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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 22(2) : 188-190

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741\(2002\)022\[0188:EITPRP\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2002)022[0188:EITPRP]2.0.CO;2)

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Ecotourism in the Pamir Region: Problems and Perspectives

The central Asian state of Tajikistan, created in 1991 after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, borders Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Most of the country is mountainous, at altitudes higher than 1000 m. Badakhshan Autonomous Area, covering 63,700 km² or 44.6% of the country's territory, has a population of 206,000, 3.4% of the country's total population. The town of Khorog, the main administrative center of the region with more than 22,000 inhabitants, is situated 500 km east of Dushanbe, the country's capital, on the banks of the river Gunt. The famous Lake Sarez, now 75 km long, was created in 1911 when a landslide dammed up the Murgab River (see *Mountain Research and Development* 20[1], Feb 2000, pp 20–23). It is located in the heart of the Pamir Mountains, at an altitude of 3239 m. The word "Pamir" has several meanings, including "roof of the world," "leg of a bird," "foot of the sun," and "foot of death." The Pamir is one of the world's highest mountain areas, with people living at altitudes ranging from 2000 to 4200 m.

Results of a study and proposal

Under the direction of professor Ogonazar Aknazarov, the authors conducted a study between 1999 and 2001 entitled "Ecotourism in Pamir: Problems and Perspectives," financed by the Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Support Foundation. The research addressed a series of issues, including

- Sustainable development of the Pamir region to promote ecotourism, taking into account the preservation of nature as a habitat for animals and plants while

safeguarding the cultural, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value of the region.

- A study of Tajik legislation in the fields of tourism and environmental protection, to assess the potential for ecotourism development in the Pamir region.
- Preparation of recommendations and drafts of proposed legislation for regional authorities regarding regulation of tourism and nature protection in the region.
- Creation of a data bank on objects of interest to ecotourism in the Pamir region and proposals and recommendations for protection and use of these objects.
- Assessment of income-generating opportunities for the local population in ecotourism.

There is no legal basis or official strategy for promoting tourism development in Tajikistan. Tourism has not been declared important to economic development in Tajikistan, nor has it been mentioned in the "National Poverty Reduction Strategy in Tajikistan." However, the results of this research led us to conclude that ecotourism is feasible in Tajikistan, in light of the country's available infrastructure, geopolitical position, and numerous other objective and subjective factors. Ecotourism that conserves major natural resources would not require large investments, could stimulate development of local private business, benefit the local population, and promote sustainable development in the country. The authors are convinced that a program to develop ecotourism in the Pamir region could be an important component in a general strategic program for sustainable development

of the region and that implementation of such a program through a pilot project in Tajikistan could rapidly benefit local people living in very difficult socioeconomic conditions.

It is the first time that such a program for the development of tourism in Tajikistan as a whole and ecotourism in the Pamir in particular has been proposed. Mechanisms for implementing this program have been designated and specific executors determined. Measures to create new jobs and develop or improve local infrastructure have been identified. The draft documents developed by the authors have been presented to central and local government bodies for study, consideration, and initiation of concrete activities.

Moreover, for the first time, data were obtained on the attitude of the local Pamir population to the probable use of their living space for tourism. During field expeditions it was established that many cultural and historical monuments in the Pamir region are on the verge of complete destruction (Figure 1). If measures are not taken soon, some of them will be lost forever in a few years.

A video film and a photo album were produced to present places and objects of interest for ecotourism. Main tourist routes were proposed. Interviews were conducted among the local population in regions along potential routes. The results of interviews with 60 people (of different ages, educational levels, economic status, and residence), most of them inhabitants of mountain *kishlaks* (local villages), reveal that most people welcomed the idea of tourism in the Pamir region in general, as well as in their areas of permanent residence, and



FIGURE 1 Important historical landmarks such as the Yamchun fortress in the western Pamir, constructed in the 3rd century BC, are now more than ever in great need of protection because they are attractive destination points for ecotourism. (Photo courtesy of Pamir Eco-Center)

that they are ready to become involved in tourist services. However, hardly any of the interviewees thought about the potentially negative impacts of tourism on the environment, the existing way of life, local historical and cultural objects, and economic activities. Statements such as “the more tourists, the better” or “if tourism brings problems, we shall decide what to do after the problems arise” were typical.

Visits to local “sacred places” (graves, springs, stones, trees, etc) were perceived as the sole necessary restriction on visits by tourists. About 30% of those interviewed disapproved of visits to these places by outsiders in general and tourists in particular. An additional problem was the indifference of local people and authorities to historical monuments of the pre-Muslim period (Zoroastrianism times, reassembled Buddhist monuments, sites conserved by modern construction, and unprotected sites). There is a failure to understand that conserved or restored historical monuments can attract tourists.

Problems encountered and addressed

We encountered a series of problems during our research, including a lack of statistics on tourism for 1991–2001 and difficulties in accessing available information, a limited

number of qualified experts on tourism, an absence of mechanisms of implementation accepted at local and national levels and lack of clear and reliable sources of financing, a lack of clearly defined responsibilities for central and local authorities, and local difficulties with sociological research methods such as questionnaires.

We conclude that successful development of tourism in Tajikistan is constrained by a number of factors. These include the lack of a national strategy of tourism development and plans for its implementation, lack of international promotion of Tajikistan as an attractive tourist destination, a monopoly held by the local airline, the backwardness of existing infrastructure and services, lack of qualified staff, the existing system of taxation, the underdeveloped modern banking system in Tajikistan, general economic conditions in the Republic, and the absence of a middle class.

We have consequently identified the following priority requirements for development of a successful ecotourism industry in Tajikistan:

- Creation of favorable conditions of ownership for tourism enterprises to attract foreign investors.
 - Simplified visa formalities and freedom of movement for tourists inside the country.
 - Creation of training opportunities in the field of services and tourism.
 - Admission of foreign airlines.
 - Modernization of the state-owned airline and construction of airports that meet international standards.
 - Revival of national crafts, manufacturing, and souvenir production.
 - Completion of construction of the Kulyab–Zigar–Kalaikhumby year-round highway, the Murgab–Kulma Pass, and the Ushtur automobile tunnel on the Dushanbe–Istravshan (former Ura-Tyube)–Khujand road.
 - A functional communications system including telephones, electronic connections, and regular mail.
- If these requirements are met, development of tourism in Tajikistan could well bring positive economic change, given the attractiveness of its mountains as a destination.
- Our study also addressed the issue of environmental protection. Tajikistan has extensive botanical, geological, hydrogeological, ecological, and economic features that exist in complex combination. Changes in any of these features result in ecological imbalance, a problem that has become especially apparent in recent decades. One major detrimental ecological change in Tajikistan was the destruction of riparian forest ecosystems for cotton production, resulting in desertification and the disappearance of thousands of animals, birds, and reptiles. Cotton was cultivated on more than 200,000 ha



FIGURE 2 A unique ancient ceremonial burial ground, probably for people of high social and religious status, associated with ritual honoring of a local cattle breed, in Shoroliu River valley. Such archaeological sites urgently require conservation measures because of their fragility but should be accessible to ecotourists. However, interviews conducted among the local population revealed that such sacred sites should be closed to tourists. (Photo courtesy of Pamir Eco-Center)

in 1997, but the harvest was less than half that of 1995. Productivity decreased by a factor of 3 compared with 10 years ago.

Agriculture is the main source of income for the majority of the population. However, only 7% of the country's territory is arable land. Degradation of arable land is resulting in decreasing agricultural production. The government has transferred 75,000 ha of state lands to private use, in the hope of fostering more effective land management. Sustainable methods of land management are also being promoted. The high level of technology used in modern production results in the destruction of existing ecosystems. Increased production and consumption are leading to deteriorating ecological and living conditions. This increases the importance of special attention to protected areas.

In Tajikistan numerous areas and objects have traditionally been protected; for example, *mazars* (sacred burial places), separate trees, forest plots, springs, small unique reservoirs, meadows, unique mountain breeds, and others (Figure 2). Up to the 1950s, people adapted to life in mountain regions

and mastered mountain environments while respecting the environment. Now development in the mountains is going against the trend of recent centuries. Tens of thousands of people have been moved from the mountains to the plains. Today this land is heavily damaged by erosion, growing deposits of pesticides, and industrial pollution.

In Tajikistan, protected areas are being created for biodiversity conservation, maintenance of ecological balance, scientific research on natural processes and anthropogenic factors of change, and environmental education. Protected areas include national parks, forest reserves, and recreational zones to protect rare endemic species, plant and animal gene pools, and special ecosystems. Among specially protected natural objects are lakes, reservoirs, relict paleontological and paleobotanical objects, and geological and geomorphological formations.

The legal basis of existing protected areas in Tajikistan is found in legislation on land, water, and forests, as well as other normative and legal acts. In 2001, protected

areas covered 1,678,400 ha of Tajik territory, including parks and sports, hunting, and fishing reserves. Protected areas in the Republic have experienced some failures. There is a lack of land tenure projects and appropriate protection because reserves are exposed to productive use. Second, not all landscapes and unique natural objects that deserve protection are inventoried. Finally, effective financing mechanisms for nature protection are lacking.

The problems of tourism development in Tajikistan and ecotourism in the Pamir require cooperation and coordination between all partners and structures involved. Under current economic conditions, the government of Tajikistan, the local public, and research and commercial organizations are not independently capable of making decisions about problems, for many objective and subjective reasons. Scientific, organizational, and financial support must come from the world community if there is to be any real chance of starting a tourism industry in Tajikistan and thus initiating a new kind of sustainable economic activity that could make a serious difference in dealing with the country's economic problems.

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