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## AN ASSESSMENT ON THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM IN ROYAL CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK (RCNP), NEPAL

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**Abstract:** There are many kinds of environmental effects of tourism such as those related to pollution, to the distortions of local identities and to the preservation or destruction of local culture and history. To manage ecotourism successfully an understanding of environmental management is essential to all involved in tourism activities. The studies aimed to provide insights into the demand and the relative importance of the ecotourism by examining the characteristics and motivations of local and international tourists participating in ecotourism ventures at Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP), Nepal. Another prerequisite of ecotourism is to create schemes, which allow the local communities to obtain fair share and direct benefit from ecotourism and to bring incentives from biodiversity conservation. A tourism that combines basic needs of the local community and ensures environmental conservation issues can assure sustainable ecotourism.

**Key words:** Ecotourism, biodiversity, conservation, Chitwan National Park, Nepal

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### Introduction

The ecotourism concept was adopted comparatively recently and the need is subjected to various interpretations. Kutay (1989) suggests that 'ecotourism is nature tourism which directly or indirectly promotes conservation and supports sustainable economic development'. However, Boo (1992) also sees it as 'nature travel that advances conservation and sustainable development efforts'. While Canadian Environmental Advisory Council perceives ecotourism as an 'enlightening nature travel experience that contributes to conservation of the ecosystem respecting the integrity of host communities' (Scace *et al.*, 1992). Ecotourism is widely perceived as a subject of alternative tourism, which places primary emphasis on the natural environment as the main motivation for travel (Cater, 1994). According to Godwin (1996), 'ecotourism is low impact nature tourism which contributes to the maintenance of species and habitats either directly through a contribution to conservation and/or indirectly by providing revenue to the local community sufficient for local people to value and therefore protect, their wildlife heritage area as a source of income'. Ecotourism Association of Australia (Anon, 1999) defines 'Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation'. On the occasion of international year of ecotourism 2002, World Tourism Organization (WTO) and other collaborating parties agreed that the ecotourism concept reflect all forms of tourism in which the tourists' main motivation is the observation and appreciation of nature, that contribute to the conservation of, and that generate minimal impact upon the natural environmental and the cultural heritage.

The Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP) covers 932 sq. km. On flat lowland (Terai) region of the southern Nepal (Fig. 1). It got the present size in 1977 including southeastern section of Nawalparasi district across the Narayani River in the west and merging with Parsa wildlife reserve in east. RCNP has long been the Nepal's treasure of natural wonders. It is very popular for its natural and cultural resources as well as the diverse form

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of biodiversity. Approximately 70% vegetation of the park is Sal forest. The remaining vegetation types include grassland (20%), riverine forest (7%), and sal with chirpine (3%). Chitwan was declared a national park in 1973, following approval by the late King Mahendra in December 1970. The habitat had been well protected as a royal hunting reserve from 1846 to 1951 during the Rana regime. An area south of the Rapti River was first proposed as a rhinoceros sanctuary in 1958 demarcated in 1963 (Whelan, 1991) and later incorporated into the national park. Chitwan was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1984.

The perspective of this research is to reconcile the goals of sustainable tourism and environmental protection, to build up equitable partnership with local communities and to develop fair collaboration among the government organizations, tourism and local people within the tourism industry.

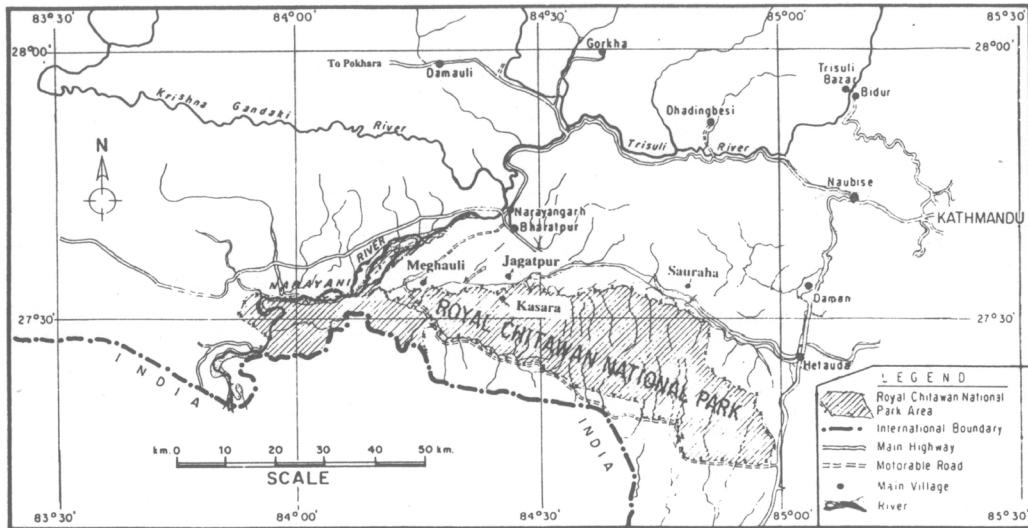


Fig. 1. Location of the study area.

### Materials and Methods

A twelve item questionnaire for international tourist and ten item questionnaire for locals were developed. The questionnaire primarily consists of the tourists' view on the existing condition of RCNP and their suggestions for the implementation and practicing of ecotourism. The local people were also asked about the existing condition of RCNP and their attitude towards the presence of tourists. Forty foreign tourists from different countries and forty local people of different age and professional group were interviewed. The trend of tourist flow, their purpose of visit and profession were surveyed in December 2002 by interviewing forty tourists and forty local people residing in the periphery of RCNP.

Additional secondary data were collected from Nepal Tourism Board, Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, Central Statistical Bureau of Nepal, and Hotel Association of Sauraha for rewarding prospects of ecotourism.

### Results

**Prospects related to tourism at RCNP:** Natural history and a clean environment were rated the highest among factors that attracted tourist at RCNP. It provides a full adventure to tourists who really enjoy wilderness.

The maximum tourists visited the RCNP belonged to professional cluster and their visit was for recreational purpose (Fig. 2 and 3). Students' expedition belonged to 30%, while their purpose of visit for education was 12.5%. Visitors like businessman' covered 20%.

The survey also revealed that the tourism embedded in the outlook of local people. About 50% of the people wanted to be involved in tourism related jobs, 25% had keen interest in business and 15% wanted to get involved in official works (Fig. 4 and 5). Its pity to mention that only 10% of the people had interest in

agriculture, though more than 50% of the people are presently engaged in agriculture and 30% are in business, whereas tourism covers only 15%. The present occupation and the future field of interest show a very contrast figures. The farmers' attitudes towards the tourism showed a very hard influence on the tourism in the locality. Association measurement data of foreign tourist, SAARC tourists and Nepalese tourists in RCNP for the year 2001 (January- December) is given in Table 1, 2 and 3.

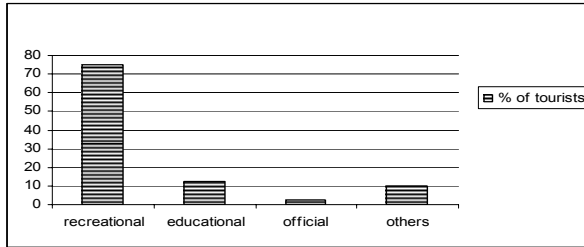


Fig. 2. The purpose of visit by foreign tourists.

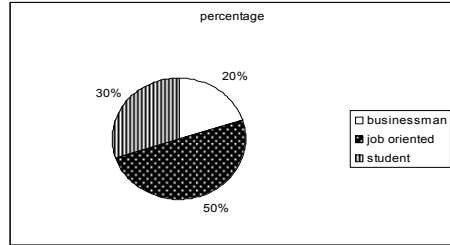


Fig. 3. Tourists with their professional background.

**Accommodation:** Though the numbers of hotels (61) have increased around the RCNP but still the facilities were not enough to lengthen the tourists' stay. There is an urgent need to arrange some attracting facilities like organizing the local cultural show to entertain the guests. About 15% tourists showed their dissatisfaction on accommodation and amenities (Table 4).

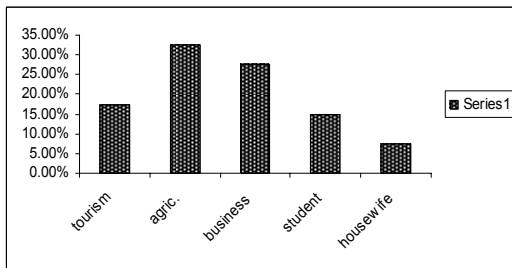


Fig. 4. The resident people with their profession.

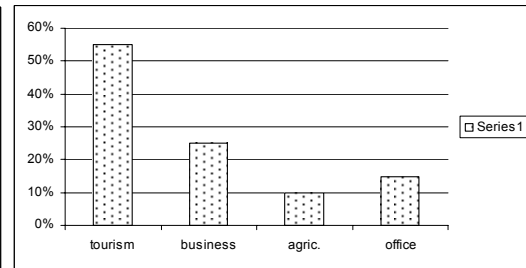


Fig. 5. Views of local people over future field of interest.

Table 1. Correlation between foreign tourist and SAARC tourist.

Type of tourists	Statistic	Foreign tourist	SAARC tourist
Foreign tourist	Pearson Correlation (r)	1	0.326
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	12	12
SAARC tourist	Pearson Correlation	0.326	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	12	12

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Correlation between foreign tourist and Nepalese tourist.

Type of tourists	Statistic	Foreign tourist	SAARC tourist
Foreign tourist	Pearson correlation (r)	1	0.864
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	12	12
SAARC tourist	Pearson correlation (r)	0.864	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	12	12

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Correlation between SAARC tourist and Nepalese tourist.

Type of tourists	Statistic	Foreign tourist	SAARC tourist
Foreign tourist	Pearson correlation (r)	1	0.213
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	12	12
SAARC tourist	Pearson correlation (r)	0.213	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	12	12

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1, 2 and 3 show that the Pearson correlation for Nepalese tourists with SAARC tourists is 0.213, which marks the dependency of Nepalese tourists to SAARC tourist, is very low. While the Pearson correlation of Nepalese tourists with foreign tourists is 0.864 which indicate the flow of Nepalese tourists is dependent to the flow of foreign tourists. But the correlation between foreign tourists and the SAARC tourists also does not show big mark.

Figure 6 shows that highest growth of tourist arrival took place in 1998 comparing to previous year and the later years. But the highest number of tourist arrived in Nepal in 1999, resulting less growth rate than previous year 1998. Year 2000 seems to be very pathetic in tourism of Nepal. Number of tourist decreased by 5.7% compared to the previous years especially due to political unrest.

**Problems related to tourism development at RCNP**

**Infrastructure:** The system of transportation and other physical infrastructure are major parameters for the development of an area. The existing road network in the study area was not up to the mark, which are being eroded and inundated by the passing river in the monsoon. The lack of telecommunication facilities was another major problem in the study area (Table 4).

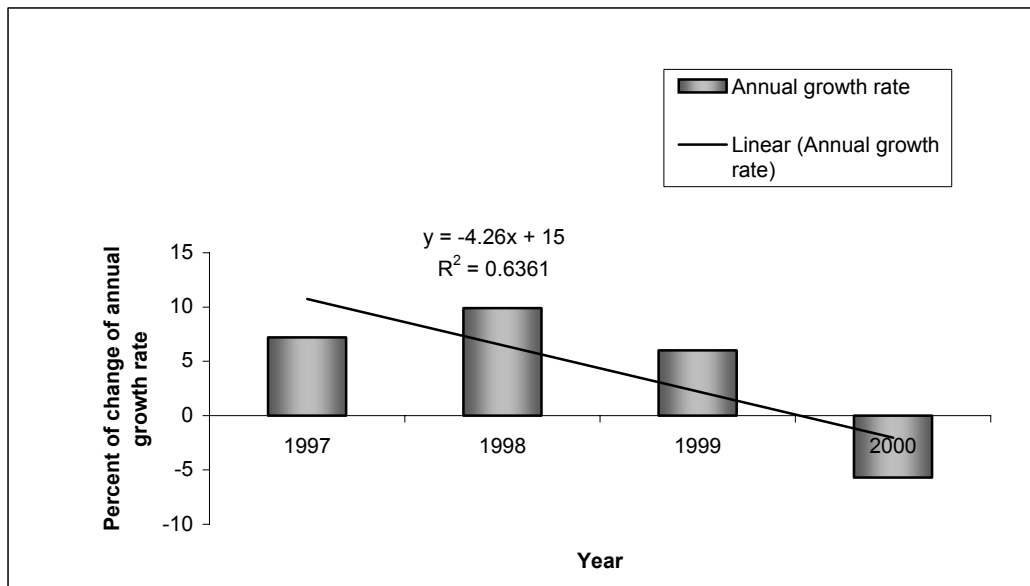


Fig. 6. Percentage of the growth rate of tourist arrival during 1997-2000.

Table 4. Overall views of the tourists on the existing problems of RCNP area.

Problems category	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Transportation/communication	16	40
Accommodation	6	15
Rubbish/damage to nature	3	7.5
Political instability	11	27.5
Local people behavior	4	10
Total	40	100

**Onsite problems:** Onsite problems refer to the existing condition of the local area adjacent to the RCNP. The field survey revealed that the presence of garbage, damage to the nature, lack of safari, mismanagement of travel routes, less educated guides, sometimes the brokers create onsite problems. Foreign tourists are not satisfied with the increased fees of entrance and the safari. Local peoples’ behaviors also count for the tourists. During the survey, most of the tourists were found upset about the way that the local people think them as dollar wallet.

**Environmental impacts:** The emergence of ecotourism as an important revenue generator, in at least certain flagship parks, has undoubtedly accelerated government’s attempt to enhance protected area systems,

although ecotourism itself has also been identified as a contributor to environmental stress in certain highly localized areas where visitation has not been adequately managed.

In the case of RCNP, the environmental impact of tourism is clear. The degradation of the habitat pattern of area, the construction of the concrete houses, and other tall and big structures have contributed against the dignity of nature. According to the local people, the erosion of the land caused by Rapti river, mismanagement of house planning, rapid construction of the concrete structure, lack of garbage management are the cause of degrading the natural beauty around the RCNP. It is clear from Table 4 that the degradation of nature is not caused by the tourists but by the unwise practice of tourism.

Ecotourism have especially high potential environmental impacts owing to their nature as they are typically located in pristine or fragile ecosystem (Toepfer, 2001). RCNP has a high degree of biodiversity thus also tend to be extremely vulnerable to environmental damage. The projected environmental impact in the RCNP area could be overcrowding, erosion, deforestation due to increased access and construction of facilities, loss of biodiversity and habitat, increased competition for scarce resource and increased pollution.

**Socio-cultural impacts:** The tourism has been alleged to cause erosion of traditional values and culture. Dixit (1989) indicated that acculturation or aping the values of another society is unavoidable result of tourism. Sherpa (1987) indicated that the psychological impact of tourism on local cultures has created a situation in which feelings of cultural pride and self-respect are giving way to sense of insecurity and inferiority. Puntteney (1990) reported that tourists have influenced dress pattern, food habit, family structure, religion, community language, and daily pattern of life. According to the present survey, the social impact of tourism seems to have improved. However the social structure of the area was improved than before. Now the people have positive attitude towards the presence of tourists in the park and the surrounding area. International Tourism in the RCNP area has been playing a vital role in modernization and thus it has influenced the social institutions. The social separation has been increased because some group has gained in status and others have lost ground. But the prostitution and crime rate in the area is negligible.

Table 5. The reaction of the local people towards the tourists.

Concepts towards the tourists	Percentage of people interviewed
Tourists are similar to us	17.5
Tourists are different than us	25
Neither same nor different	57.5

**Economic impacts:** For all level of government as well as local communities, potential economic benefits such as jobs and income usually constitute a more compelling incentive to pursue ecotourism than the environmental consideration. Tourism has proved as a vital factor in increasing economic condition of the local people. Likely, RCNP and its periphery has become the type of hot spot to raise the economy involving tourism. The people interviewed in the study area showed their satisfaction over the economic contribution of ecotourism. They are not only getting employment opportunities but the field of business has spread as well.

## Discussion

The impact of ecotourism in the RCNP is of quite significant and obvious. Ecotourism not only benefits the local ecology and environment but also the local people economically and socially. The survey on the local people has revealed that ecotourism has great effect on their life as land value has increased; it also provides new income options and other opportunities for economic development. It is claimed that well planned and managed ecotourism can serve as an ecologically, economically, and culturally viable alternative to the utilization of natural resources by non-sustainable, consumptive methods (Whelan, 1991). For example, it can locally and regionally provide new employment opportunities and markets for locally produced goods and services. This, in turn, provides an incentive for the local communities and the governments to preserve natural resources. Moreover, it may provide a sense of pride among communities in their natural as well as cultural resources. Unfortunately, the hypothetical benefits of nature-oriented tourism have not been fully realized in many developing countries. In many instances, it has been noticed that the local people do not receive equitable share of income generated by the tourism (Bellamy, 1989; Berle, 1990). Resident people and tourist interaction also brings about changes in local culture (Anderson, 1994). Poorly planned tourism also leads to local conflict (Budowski, 1976). Butler (1991) reflected that there is no example of tourist use that is completely without negative impact. Thus, ecotourism cannot be considered as a panacea and one has

to be careful while promoting it. The development opportunities of ecotourism at RCNP might have highlights over the following points- There should be improvement in infrastructure like roads, trails, communication facilities. Concrete buildings around RCNP decreases the beauties of area. So hotel building should be constructed with the local materials to have a good matching with the surrounding, providing the tourists naturalist, and protect the aesthetic and cultural values of the place. For this eco-lodges could be the best option for the accommodation infrastructure. Eco-label or eco-tag should be provided to the hotels that are constructed within the ecological criteria considering the aesthetic value of the area. Local cultural programs should regularly be organized in the area to let the visitors know about indigenous culture. RCNP authority and government should allow some portion of the revenue generated from RCNP for the welfare of local people and area. Government should give priority to the ecotourism as well as the agriculture so that the local people may take the chance to get economic benefits along with their traditional occupation.

### Conclusion

Ecotourism is the best concept in the field of tourism from ecological and environmental point of view. RCNP, a best studied protected area in the subcontinent really deserves 'ecotourism' to get the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources as well as the conservation of biodiversity. The Government should take the policy and proper initiative in association with locals to practice ecotourism. Local people must understand that the ecotourism is by them and for them in the name of nature. Needless to say ecotourism also needs the policy and management to imply and to make the sustainable use of resources, otherwise 'ecotourism' will not take time to be 'eco-terrorism'. Local people bear great importance in ecotourism not less than Government because the local people are the ones who will be benefited first environmentally, socially and economically. Ecotourism can be the bridge between biodiversity conservation and development in the study area. One thing must be noted that the success of ecotourism depends on local community involvement and control of small-scale operation that can be locally managed. Ecotourism should make sure that the local people are economically benefited through tourism apart from the agriculture. The tourist inflow has been increased to the RCNP, which is obviously a better chance to highlight and promote the RCNP as an ecotourism park. Better management of infrastructure facilities especially, transportation, communication and accommodation must be developed to make the RCNP as an Eco-park of international standard.

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