

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

ECOTOURISM: PURPOSEFULLY BRINGING BENEFIT FOR BOTH PEOPLE AND NATURE



Brief introduction to Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan

Central Asia remains relatively little known on the global stage, but awareness is increasing... and consequently, so also is tourism.

Gaining independence in 1991 and now with visa-free entry for nationals from many countries, Kyrgyzstan has become the most accessible country in the region. Its mountains, wildlife, culture, and uncounted possibilities for adventure have made it a 'rising star' of tourism in Central Asia. Now over 3 million people arrive annually from around the world.

Purpose driven tourism

Tourism may be developed and expanded simply on the basis of available assets, assuming that any tourism is good tourism. However, tourism also may be taken as a 'tool' to advance the fundamental values held by society. Two good examples of purpose driven tourism are *community based tourism* and *ecotourism*.

Community based tourism, or CBT, seeks mainly to promote community wellbeing, whereas ecotourism also aims to protect the environment and increase environmental awareness.

Both of these approaches have already begun to take root in Kyrgyzstan, and should be further encouraged.

Tourism For Sustainable Development

Many different interest groups, or stakeholders, can benefit from tourism, and especially from responsible and sustainable tourism:

- Tourism enterprises seeking long term profitability
- Tourists seeking high quality, meaningful experiences
- Local communities seeking increased prosperity
- Environmentalists concerned about conservation

"Making tourism more sustainable is not just about controlling and managing the negative impacts of the industry. Tourism is in a very special position to benefit local communities, economically and socially, and to raise awareness and support for conservation of the environment" (UNEP & UNWTO 2005). Sustainability may be the responsibility of all who are involved in the sector, yet most impacts are the result of actions taken by the private sector and the tourists themselves. Government, however, is well positioned to create an enabling environment with responsible policies and guidelines that places sustainability at the centre of tourism development.

Embedded within a framework of sustainable mountain development, tourism also may be leveraged to contribute to meaningful adaptation by agro-pastoralist communities living in these fragile socioecological systems in the face of climate change and globalisation.





Destination Marketing

Destination marketing promotes a region as a whole, rather than any particular tour operator, activity, or accommodation — aiming to drive people and investments for greater overall benefit. Individual towns, regions, and even countries have successfully adopted this approach in recent years. It is being trialed in Kyrgyzstan, e.g. through *Destination Karakol*. Yet greater sustainability and benefit to local communities could still be achieved...

Norway is the first country to have launched a national certificate for sustainable destinations based on international criteria — developed and tested by *Destination Røros* and the municipality of Røros.

“The Great Tianshan Trail”

Modelled after the *Great Himalayan Trails* (GHT) in Nepal and beyond, development of a “Great Tianshan Trail” is proposed. By developing a suite of long-distance trails, 3 overarching purposes are sought : (i) to raise international awareness about the country, (ii) to promote tourism that brings greater benefit for local communities, and (iii) to maximise the conservation outcomes derived from tourism development.

Sustainable Tourism, Responsible Tourism

While tourism assets are clearly abundant in Kyrgyzstan, priority should be given to high value, low number tourism development - with special attention given to the valuable contributions that appropriate tourism can make for development.

Sustainability reflects mainly on the overall and long-term viability of the tourism systems that are now being set in place, and the notion of *responsibility* recognises both that every stakeholder has a role to play to ensure sustainability, and also that *all the right people* should be involved in the important processes of developing the sector — including fundamental decisions regarding whether tourism is even a desired option, and if so, what form and scope it should take.

Helpful guidelines for hotels, destinations, operators, certification bodies etc. are available from several sources, such as the criteria developed by the *Global Sustainable Tourism Council* (GSTC), which serve as baseline standards for sustainability in travel and tourism.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, the *Kyrgyz Association of Tourism Operators* (KATO) and *Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association* (KCBTA) are leading the way. Other important partners or sites for strategic planning and development of tourism, including learning resources, include *The International Ecotourism Society*, the *Centre for Responsible Travel* (CREST) and the *UN World Tourism Organisation* (UNWTO) section on sustainable development and its Silk Road project.

In many areas in the tourism sector, including ecotourism, training programmes to promote appropriate knowledge and skills are still needed, as well as accreditation and certification. Some elements from the successful PADI training and accreditation programme (focused on scuba diving) could be modified to mountain regions and ecotourism, as being advanced by *Horseback Planet Society*.

Widespread availability of educational technologies (EdTech) such as smartphones and new approaches in open and distance learning (ODL) are creating further opportunities for capacity development in ways that can integrate in meaningful ways with local livelihoods.



Tourism Typology

Characteristics — *Sustainable tourism* is not a discrete or special form of tourism. Rather, all forms of tourism should strive to be more sustainable. In a similar way, *responsible tourism* aims to ensure that impacts from tourism are minimised and benefits derived from tourism are equitably shared.

Geographic area — Tourism always occurs in particular places, each with its own situations and unique possibilities, and sometimes also challenges or constraints. *Mountain tourism* is self explanatory due to its location, but largely seeks to stimulate local economic growth. For its part, *tourism in protected areas* seeks to advance the wellbeing of people living in/near protected areas, such as national parks, and simultaneously to support conservation goals either through financing or by reducing conflict.

Purpose driven tourism — *Ecotourism* and *community based tourism* are both driven by their underlying goals, particularly in relation to community benefits, environmental conservation, and education.

Assets-based tourism — Tourism may equally be developed solely on the basis of available assets. In essence, this is the case for *nature tourism*, *culture tourism*, *adventure tourism* and more. However, there often is overlap... and any particular tourism venture may fit into more than one of these typologies.

Community conservation strengthened by ecotourism

In addition to establishing formal protected areas, community-based conservation also should be supported by government and society at large for reaching conservation targets as well as achieving sustainable development goals. Indigenous peoples and local communities have traditionally contributed substantially to such ends, and continue to do so to this day - as long as they are given due recognition and agreement is reached in regard to all parties' respective rights and responsibilities. Globally, indigenous lands and territories encompass around 80% of the world's biodiversity. Ensuring that local communities and indigenous peoples are enabled to duly govern and manage their resources, including through ecotourism, can contribute substantially to collective development and conservation goals.

For example, the community-oriented work of *Ilbirs Foundation* in Kyrgyzstan is enabling local associations comprised of former poachers to protect critically endangered wildlife such as snow leopard. Strengthening grassroots initiatives is key to success.

Working with *Ilbirs Foundation*, a model of ecotourism developed by *Horseback Planet Society* and *Plateau Perspectives* has been trialed in the Lake Issykul region, with a documentary film launching in early 2020 to highlight how community-centred ecotourism may help advance conservation purposes.



Findings about tourism, its potential benefits for people and nature

Key findings include: (1) purpose driven 'ecotourism' and 'community-based tourism' can bring benefit for both people and nature, unlike assets-oriented models such as nature tourism; (2) ecotourism can help to strengthen community conservation efforts, thus helping the country meet national goals, obligations, and aspirations; and (3) Kyrgyzstan's experience in community-based tourism is rich, yet it could be further strengthened to broaden its development impact as well as for conservation purposes.

Recommendations for strengthening the tourism sector

When long-term goals for tourism development are duly recognised as part national sustainable development strategies, including the emerging need for substantial adaptation to climate change at both local and national

levels, it is apparent that Kyrgyzstan must clearly identify and define the future that it wants - then prioritise appropriate actions and guide the process, not simply react to decisions or approaches advanced by external actors, whether from the private sector or elsewhere.

Key recommendations include the following:

1. Prioritise and strengthen ecotourism for its 3 core purposes: conservation outcomes, community benefit, and education. Simultaneously, encourage and enhance the integration of conservation purposes into community based tourism.
2. Build on well established assets such as mountains, wildlife, culture, horse riding, and adventure tourism, and strengthen less established assets such as agri-tourism, star gazing, and seasonal (esp. winter) tourism
3. Develop and promote destination marketing at regional level (not individual companies or communities), such as with development of long-distance trekking and horse riding trails, e.g. the 'Great Tianshan Trail'
4. Create and/or strengthen specialist networks and associations (e.g. ecotourism, community conservation), including development of tools or mechanisms for sharing information and enabling peer-to-peer learning
5. Develop training programs in relevant knowledge and skills targeting both community practitioners and tour operators, inclusive of a certification system to facilitate recognition of achievements made - similar to PADI (for scuba diving) but with a focus on mountain regions and their livelihoods and environments
6. Explore and further develop the use of information and educational technologies (IT/EdTech) as well as open and distance learning (ODL) to advance the SDGs, with special focus on ecotourism development



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Plateau Perspectives supports grassroots initiatives in community-based conservation and sustainable development in the Tibetan plateau region and the mountains of Central Asia
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