

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

At times, ecotourism seems like the bright child whose report card always reads, “Not working up to his or her potential.”

If we start our exploration with the International Ecotourism Society’s definition that ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people,” the potential is immediately obvious. That magic blend of environmental responsibility and local socioeconomic benefit could be the answer to so many problems in marginalized and developed mountain areas: the answer to rural depopulation and poverty, environmental degradation, and tourist ennui. Ecotourism could create meaningful employment, encourage both locals and travelers to value their environment, and engage travelers in a meaningful experience of the nature and culture of their mountain destinations.

Alas, after almost 2 decades of ecotourism initiatives, this ideal potential remains elusive. As Sanjay Nepal points out in his article, “it is difficult to find successful examples of ecotourism. However, in spite of all the controversies, there is general agreement that ecotourism, if planned properly, can change the fortunes of people and places.” In the development articles in this issue, no single example achieves the ideal. The degrees of success vary widely, but the mountain projects described from Sichuan, Australia, Greece, and Costa Rica all show the positive effects of the ecotourism concept. Even Agha Iqar Haroon’s frank discussion of the obstacles to true ecotourism in Pakistan illustrates the importance of the concept: if we were not thinking in terms of ecotourism, would we hold tourism, in general, up against such high standards?

In the end, as several authors make it clear, the success or failure of ecotourism will be determined by individuals. Each of these individuals will have to find what Bob Sandford calls “the experience of success in small things” before the large-scale success of the ecotourism movement is seen. As author Fang Yping says so eloquently: “Governments can pass laws. Businesses can develop clean technology. But first of all people have to care.”

The research articles in this issue address more broadly the ecological impacts of human interaction with the natural environment. Victoria Cole and John Sinclair, Thomas Heberlein et al, and Nakul Chettri et al are all concerned with the impacts of tourism. Changing socioeconomic patterns in recent decades have been responsible for the growing impact of tourism on fragile mountain environments, sometimes at the expense of subsistence agriculture, especially in developing countries. In the light of this trend—which is being addressed during the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE2002), which coincides with the International Year of Mountains (IYM2002)—new research approaches, such as the systems approach presented by Florian Hug and Peter Baccini, are needed to explore the dimensions of sustainability. But careful specialized research focusing on the physical features of mountain landscapes—as illustrated by Robert Hofstede et al and Lydia Espizua—is also important for enhancing the understanding of sustainable management of mountain resources.

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