

# Surmountable challenges

Nepal's mountain tourism can learn a lot from sustainable projects around the European Alps



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Until the late 1700s, it was believed that Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps, was insurmountable. Two mountaineers, Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat, changed that on August 8, 1786, when they ascended this 4,801m peak. Their success led to the birth of alpinism, and Chamonix, a beautiful French town west of Mont Blanc, became the Mecca of alpinism. Today, over 25,000 climbers attempt Mont Blanc each year and over four million tourists visit Chamonix.

Having walked the entire stretch of the Great Himalaya Trail in 2012, I was immediately drawn to SuperAlps7, a venture organised by the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention, which is to travel 600km across the Alps through three countries—France, Italy and Switzerland—using eco-friendly means of transport, connecting dots between ancient trade routes and villages and experiencing sustainable tourism practices.

## Sustainable tourism

When it comes to sustainable mountain tourism, the Alps have many lessons to offer to Nepal. A funicular gondola connects Chamonix (1,030m) with Aiguille du Midi (3,842m)—a peak that is the gateway to the high Alps. As Nicolas Evrard, the deputy mayor of the Communauté de communes de la Vallée de Chamonix Mont-Blanc, puts it, “There is no off-season in Mont Blanc.” After all,



■ The Italian town of Cogne reminds the author of Dhorpatan

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some 5,000 tourists take this gondola every day during peak season. At 54 euros for a day pass, the cable car generates substantial revenue. But incredibly, all other public transport in Chamonix is free, with the cable car company partaking in the subsidy.

The landscape around Cogne, a beautiful Italian town south of Mont Blanc, reminded me of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve in Nepal. Dhorpatan remains widely ignored. Cogne, on the other hand, supports many eco-friendly and sustainability-related projects, one of them being the Rete Veicoli Elettrici Grand Paradis project integrating sustainable mobility approaches in local tourism development. This project has introduced 66 electric bicycles and two electric cars for locals and tourists to travel around town, together with a network of 11 photovoltaic shelters to recharge the vehicles and bicycles. The project is aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the area while at the same time, boosting the tourism economy.

Switzerland, the third country bordering the Mont Blanc region,

probably has the most reliable and efficient transportation system in Europe. It is incredibly easy to travel around the Swiss part of the Alps relying completely on public buses and trains. This was one of the underlying aims of the SuperAlps—to experience a working model of how easily travellers can reduce their carbon footprint by using sustainable means of public transport.

Given the sheer scale of tourism in the Alps, the process of making it carbon neutral is going to be a big challenge in the future. While the free public transport scheme in Chamonix is a commendable low carbon strategy, it is only a small step to maintain the fine balance between ecology and economy.

## By the numbers

Today, we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Mountains to create awareness about the importance of mountains to life, highlight the challenges in mountain development and build understanding across the world's mountains and highlands to bring positive

change. While each country's path of development is unique, there are certain geographical similarities among mountainous countries that make knowledge sharing not only relevant but also imperative.

Chamonix in the Alps would probably be synonymous with Namche in Nepal's Himalayas. What can we learn from the Alps? And how can we adapt these lessons to our local conditions so that we can attract as many tourists in an environmentally and ecologically sustainable manner? These are not trivial questions. According to the Nepal Tourism Statistics 2012 report, Namche received 0.036 million tourists, against the four million who visited Chamonix. In 2012, Nepal also received a total of around 0.8 million tourists, which was the highest record of tourist arrival in Nepal since the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation started collecting this data in 1962.

Of the tourists who visited Nepal in 2012, 0.13 million tourists visited Chitwan National Park while 0.1 million tourists went to the Annapurna Conservation Area. And then there are places like the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, which received a miniscule number of only 77 tourists. Some 309 tourists visited the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, 124 tourists visited the Rara National Park and 536 tourists visited the Shey Phoksundo National Park. There is a steep plunge in the number of tourists visiting these regions when one compares it to the Chitwan National Park and Annapurna Conservation Area. Even Bandipur, a small Newar settlement on a hilltop in Tanahu district, received some 0.1 million visitors in 2012 (including domestic tourists).

## Economy v ecology

Nepal's topography is marked with unique features, both in terms of verticality and variability. Each national park maps diverse and unparalleled beauty. The question that arises is: why is there such a huge disparity in the volume of tourists visiting Chitwan and Annapurna and those visiting Dhorpatan or Shey Phoksundo? The answer may lie in the inaccessibility of terrain and perhaps, also the inadequate promotional strategy.

The Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) is one initiative in Nepal that has gained momentum over the last few years. It connects all the local trails traversing from east to west of the Nepal Himalayas on a trail of over 1,500 km. The idea behind GHT is to bring development to communities living along the trail by creating tourism markets that would give impetus to finance and sustain various development activities by the communities themselves.

We need many more initiatives like GHT to make mountain tourism a formidable development agenda. However, as we are only at the beginning, we have to ensure that our economic ambitions do not reign over our ecological responsibilities. A fine balance has to be maintained between economy and ecology. Mountain development cannot come at the cost of destroying the mountains. For now, we have a clean slate when it comes to mountain tourism but we have to make our own way towards a green economy and sustainability. This is the key to our sustainable future.

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