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Protecting ecology, culture and identity in the Nepal's Himalayas

Hari Krishna Uprety

Abstract

Nepal is home to diverse ethnic communitieswith varied cultures, costumes and practices. Langtang National Park in Nepal is protecting trans-boundary flora, fauna and cultural identity of the region. Over 800 households are in five buffer zones. *Lhosar* is an important annual festival. Having prayer flags on a wooden pole is a symbol of cultural pride. On the occasion of *Lhosar*, prayer flags are changed aspiring for a better year. With due respect to the local culture, the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP), the Buffer Zone Management Committee (BZMC) and the District Development Committee (DDC-local government) joined hands for minimising the environmental impact from tourism and preserving the cultural identity.

Keywords: conservation poles, environment, District Development Committee, Langtang, tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme

1 Introduction

The TRPAP was a joint initiative of the Government of Nepal, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Department for International Development (DFID), and the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV-Nepal). The government's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA) was executing at the central level, whereas at district level TRPAP worked with District Development Committees (DDCs) under the Ministry of Local Development (MLD). At the national level, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB – National Tourist Organisation a mosaic of public private partnership under MoCTCA) and Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) under the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MFSC) were the implementing partners.

Three National Parks are in and around TRPAP sites: Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) – a World Heritage Site since 1979, Langtang National Park (LNP) and Shey-Phoksundo National Park (SPNP). Similarly, National Parks work with community organisations (COs) at grass-root level. However, in National Parks TRPAP worked closely with Buffer Zone (BZ) institutions (table1).

All micro, meso and macro level government institutions and its line agencies, policy makers and planners, academic institutions, tourism industries and private sector tourism entrepreneurs, guides, porters and farmers benefited from the programme.

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Table 1: District-wise summary of the Community Organisations (CO) recognised by the Programme.

District	No. of CO/BZUG	Total members		
		female	male	total
Chitwan	159	1396	1591	2987
Dolpa	80	1393	337	1730
Rasuwa	89	784	1117	1901
Rupandehi	84	828	825	1653
Solu	240	2768	2471	5239
SNP	28	34	84	118
Taplejung	101	875	1595	2470
Total	**781**	**8078**	**8020**	**16098**

Source: Project Completion Report 2000, Programme Management Unit, TRPAP.

2 Objectives

Three objectives addressed the goal of poverty alleviation.

- Demonstrate Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) Models for policy feedbacks;
- Develop institutional mechanisms for the sustenance of tourism development in Nepal; and
- Support the government to review and formulate policies and strategies and integrate them with wider conservation objectives.

The Programme developed strong backward and forward linkages at different levels: (i) Micro-level with community based organisations (COs), BZ institutions and local government (ii) Meso-level with DDCs and National Parks, and (iii) Macro-level with Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) and MoCTCA.

3 Study region

Nepal is a landlocked country sandwiched between two giant nations of Asia, i.e. China in the north and India in the south. There were six pilot districts chosen (cf. figure 1) based on the extent of existing tourism development or its potential, and the extent to which significant elements of poverty and marginalised social groups were in need of support (Project Completion Report 2007). The programme was designed to use tourism to help to address disadvantaged groups by focusing on human resource issues, sustainable tourism planning and integration with tourism distribution channels and existing local government support mechanisms with wider conservation objectives. The programme holds a very strong social agenda and aimed at getting multiple stakeholders (such as community interests, local government and the national tourist organisation) to work together towards agreed common goals.

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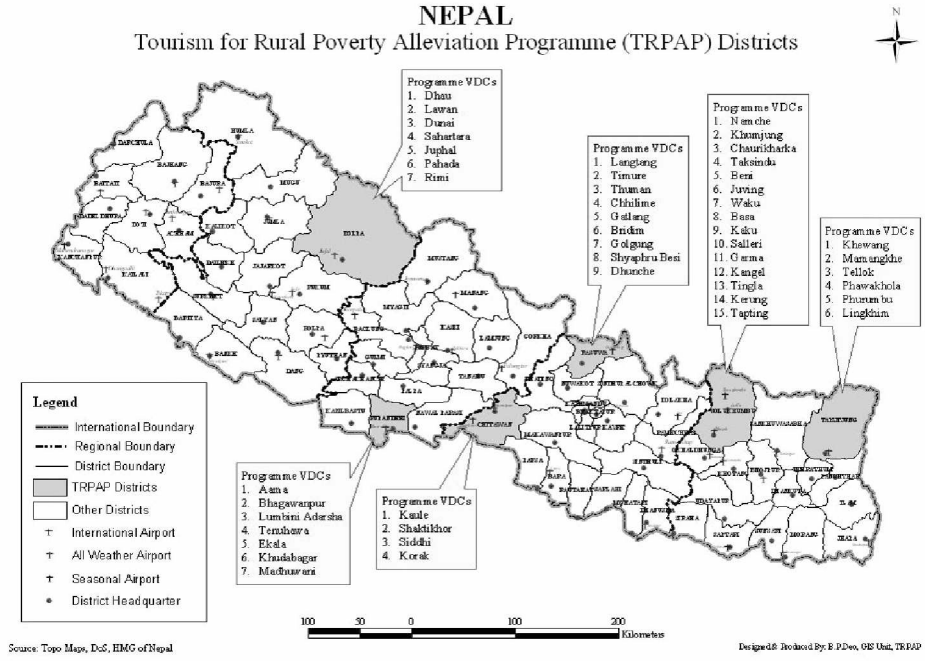

Figure 1: Overview map of Nepal.

4 Methodology

TRPAP used bottom-up planning and participatory approach during its whole process. It focused on four thematic areas viz: Pro-poor, Pro-rural community, Pro-women and Pro-environment.

4.1 Pro-poor, Pro-women and Pro-rural community (in brief)

TRPAP put poor, backward, women and community in its mainstream. Social mobilisation always remained an integral part. Every household was the member of community organisation and they were trained, empowered, facilitated and mobilised to define their priority needs, identify their objectives and prepare a sustainable process to achieve the results.

Poorest of the poor stratum of the community were empowered through social mobilisation, capacity building and skills development. Local people themselves planned, implemented and monitored the activities through public auditing. TRPAP staffs always encouraged them to come into the frontline by giving high priority while taking any decision during planning and implementation of the activities.

TRPAP worked in three modalities: recognising COs already formed by other development organisations; reactivating inactive COs; and forming new COs (Dhakal

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2007). Recognising COs was possibly in protected areas where buffer zone groups had been working as a legal entity for long time.

Over the periods, TRPAP formed or re-formed 781 COs with 16,098 members (table 1). Women account for 50.18% of the members. Special Targeted Groups (STGs) are those unable to feed their family whole year from their own agricultural resources.

4.2 Pro-environment

Environmental conservation serves tourism development. Many tourism products in Nepal are based on natural and cultural resources. Protected Areas (PAs) are the core attractions of tourists due to beautiful landscapes, flagship species of flora and fauna and unique, indigenous and varied cultural practices within a small country of 147,181 km^2. Tourism can contribute positively to the care and maintenance of the environment but can also threaten it if not carefully managed (Dhakal 2007). Mitigation measures need to be prepared in advance to preserve a green and healthy environment. A conservation approach that safeguards the natural environment not only benefits the tourism industry, but to some extent also the entire country and global community.

One of TRPAP's most notable contributions in tourism and environment conservation was the support of the DNPWC to produce a revised Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone Management Plan for 2007–2012. Unlike the 1981 Management Plan focusing solely on biodiversity conservation, this Plan has integrated conservation and tourism management and recognised the role of local communities in conservation. Similarly, TRPAP prepared participatory district tourism plans for its six districts. All district plans have addressed conservation issues of concerned districts and associated National Parks, e.g. Langtang.

To give visitors more choices, to reduce visitors pressure on limited destinations, to diversify the tourism products and to enhance the livelihood of rural communities by the means of rural tourism, TRPAP's programmes were implemented in ruraland remote but potential tourism areas. All districts enclaves the Alpine environment except the two districts of low land Terai-Chitwan and Rupandehi. To address possible depletion of local environmental resources due to tourism, TRPAP undertook a holistic approach in programme intervention and implemented integrated activities. However, activities were broadly on two categories- software and hardware. Categorically they were:

1. Tourism and Environment Awareness Programme (TEAP)
2. Waste Management
3. Renewable/Alternative Energy Technology

TRPAP introduced TEAP as a tool of entering villages. Community organisations (COs) were given two days TEAP while functional groups (FGs-group of entrepreneurs) and pupils were given a one day training to inform them about the relation between tourism and environment. Similarly, three days training was conducted for local people to make them fully aware of various waste management aspects. TEAP

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for COs, FGs, Eco-clubs, and student in non Eco-club areas were participating in the "software programme". Guidelines, posters on conservation codes of conduct, pictorials, training manuals and booklets were developed and disseminated as a supplement of TEAP. Similarly, facilities for sanitation and waste management, forest conservation either through replacement of existing practices viz replacing wooden poles by iron poles in National Parks and Buffer Zones and energy promotion and energy saving schemes were included under the hardware part. Implementation TEAP immediately after forming or recognising existing COs was productive in raising awareness in the community. TEAP also created an enabling environment for people to better relate and govern the tourism and environmental resources.

Waste management was addressed through toilet construction for better hygiene, incinerator for burnable waste, rubbish pits/bins for temporary collection of waste, adequately placed compost bins for decomposable wastes and dumping sites for non-biodegradable and disposable wastes.

Promotion and propagation of Improved Cooking Stoves, construction of toilet connected biogas plants (both low and high altitude model), installation of micro-hydro and peltric sets in feasible areas, initiation of solar home systems, solar dryer and solar water heaters (SWH) with the initiatives and guardianships of local people in potential areas were effective to relief the pressure on the already scarce local environmental resources particularly the forest resources. These efforts were substantially supporting the local environmental resources and bio-diversity conservation in addition to creating employment at local level being the ultimate goal of government. Improved Cooking Stoves not only supported to save fuel wood but also substantially helped to reduce the indoor air-pollution and smoke related diseases of rural women who are more involved in kitchen environment. Likewise, plantation and replacing of wooden poles by iron poles in massive scale in buffer zones were found helpful to replenish the depleting forest resources.

In addition to the conservation poles in the Alpine environment for conserving depleting forests in harsh climate, TRPAP implemented integrated energy schemes based on the feasibility of the options available. Figure 2 illustrates alternative energy programmes implemented by TRPAP during its tenure.

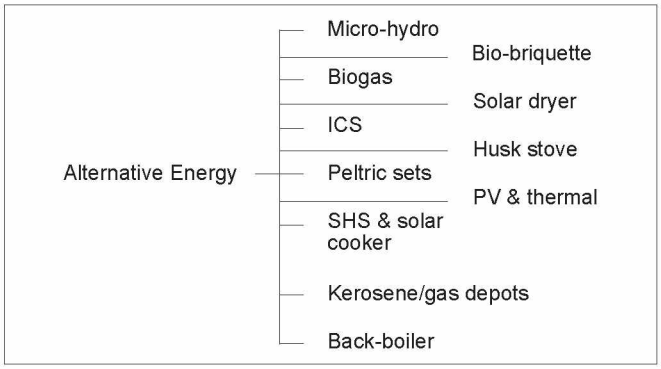

Figure 2: Alternative energy schemes.

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Table 2: Institutional systems adopted in Rasuwa.

SN	Level	Recognised Institutions in Buffer Zones	Nb.	Remarks
1	Settlement	Community Organisations	44	Outside National Park
2	Settlement	Buffer Zone Users Group	45	Inside National Park
3	Village Development Committee (VDC)	Sustainable Tourism Development Committee (STDC)	4	Outside National Park
4	VDC	Buffer Zone Users Committee	5	Inside national Park
6	DDC	Sustainable Tourism Development Section (STDS)	1	Newly formed section in DDC for tourism
7	DDC	District Tourism Coordination Committee (DTCC)	1	Public-Private Tourism Advisory Committee

Source: Project Completion Report 2007, DDC/TRAP-Rasuwa

Almost all the measures taken have started to show positive results favouring environmental conservation. It has proven that the programme following a bottom-up approach considering beneficiaries' stewardship and wider participation of local stakeholders is probable to lead to success.

5 Results and discussion

Rasuwa district was one of the successful models of TRPAP out of its six districts where TRPAP developed a supplementary product branded as Tamang Heritage Trail (THT). The new product benefited nine Village Development Committees (VDCs) out of 18 VDCs of Rasuwa. There are five Buffer Zone (BZ) VDCs of Langtang National Park (LNP) under THT viz. Dhunche, Syafru, Langtang, Briddim and Timure. Buffer Zone VDCs are bordered by Bhotekoshi River and, four VDCs are in outside BZ. Goljung, Gatlang Chilime and Thuman VDCs are outside the BZ. Table 2 illustrates recognised institutions in the Buffer zones.

TRPAP actively encouraged the participation of stakeholders and observed national events such as the World Environment Day (June 5), World Tourism Day (27 September), and HIV/AIDS day (December 1) and World Women Day (March 8) in successive years. During these events TRPAP briefed about its activities on how tourism is interlinked with environment, women issues and HIV/AIDS. These events raised the level of awareness and were successful in disseminating information on rural tourism and environmental conservation in Nepal. TEAP conducted over the period of TRPAP in Rasuwa is given below.

TRPAP published different guidelines, posters and manuals on environmental themes. Two separate manuals, the Waste Management Training Manuals and the Waste Management Guidelines (WMG), were produced to facilitate districts and other stakeholders for pollution free tourism development. The Solar Dryer Manual will guide beneficiaries in operating distributed solar dryers to yield more income from their surplus vegetables during season and in using it in off seasons. The

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Table 3: TEAP Conducted in Rasuwa during TRPAP Tenure.

SN	Target benefecieries	Held Activities	No. of participants		
			Women	Men	Total
1	COs/BZUGs	106	1266	1346	2612
2	Pupils	24	717	908	1625
	Total	130	1983	2254	4237

Source: Project Completion Report 2007, DDC/TRPAP-Rasuwa.

Ecotourism and Biodiversity Training Manual became a practical tool for human resources development at National Parks. Further, "Be a Responsible Tourist" conservation codes of conduct, biodiversity conservation poster, poster covering social dimensions had risen the awareness level of local people.

6 Conclusion

With the emerging concept of partnership and synergies for sustainable development, TRPAP developed partnership relation with those government and non-government institutions who were promoting renewable energy technologies and joined its hand for renewable energy propagation at TRPAP sites.

In Rasuwa district inhabited by mainly of Buddhist communities, *Lhosar* is an annual festival. In this culture, having a prayer flag on a wooden pole is mandatory for each household and is a symbol of cultural pride. Prayer flags are changed during every *Lhosar* as a belief to usher in good luck. Therefore every year, locals used to cut trees to change the wooden poles. In the process of cultural preservation, locals had forgotten the aspect of environmental conservation and importance of forest cover. This had arisen mainly due to lack of adequate awareness and environmental education. To solve this problem permanently, TRPAP, local community and Buffer Zone Management Committee (BZMC) of Langtang National Park jointly stepped in. Today, every house in BZ VDCs uses an iron pole instead of a wooden one, hence lessening the impact on environment while preserving culture and tradition. In this way, local people are saving a high number of pine trees (at least 825 each year) thereby ultimately adding significant forest cover. If we could continue and replicate this initiative in other Alpine areas, it would definitely help to generate more forest cover, further carbon sequestration, culture, economy and the environment.

Conservation poles were distributed in all BZ VDCs. For this innovative conservation effort a total of NRs 1,010,000 (US$ 15,538) was invested.

This effort brought uniformity in cultural identity, at least 825 man-days has been saved each year from economic point of view. It simply saves NRs 82,500 (US$ 1,270) in monetary terms. The firm size of cutting tree was of Pine with 15 m height and 40 cm girth or above. If the management and protection cost is not considered, the replacement of 825 wooden poles every year saves about 6187.5 cft wood (7.5 cft/pole) and thus saves NRs 247,500 [(NRs 40/cft) = US$ 3,808] per annum.

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Table 4: Conservation measures in Rasuwa District.

SN	Infrastructure	No	Place
1	Conservation (Iron) Poles	825	BZ VDCs- Timure, Briddim, Syafru, Langtang and Dhunche
2	Improved Cooking Stoves (ICS)	89	Briddim, Thuman and Gatlang
3	Micro-hydro plant (15 KW)	1	Langtang –most visited area
4	Community solar hot water	5	Gatlang, Chilime, Thuman and Briddim
5	Solar Home System	55	Chilime, Syafru, Gatlang
6	Toilet attached biogas plant (high altitude model)	32	Syafru, Goljung, Chilime, Gatlang and Haku

Source: Project Completion Report 2007, DDC/TRPAP-Rasuwa.

The iron poles have a positive impact on the environment. Each year, 825 pine trees are saved giving good seeds. The intact habitat provides space for animals. The destruction of saplings from cutting down parent trees has been reduced, which further supports good forest health and maintains corridor functions.

In Rasuwa, TRPAP explored possibilities of partnership and joined hands with the National Park, its BZMC and local communities for implementing environmental conservation measures. Table 4 provides an example for the conservation of natural resources. Conservation poles and other energy schemes were implemented under the partnership arrangement.

Langtang National Parks harbours endemic Langtang Laryx, 10 species of rhododendron, and 15 forest types including orchid. 3000 flowering plants are an additional attraction of the park. Similarly, it inhabits Red panda, Musk deer, snow leopard in the upper reaches, 46 species of mammals including 250 species of avi-fauna.

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