

CGG30 Unit 4: Tourism and the Environment

Activity 6: Tourist Impacts on the Natural Environment in Asia and Africa

Overview

This activity will provide you with the opportunity to read about how ecotourism, if not practiced properly, can have damaging impacts to the natural environment. You will read two case studies, about safari tourism in Africa, and trekking in Asia, to illustrate the detrimental impacts that tourism can have.

Lesson



As you already know, **Ecotourism** is participatory and has its main focus as conservation, interpretation and understanding of the area visited, while making an economic contribution to the local community. Ecotourism has come to be a force in sustaining natural resources and promoting sustainable development.

While there is no specific data on the size and growth of ecotourism, statistics for ecotourism destinations around the world point to a growing trend. Since 1989, Nepal has seen an annual 18% growth in trekkers to the Annapurna sanctuary, while in South Africa, the number of visitors to game reserves has grown by an annual rate of 106% between 1986 and 1998. Destinations like Belize, Costa Rica, the Galapagos Islands, Kenya, Peru, Brazil and even Australia report that significant proportions of tourists visit natural areas at an increasing pace.

Africa: Kenya

Unfortunately, if tourists are not traveling with a conscience, a fair bit of environmental damage can occur. An example of this type of damage has been seen in **Kenya**. In the 70's and early 80's, Kenya developed its safari industry with great success. People began to flock to Kenya after the success of the movie entitled, "Out of Africa." The safari industry expanded and developed many types of safaris to cater to all the different types of tourists. The most popular types are listed below.

- Photo Safaris: Serious photographers are guided by professional wildlife photographers.
- Camping Safaris: Clients camp in tents, cook over campfires, range of accommodations and facilities.
- Walking Safaris: Best way to get close to nature, travel on foot, usually limited.
- Balloon Safaris: Ride over the savannah in a hot air balloon (expensive),
- Boat/Canoe/Kayak Safaris: travel on lakes and rivers, often get close to wildlife.
- Overland Safaris: Travel on land for weeks/months; help with chores, size ranges from 8-30.
- Hunting Safaris: 1-14 days, usually offered on private game ranches or government hunting reserves. Guide, vehicles, and portable camps are used (Birchall and Earle).

Kenya has protected about 10% of its land for national parks and reserves. The tourist industry is Kenya's second largest industry after agriculture and accounts for 12% of their economy (Akama and

Keiti). Until the mid 90's Kenya was viewed as an "island" in a sea of chaos. Other countries had suffered many cultural clashes and were also perceived by the world as politically unstable.

However, Kenya offered stability and had few, if any major tribal wars. However, since the mid 90's, tourism in Kenya has started to decline for a number of reasons such as: political instability, environmental degradation, poor infrastructure and marketing advances.

For example, the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, certainly had a negative impact since the US State department issued a Travel Advisory after 243 people were killed. This caused a large slump in the tourism industry. People no longer view Kenya as being a completely stable country and this has resulted in other destinations becoming much more popular such as Tanzania, Botswana and Zimbabwe, which all offer equally excellent wildlife viewing opportunities.

Environmentally speaking, the safari experience has suffered and has resulted in tourism numbers dwindling due to: overcrowding increased use of the savannah, natural disasters, poaching and ramped development of 5 star hotels.

Overcrowding of popular national parks and reserves such as Tsavo, Masai Mara and Mount Meru have damaged the savannah landscape and has disturbed the wildlife. Balloon safaris have scared off wildebeest, antelope and topi and their migration and mating patterns have been negatively impacted as a result. Moreover, safari jeeps have crept closer and closer to wildlife, often going off designated roads. This causes massive soil erosion and also scares wildlife. This has had a particularly detrimental impact on the lion population in Kenya. Their numbers continue to dwindle.

Increased use of the savannah region, in particular the agricultural use of the marginal lands surrounding the national parks, has eroded the quality of the parks. Kenya is a growing population and needs to keep producing food to feed their population. This results in competition for land that buffers the national parks and reserves.

Natural disasters have also wreaked havoc on the environment by causing flooding of safari roads, bridges and beach resorts. The massive rainfalls have also resulted in increased epidemics of malaria and cholera. These natural disasters have certainly decreased the desire by tourists to visit the region because poor infrastructure makes travel in a country less attractive.

Poaching has also led to tourists viewing Kenya as a less than "pristine" safari experience. Declining elephant and rhino populations from poaching have decreased the attractiveness of the East Africa savannah. However, Kenya's GNP is roughly \$1100 and one can earn about up to ~\$650.00 Canadian for an elephant which makes poaching very attractive to poor Kenyan's seeking to increase their standard of living.

Finally, 5 star hotels have had a negative impact on the environment as well. Many of them are built in the middle of the savannah that was never meant to house these buildings. There is insufficient sewage or garbage facilities and disposal. Moreover, the wildlife is often seen scavenging through the garbage. In some instances, elephants have eaten batteries and have died as a result. Monkeys and smaller animals are particularly keen to eat the rubbish and often become ill and die. Many animals now devote their time searching through garbage instead of hunting naturally for their food.

Asia: Nepal

Asia, is another area where both mass and ecotourism have fallen short. In Asia, Nepal has become a particularly popular tourist destination for trekkers over the past twenty years. In fact, the number of trekkers to Nepal has increased dramatically from about 14,000 in 1980, to 43,000 in 1994, to more than 67,000 in 1999 (Eduspace). If you include the guides and porters, the route has more people that travel it each year than the total of the local population!! The Annapurna Circuit, one of the best known in the world and Nepal's major trekking route, is a 16-21 day trek that covers about 250 km's. However, the circuit borders the ACA. The Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) attracts more than 60% of all trekkers visiting Nepal (Eduspace). This area, which is located in the Western Himalayas, covers an area of 7,629 km². The ACA is the catchment area for three major rivers and contains the deepest river valley, the Kali Ghandaki, and two of the highest mountains in the world, Annapurna I (8,091m) and Dhaulagiri (8,167m).

This area is particularly attractive to trekkers because it ranges from sub-tropical conditions through to arid and to extreme northern conditions at high altitudes. The biological diversity and the cultural diversity of this area are truly immense. There are over 1200 species of plants, 100 mammals, 747 species of birds, 39 species of reptiles and 22 species of amphibians. However, they are also is home to the endangered snow leopard, blue sheep, musk deer and over 100 varieties of orchids (Eduspace). Culturally speaking, the area has a population of over 120 000 inhabitants from more than 10 different ethnic groups. The majority of the population lives at a subsistence level from agriculture and livestock rearing as their major occupations. They depend much on their natural resources for their living.

However, as the number of tourists has grown, so too have the environmental problems for the region. The area is so mountainous that there are no cars permitted throughout the region. Everything must travel by foot or by mule. The increased number of visitors has meant that the locals have developed a trekking infrastructure to support the visitors. They have built lodges, hotels and restaurants, even in locations that are very difficult to access.

There are also reasonably warm showers (some of which are solar powered), 4000metres above sea level. This has resulted in soil instability and slope failures due to heavy construction along slopes (Sharma).

Deforestation has been a huge problem because 90% of the local energy needs are met by the forests (Eduspace). Many of the sparse forests were cleared to assure comforts for visitors, to heat the ovens and the water tanks. The ensuing erosion has cause many devastating landslides in the region. Another problem has been enormous amounts of garbage left by hikers. Trekkers leave up to 200,000 plastic bottles each year. The bottles are not carried down into the cities for waste disposal; they are dumped behind the lodges and along the track, and remain there forever. This has also resulted in contamination of creeks and rivers as well. Moreover, garbage is not just a problem in the ACA area, but also everywhere in Nepal. The Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (an NGO set up with WWF support in the Everest region which became operational in 1993) collected 145 tons of burnable and 45 tons of unburnable garbage a one year period. In the same year, SPCC collected nearly 2 tons of disposable and 1.5 tons of non-disposable garbage from mountaineering expeditions alone in the Everest region. In addition, 195 gas cylinders, 524 oxygen cylinders, and 603 kg of batteries were also collected in the same year (Eduspace).

Culturally, there have also been many negative impacts as well. There has been an agricultural decline in some villages and also a decline in the number of monastery lamas. There has also been a decline of

traditional crafts, and the commercialization of art. There has also been a decline in the quality of Sherpa village life, an increased burden on women and additional family break-ups (Sharma).

In mountain areas, the decline of local cultural practices and institutions, commercialization of culture and art, and consequent loss of the symbolism of cultural events have been major issues related to tourism. Objects and artifacts venerated for their religious and cultural values are stolen and sold in the black market for unscrupulous tourists. Outside influences on social norms, introduction of new diseases, and breakdown of cultural inhibitions can have disastrous consequences for small mountain communities (Sharma).

Assignment

1. In the 1970s and 1980s Kenya's ecotourism industry had seen great success. Unfortunately, since then it has seen a serious decline and some significant social and environmental problems. Write a 1-page paper detailing the situation in your own words.
2. Write a 1-page paper describing the issues facing Nepal's tourism industry.