

# Mountain Tourism and Hazards: A Proposal for a New Direction of Mountain Tourism in Nepal

Dhananjay REGMI\*, Kabindra BHATTA and Sitaram DAHAL

*Nepal Tourism Board  
Exhibition Road Bhrikutimandap, P.O. Box 11018, Kathmandu, Nepal  
\*E-mail: dj.regmi@gmail.com*

## Abstract

Tourism is one of the major contributors to Nepal's Gross Domestic Product. The history of tourism in Nepal dates back to the 1950s when foreign mountaineers started to visit the country for its summits. As a result, Nepal gradually established itself as a mountain tourism destination. Therefore, mountains became inseparable from tourism in the country. However, these mountains are now severely affected by glacial melting and other unprecedented and unpredictable extreme hazardous events, which are mostly related to higher temperatures and changes in precipitation, and which pose threats not only to mountains but also to mountain communities and the tourists visiting the mountains. There is an urgent need to assess and understand the processes and components of mountain ecosystems to make these area safe and sound eventually for the visitors and local communities. Also, there is an urgent need for recommendations that can be implemented to minimize risks in mountainous regions and ensure the safety of visitors and local communities. For this, first we review major hazard incidents during the last few decades in the mountainous regions of Nepal. Then we suggest possible modalities for sustainable land-use planning and sustainable trekking-trail planning to the major stakeholders, including policy makers and the scientific community. In addition, we discuss the need for joint efforts toward preparedness for glacial and mountain hazards to ensure the safety of everyone in the mountain tourism community. We also discuss the importance of introducing a geopark system for Nepal's hazard and disaster sites to offer educational tourism.

**Key words:** geoparks, geotourism, hazards, mountain science, mountain tourism, tourism zoning

## 1. Introduction

Over the years, many researchers and organizations have had a variety of definitions of tourism. For example, Mathieson and Wall (1982) defined it as the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay at those destinations and the facilities created to cater to their needs. Globally, tourism accounts for 10% of the global GDP and provides around one in 10 jobs worldwide (UNWTO, 2019). Mountains as tourist destinations are also among the most fragile ecosystems, and are under threat from climate change and overexploitation. According to Batliwala *et al.* (2013), as of 2017, mountains were home to about 1.1 billion people, representing around 15% of the global population. Mountain tourism is estimated to represent between nine and 16% of total international tourist arrivals, which is equivalent to between 195 and 375 million international

arrivals, based on 2019 figures (FAO and UNWTO, 2023).

The mountain tourism industry is sensitive and vulnerable. It is a highly climate-sensitive sector that is strongly influenced by multiple climate and geological hazards. Disasters have the potential to discourage visitors from travelling to the affected destinations (Bhati *et al.*, 2016). Mountain disasters and unexpected events are traumatic experiences for residents and tourists and may cause lasting damage to destination infrastructure. Therefore, adequate, adaptive management is required in mountain tourism as well as in other tourism (Hystad and Keller, 2008).

The Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region, which has tremendous potential for mountain tourism, can provide employment opportunities for local communities and a positive socio-economic contribution. However, the HKH region is geologically fragile and vulnerable to erosion and landslides as well as snow and ice avalanches

(Acharya *et al.*, 2023). The South Asian mountains are undergoing rapid change driven by stressors such as climate change and anthropogenic changes, i.e., globalization, infrastructure development and migration (Wester *et al.*, 2019), which are often related to tourism development.

The history of tourism in Nepal dates back to the 1950s, when foreign mountaineers started visiting the country for its summits. As a result, Nepal gradually established itself as a mountain tourism destination. The mountains became inseparable from tourism in this country. These mountains, however, are now severely affected by unprecedented and unpredictable extreme hazardous events, which pose threats not only to the mountains but also to the mountain communities and the tourists visiting the mountains (e.g., Byers *et al.*, 2022; Acharya *et al.*, 2023).

This paper aims to (1) describe the characteristics of mountain tourism and mountain hazards in Nepal and (2) examine new directions for Nepal's mountain tourism in relation to hazards.

## 2. Tourism

### 2.1 Characteristics of Nepal's Mountain Tourism

In the context of Nepal's economy, tourism is one of the major contributors to the gross domestic product (GDP). The Government of Nepal reports that direct earnings from tourism amounted to the equivalent of 67.09 billion Nepali Rupees (US\$590 million) in FY2017/18, representing 2.2% of the GDP (Government of Nepal, 2019).

Similarly, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018) revealed that the total employment generated by the tourism sector was 1,027,000 Nepali Rupees, and the total percentage of employment by that sector came to around 6.7% in Nepal. Nepal welcomed about 1.2 million international visitors in 2019 (Fig. 1), having crossed the milestone of 1 million tourists in 2018 (MoCTCA, 2019). There was a surprising growth in tourist arrivals in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake, with more than 25% growth for three consecutive years after that. Out of the 1.2 million arrivals in 2019, 65.0% of the

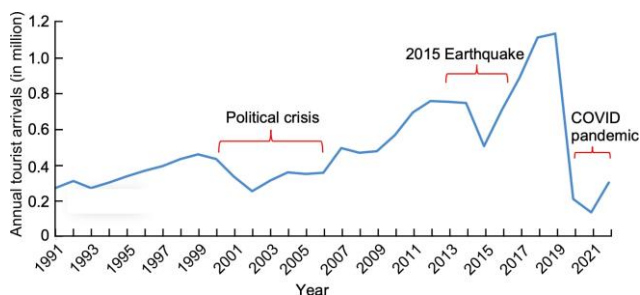
tourists visited for holidays and pleasure, 16.5% for trekking and mountaineering, 14.5% for pilgrimage and the remainder for other purposes.

Revenue generation in the form of foreign exchange earnings from tourism in 2019 came to 75,374.1 million Nepali Rupees, about 2.2% of the total GDP (Fig. 2). After the pandemic, however, Nepal experienced a significant decrease in tourist arrivals (Fig. 1). Therefore, the entire tourism industry came to a standstill, risking jobs and investments in the tourism sector.

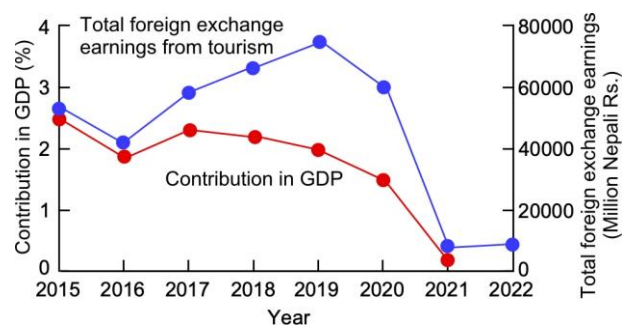
### 2.2 Proposal for New Tourism Destination Zoning in Nepal

Nature-based tourism has been recognized as the major pillar of the tourism sector in Nepal. The seasonal and regional imbalance here, however, has been identified as a challenge for development of Nepal's tourism. The Nepal Himalayas offer lifetime experiences for global tourism enthusiasts, with world-class trekking trails, numerous hard and soft adventure activities and mountaineering options. The mid-hills, on the other hand, have less tourism development although they have a potential for it, with numerous hill stations and cultural trails connected with socio-cultural and landscape diversity, an integrated farming system and well-developed terraced agricultural field (Ives and Messerli, 1989), all of which can be offered throughout the year. Furthermore, the lowland plain of Terai in the southern part of the country has immense potential for cultural and nature-based tourism, with maximum market potential for cross-border Indian tourists especially for religious purposes, entertainment and visiting friends and relatives.

The targeted tourist age group, as derived from the global tourism pyramid of 2020, shows that 46.2% of the global population in the 25–60 age group could be directly or indirectly targeted for Nepal. However, children, youth and millennials together with the older population have been less prioritized in Nepal. Similarly, tourists have been densely concentrated in specific mountain destinations such as the Annapurna Conservation Area and Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) National Park (Watanabe, 2016). Hence, the Nepal Tourism Board



**Fig. 1** Relationship between annual total tourist arrivals and major disaster and disruptive events in Nepal from 1991 to 2022. (Sources: MoCTCA, 2021; Nepal Tourism Board, 2022)



**Fig. 2** Total foreign exchange earnings from tourism and their percentage contribution to the GDP. (Source: Nepal Tourism Board, 2022)

(2022) has proposed a specific geographical model for the diversification of mountain tourism destinations including the lowland area (Fig. 3): (1) the high Himalayan regions as an adventure zone, (2) the mid-hills as a hill station zone, and (3) the lowlands as a nature and entertainment zone, which can support product diversification and all-season engagement for all age groups of tourists.

### 3. Mountain Hazards and Tourism

#### 3.1 Mountain Hazards

The Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM, 2017) reported that there was 0.056°C/year of temperature rise in the Nepal Himalayas based on the maximum temperature trend of the preceding 57 years (1947–2014). On the basis of the general and regional circulation method in the National Adaptation Programme of Action to Climate, the Ministry of Environment (2010) projected scenarios of mean annual temperature increase of 1.4°C by 2030, 2.8°C by 2060 and 4.9°C by 2090, indicating that the temperature rise in the mountains of Nepal will be higher than that of the global average. Climate change impacts will very likely increase due to increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (IPCC, 2007). Variability in temperature and precipitation results in disastrous events, i.e., rockfalls, floods and avalanches. Glacial lakes in Nepal have grown dramatically since the 1960s (e.g., Bajracharya and Mool, 2009; Watanabe *et al.*, 2009; Ives *et al.*, 2010).

The following are some recent examples of mountain hazards in Nepal.

(1) **Avalanche in the Everest Region, 2015:**

In April 2015, a devastating earthquake in Nepal caused snow avalanches at about 7,000 m in the Mt. Everest region (Swann *et al.*, 2016). More than 17 people died and 61 were injured. Another avalanche and icefall had killed 16 Sherpas in the region prior to that in 2014.

(2) **Avalanche in the Langtang Region, 2015:**

The 2015 earthquake caused avalanches in the Langtang region as well (Fujita *et al.*, 2017; Nagai

*et al.*, 2017). These buried 116 houses, killed 308 people (176 locals, 80 foreigners and 10 army personnel) (Callaghan and Thapa, 2015).

(3) **Avalanche in the Annapurna Region, 2020:**

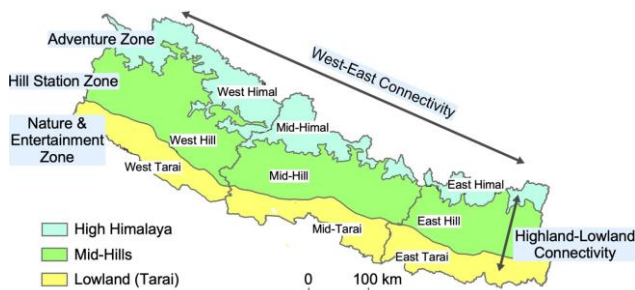
In January 2020, a snow avalanche occurred. After the avalanche, 200 people were rescued, but seven are still missing (including four Korean visitors).

(4) **Snowstorm in the Annapurna Circuit, 2014:**

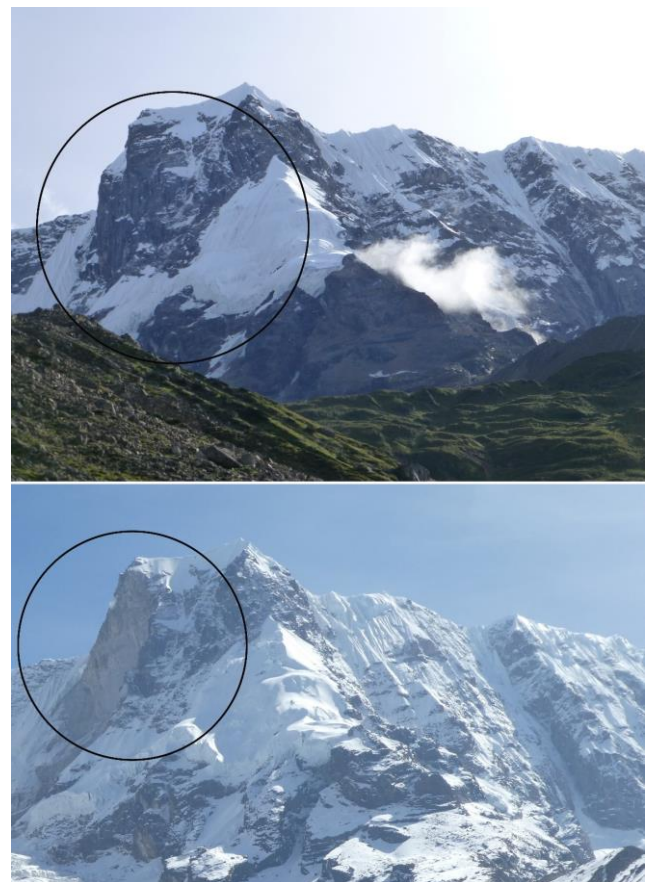
This snowstorm, caused by Cyclone Hudhud, killed more than 40 people of various nationalities in Thorong-La Pass (5,416 m).

#### 3.2 Mountain Hazards and Tourism

With approximately 85% of its total land above 1500 m a.s.l., Nepal is a country with hills and mountains of young geological structure. The diverse geography of this country provides immense opportunities amidst threats of hazards. Mountain tourism and adventure tourism are comparatively more vulnerable to mountain disasters. This hazard is more pronounced in the context of climate change, especially with temperatures rising, which intensifies the frequency of mountain hazards, including snow/ice avalanches, glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), flash floods, landslides, debris flows, rockfalls and rock detachments (Fig. 4). As mentioned earlier, numerous studies have shown that the temperature



**Fig. 3** Schematic diagram showing the proposed tourist destination zoning for a better connectivity of the highland-lowland and of the east-west of Nepal. (Source: Nepal Tourism Board, 2022)

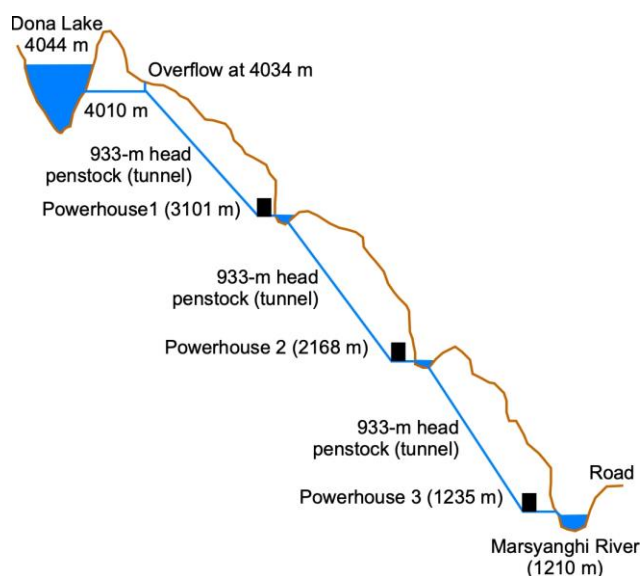


**Fig. 4** Saldim Peak, Makalu-Barun National Park, after the June 17, 2017 separation of rock (in circle) from the north face. (Photo courtesy of A.C. Byers)

rise in the Himalayas is more pronounced and higher than the global average, and will ultimately lead to an increase in mountain hazard occurrences. In this context, Nepal needs detailed studies to ensure adventurous activities such as mountaineering and trekking are safe and secure.

New perspectives have emerged on mountain hazards and tourism, which we can develop with scientists. Every mountain disaster has a story. The story can be effectively communicated by trained guides to tourists to increase their interest. Geopark systems, common in many countries worldwide, are regarded as an opportunity for educational tourism, i.e., geotourism. We would like to propose introducing a geopark system to Nepal as a means for that. When geotourism destinations are developed, the new concept of destination zoning, shown in Fig. 3, will help to augment the sustainability of Nepal's future tourism.

We also emphasize the need for joint efforts for preparedness regarding glacier and mountain hazards to ensure the safety of the visitors and the entire mountain tourism community. Here is one example of a new perspective on glacial lakes. We believe that glacial lakes, which have been treated as a “nuisance” and negative entity, can be utilized as a source of hydroelectric power generation. Figure 5 shows a cross-section of the Thulagi Glacial Lake (locally known as Dona Lake, 4,044 m) and its surrounding mountain slope in the Manang District. This glacial lake is one with a high risk of outburst (e.g., ICIMOD, 2011): about 12.8 km<sup>2</sup> of land cover is estimated to be exposed to a possible GLOF extending as far as 100 km downstream from the lake (Maskey *et al.*, 2020). However, if tunnels are dug in the mountain massif and if water from the glacial lake is channeled through the tunnels to generate hydroelectric power, the water level of this lake can be kept low, thereby reducing the risk of a GLOF. This would provide electricity to the local



**Fig. 5** Proposed tunnels for a hydropower generation system using water from the Thulagi Glacial Lake (or Dona Lake, 4,044 m) in Manang District.

community and allow the mountain community and tourists to learn about these disaster preparedness efforts by taking them on study tours (geotours). It is important to develop new ideas for the possibility of hydroelectric power generation from glacial lakes. Similarly, it is important to promote geotourism on frozen glacial lakes, and that will require detailed research.

The followings are the examples of GLOF-related concerns and issues to be addressed.

- (1) We cannot stop natural calamities, but now it is time to rethink how we can find appropriate solutions to the threats that we have in Nepal.
- (2) Glacial lakes have been growing rapidly and the resultant threats are increasing day-by-day. Updated knowledge on the present status of these lakes is always needed, and more numerous and detailed studies are required.
- (3) Areas downstream of certain dangerous glacial lakes require immediate attention before disasters happen.
- (4) Research results on glacial lake development and past GLOFs can be used to develop geostories that help promote mountain tourism.

### 3.3 Sustainable Land-use and Trekking-trail Planning Modalities

Based on the characteristics of Nepal's mountain tourism and natural hazards, the major stakeholders are identified as the local communities, scientific community and policy makers. We posed questions to major stakeholders, including policy makers and the scientific community regarding possible modalities for sustainable land-use planning and sustainable trekking-trail planning.

Sustainable land management has been explored as a knowledge-based procedure that helps integrate land, water, biodiversity and environmental management to meet rising food and fiber requirements while sustaining ecosystem services and livelihoods (World Bank, 2006; ADB, 2017). Since the Nepal Himalayas are a hotspot for water- and climate-induced hazards as well as geo-hazards, developing a strong knowledge base on extreme weather events and seismic activities in the region is vital to an understanding of how to increase resilience. Wester *et al.* (2019) suggested preparation of hazard maps and real-time hazard information systems for communities, that could substantially reduce vulnerability to potential hazards. For this, not only early warning systems but also prudent land-use planning is vital. Hence, integrated risk-sensitive land-use planning should be developed in the mountainous regions of Nepal.

To realize the proposed trekking networks between high mountain destinations and lowland destinations, between western and eastern high mountain destinations and between western and eastern mid-hill destinations (Fig. 3), sustainable trekking trail planning will be needed. Trekking tourism is a major attribute of a mountain economy. When sustainable trekking trails are planned,

**Table 1** Items to be prioritized in trekking-trail risk assessment.

Items
a) Identification of risk-prone areas
b) Risk mapping and awareness (local people/guides/tourists)
c) Systematic rescue operations in coordination with local governments
d) Establishment of trekker tracking systems
e) Trail auditing and signage systems

**Table 2** Items to be considered for trail infrastructure enhancement and management during the process of trekking-trail risk assessment.

Items
a) Suspension bridges, cantilever bridges
b) Tunnels and shed-way construction
c) Alternative trails (if feasible)
d) Bioengineering techniques for slope stability
e) Early warning system installation
f) Weather stations and communication channeling (application based)

policy makers should prioritize aspects of trekking-trail risk assessment (Table 1) along with the enhancement and management of trail infrastructure (Table 2).

Policy recommendations based on policy gap assessments can provide suggestions for an approach to trekking trail risk assessment. Joint efforts toward preparedness for glacier and mountain hazards to ensure the safety of the entire mountain tourism community are required. Trail auditing and a signage system are basic approaches to trekking-trail risk assessment. Similarly, trail infrastructure enhancement through the application of bioengineering techniques for slope stability and installation of communications channeling (e.g., early warning systems and weather information channels) could be a successful intervention to enhance sustainable infrastructure for trail planning.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Mountain scientists need to work with the tourism sector to develop mountain tourism programs that attract many people while providing opportunities for them to learn about mountain hazards and disasters. Every mountain disaster has a story that can be effectively communicated to tourists to increase their interest. We would like to propose the introduction of a geopark system for Nepal's mountain-hazard and disaster sites.

To tell the stories of mountain hazards and disasters to tourists effectively and attractively, it will be important to accumulate scientific evidence. For example, how should the geological, topographical and meteorological characteristics of past avalanche disaster sites be explained to show tourists that an avalanche disaster of the same scale could occur at any time? How should we show tourists the hydroelectric power generation facilities

that utilize the water of potentially dangerous glacial lakes? Detailed studies on these aspects will be necessary.

Mountain tourism in Nepal is highly asymmetrical, both seasonally and spatially. This characteristic calls for strengthening the linkage among the Himalayas (high mountain region), mid-hills region and lowland tourist destinations, as well as linkages between the east and the west to dramatically increase the mobility of mountain tourists. To this end, sustainable development plans for trekking trails and land use need to be discussed among all stakeholders including researchers.

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### Dhananjay REGMI

Dr. Dhananjay Regmi is chief executive officer (CEO) of the Nepal Tourism Board. Born in 1975 in Nepal, he obtained his PhD in Environmental Science from Hokkaido University, Japan in 2006. Then he served as a post-doctoral research fellow for the Global Land Project (GLP) Japan Nodal Office. He completed a three-month post-doctoral course on dendrochronological research at Arizona University, USA as a Haury Fellow.



### Kabindra BHATTA

Mr. Kabindra Bhatta has been an officer at the Research Planning and Monitoring Department of the Nepal Tourism Board for six years. His academic background includes a Masters in Environmental Science from the Central Department of Environmental Science, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, with a specialization in sustainable mountain development and disaster risk reduction. Previously he worked as a soil conservation and watershed management expert at the National Reconstruction Authority with the support of the United Nations Office of Project Support (UNOPS) and as an environmentalist in the Environment Friendly Local Governance Project (EFLGP) of the Government of Nepal.



### Sitaram DAHAL

Mr. Sitaram Dahal is an officer on the Nepal Tourism Board. He is an enthusiastic student and practitioner of sustainability, leader of the Nepal Chapter of Climate Friendly Travel, a trained trainer for sustainable tourism and a UBUNTU leader. With more than a decade of experience in the fields of tourism, DRR and project management and education systems, Mr. Dahal seeks to learn, practice and share different practical interventions that can help achieve sustainability.

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