally made food? Can government policy force tour operators to plan their tours in consultation with the locals? It seems certain that the answer to these 2 questions is a resounding "No!" because Pakistan is confronted with an open-market situation. It therefore appears that integrated (eco)tourism and the likelihood of its success in ensuring local economic benefits in the tourism sector depend on factors beyond the control of governments or their agencies. Tourists, tour operators, and market managers play the key roles. The following steps are essential to ensure that sustainable development will be a reality and not just a myth:

- The government should invest revenue to develop social infrastructure in mountain areas where this revenue is generated.
- Existing rules for tour operations must be amended to ensure maximum participation by the local people.
- Tourist groups need to understand that they should not visit oversold areas.
- Tour operators should not just think about their daily income but should look to the future as well.
- Local people should develop pressure groups to maximize the benefits of income from tourism.
- The public sector, including the PTDC and the Sarhad Tourism Corporation (STC), should encourage the use of locally made products in its motels and hotels. It should also provide job opportunities to the local people instead of importing manpower from the big cities.
- A heavy tax should be imposed on the sale of products made by multinational companies in mountain areas.
- Construction of buildings in mountain areas that are not planned in accordance with the local style and materials should be completely banned.
- Government-sponsored small institutions should be opened in remote mountain areas to provide training to the local youth in the fields of tourism, guide training, housekeeping and tour operations.

FURTHER READING

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Agha Iqrar Haroon holds masters degrees in philosophy and history and is the president of Ecotourism Society Pakistan. He was a consultant for the Ministry of Tourism, Government of Pakistan, at the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) for 3½ years and also served as a consultant to the Pakistan–Austrian Institute for Tourism and Hotel Management (PAITHOM) for 1 year. Currently, he teaches ecotourism at the Lahore campus of the Institute for Tourism and Hotel Management (ITHEM) run by the Government of Punjab and works as a private consultant.

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