

Flight from Bhutan

Nepal's geographical position, squeezed between the two super-powers of India and China, can be an uncomfortable one. But since 1990, a much smaller neighbour, the tiny kingdom of Bhutan, has also been a source of difficulty. In the early 1990s thousands of refugees streamed over the border from Bhutan, across northern India into Nepal. There are still 88,000 Bhutanese refugees in camps in south-eastern Nepal. Some

Bhutanese refugees building a classroom at the camp.

Belinda Coote/Oxfam



17,000 more are living with relatives or working in other parts of Nepal or India.

The refugees are ethnic Nepalis — known in Bhutan as Lhotshampas — who speak Nepali and practise Hinduism. Their families had lived in Bhutan for generations, growing rice on small farms in the fertile south of the country. In the 1980s the Royal Government of Bhutan became concerned by the large numbers of ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan. A government census not only showed that the population was much smaller than the 1.2 million hitherto claimed, but that 50 per cent or over were of Nepali origin. This, and political events at the time which brought ethnic Nepali politicians to the fore in neighbouring Sikkim and Darjeeling, may have alarmed Bhutan's rulers, according to Kapil Shrestha, a lecturer in political science at Nepal's Tribhuvan University, and vice-president of the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal. In 1985 the Royal Government of Bhutan enacted a Citizenship Act: Nepalis who could not produce papers proving they were resident in 1958 were declared non-nationals.

The Citizenship Act was followed in 1989 by the policy of *Driglam Namzha* (the 'Bhutanese way of life') which sought to impose Drukpa dress code and other cultural norms on the Lhotshampas. It became illegal to wear anything but Bhutanese national dress in public, and the teaching of Nepali in primary schools was banned. In the same year, a new Marriage Act denied citizenship to spouses of Nepali origin who married after 1958. Children born of such marriages were also deemed aliens. The combined Acts made thousands stateless overnight. Yet another measure which had an impact on the Lhotshampas was the 'green belt policy',

which sought to transform the rice-growing foothills of southern Bhutan into forest land to maintain ecological balance.

In 1989 a group of ethnic Nepalis formed the People's Forum for Human Rights. The Forum accused the government of infringing basic human rights and petitioned for these rights to be restored. Civil unrest ensued, and was put down by the army and police. According to the Lhotshampas, their public call for a restoration of human rights triggered a wave of government repression and violence, culminating in the mass exodus of the early 1990s. Refugees in the Nepal camps have many stories to tell of harassment, beatings, rape, arson and theft. It was reported that whole villages in southern Bhutan were burned to the ground. The Bhutanese government claims it merely deported illegal immigrants and nipped in the bud the beginnings of a terrorist movement in southern Bhutan.

Life in the camps

Bhim Bahadur Gurung had been head man of his village, in southern Bhutan's Sarbhang District, for 12 years, when, in January 1992, Bhutanese soldiers and police began to harass him and his neighbours. He says he was locked in a cell, tied up and beaten. Two days later he was released, only to find his village burned to the ground. There was no sign of his family. He fled into the forests on the Assam border, and eventually reached the first of the refugee camps to have been set up in Nepal's south-eastern District of Jhapa. There he found his family and thousands of other men, women, and children with similar tales.

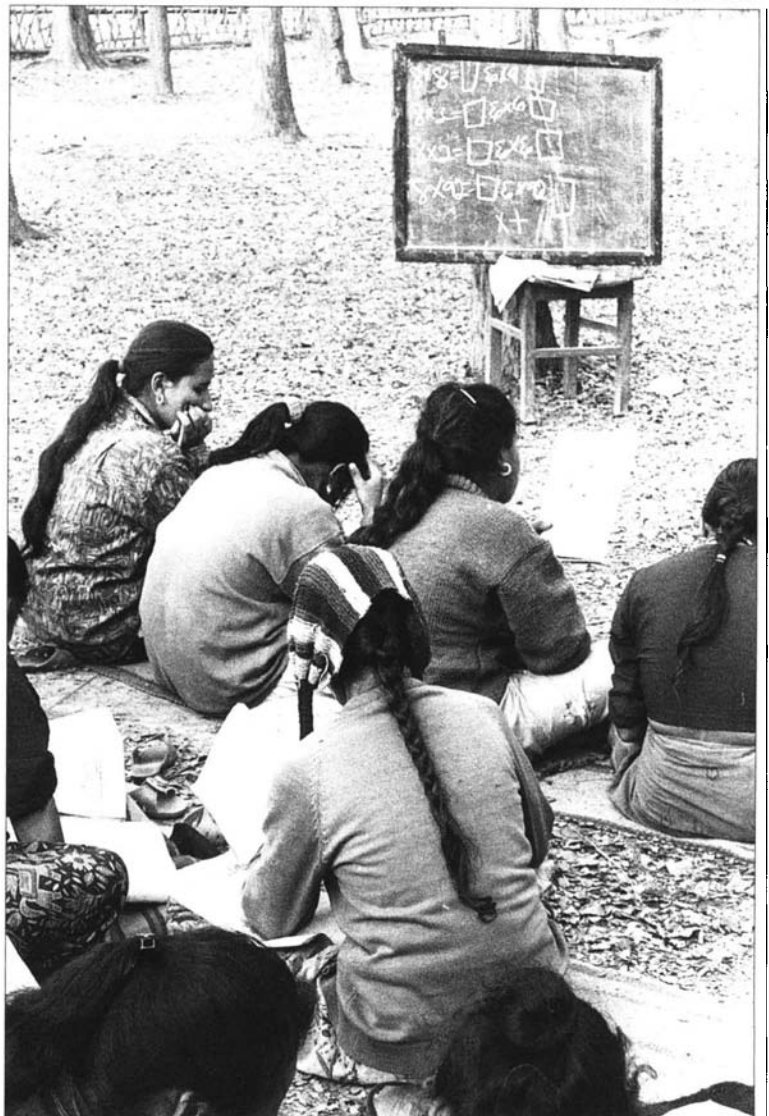
In the camps' early days, Oxfam helped to provide drinking water and sanitation. After March 1992, however, its programme became focused on social development. Oxfam worked through the Bhutanese Women's Association, later renamed the Refugee Women's Committee. This counterpart organisation ran non-formal education (NFE) classes for the illiterate, and a supplementary income programme to make the long hours in the camps more

productive. Both programmes targeted women, although men also took advantage of the training offered. Another of Oxfam's partners, the Centre for Victims of Torture, has trained refugee women in counselling techniques to help women to cope with the physical and mental abuse they suffered before fleeing Bhutan.

At the height of Oxfam's involvement, each of the eight camps had a bustling Oxfam centre, run by the Refugee Women's Committees, who consulted their fellow-refugees about their priorities. The Oxfam centres were the venue for the NFE classes, training courses in jute weaving and soap-making, and the

While new classrooms are being built, women refugees continue their literacy classes in the open air.

Annemarie Papatheofilou



knitting of jumpers and shawls. These activities were responses to needs which the camp-dwellers had identified. The NFE classes reached nearly 6,000 women. The supplementary income project began with a target of 300 participants but, by early 1993, the number reached had increased to 7,500. UNHCR bought the shawls and sweaters which the women knitted, and these were then distributed to the refugees. The women used the small sums of money they earned to supplement their rations with extra meat, spices, and vegetables.

Due to various constraints, Oxfam wound down much of its programme in late 1995. The Government of Nepal was not happy to allow goods made by the refugees to be sold outside the camps in competition with locally produced goods, making it impossible to sustain the supplementary income programme — there was a limit to the number of shawls and sweaters needed. As a short-term response to problems, however, the programme was regarded as a success by the refugees who took part.

In the current phase of Oxfam's programme, the emphasis is on post-literacy resource centres. Here, the women who learned to read and write on Oxfam-funded NFE courses can read newspapers and public information bulletins, practising their new skills. Without such support, many of them might gradually forget what they have learned. CVICT is also still providing its vital counselling service.

The camps are well kept. Many refugees have established kitchen gardens to supplement their rations. The level of health and well-being is high. Psychological well-being is much more of a problem and is likely to deteriorate as year follows year in the camps. Many refugees complain of having nothing to do. Inevitably there has been some conflict between the camp inhabitants and the local population. The refugees, who receive free food and shelter, provide a large pool of cheap labour because they can afford to work for less than the local people.

Returning to Bhutan is the dream and goal of all the refugees.

Appealing for human rights

Years after they fled from Bhutan, the 88,000 refugees living in the camps in southern Nepal are still stateless and rootless. Unless governments can be prevailed upon to help them, they are likely to remain so. Despite several rounds of bilateral talks between the Bhutan and Nepal governments, there has been no diplomatic progress on the issue. A recent agreement between the two governments to categorise refugees into four separate groups caused controversy because it undermined the refugees' right to return to their homes. India, the major power in the region, has so far refused to involve itself in the search for a solution.

The refugees are represented by two rival groups, the Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Movement and the Appeal March Coordinating Committee (AMCC). Although they have different strategies, both organisations call for the restoration of human rights in Bhutan and an early repatriation. In its 1995 appeal to His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the AMCC declared that, by arbitrarily depriving ethnic Nepalis of their nationality and prohibiting cultural plurality, the Kingdom of Bhutan had contravened the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which it signed up to in 1971.

Various regional and international non-governmental organisations, working on the refugees' behalf, have tried to use the United Nations' human rights machinery to bring about progress towards a resolution of the crisis. To be successful, though, they need one or more national governments to make the plight of the refugees a diplomatic priority

Tourism: who benefits?

Tourism is the country's second largest earner of foreign exchange. According to Government figures, tourism earned the country US\$61.09 million in foreign exchange, 20 per cent of total foreign exchange earnings (exports account for a slightly higher percentage). The largest sector are sight-seers — 71 per cent of visitors arriving in 1992 recorded sightseeing as their main reason for going. Business, official work and attending conferences — all urban-based — accounted for a further 16 per cent of arrivals. The great majority of visitors hardly ever venture outside Kathmandu, Pokhara and the major terai towns. A little more than 10 per cent of 1992 arrivals recorded trekking and mountaineering as the main reason for their visit.

Very few tourist dollars reach the villages. Worse still, of the revenue earned from businesses providing services directly to tourists, such as airlines, hotels and travel agencies, much of the profit is leaked away in the cost of necessary imports. One study found that for every Rs100 spent by tourists, Rs62 was spent on imported goods, including items such as air-conditioning units, refrigerators, construction materials and fittings, and vegetables for hotel kitchens. So it seems that much of the foreign exchange earned by the tourism sector never reaches potential beneficiaries, even those in Kathmandu.

A visitor-friendly capital

Kathmandu is described in the guide books as a welcome stop for long-term travellers weary with the difficulties of travel in India and the rest of South Asia. The 'friendliness' of Nepal's people is almost as famed as its sublime mountain

landscape. A visit there, even if only to Kathmandu, affords the traveller a glimpse of the country's rich cultural heritage; its unique architecture, the chance to pursue religious studies or simply to rest and enjoy the diverse attractions of the capital.

Thamel, Kathmandu's tourist centre.

Omar Sattaur/Oxfam



Thamel is Kathmandu's tourist centre. There, it is possible to buy goods, clothes and handicrafts from all over South Asia. You can eat Wiener Schnitzel at the Old Vienna Inn, taco and pizza at the Pizza Maya, momo at the Utse Restaurant, and fresh-baked bread from the Pumpernickel Bakery. The 1990 edition of one of the most popular English-language guide books listed 44 good eating places and 40 places to stay in Thamel alone.

At peak season, Thamel can resemble a theme park for the hippie era; unkempt beards and pony-tails, tie-dye frocks and stripy pyjamas never really disappeared from Kathmandu. The tastes of the long-term traveller in food, clothing, and accommodation are well understood and catered for.

The plethora of hotels, guest houses, restaurants, cafes, bars, book shops, boutiques, travel agencies, trekking agencies, and handicrafts shops in Thamel, and the growing sophistication of accommodation and catering along the major tourist routes, suggest that tourism is thriving. In 1962, only 6,172 tourists went to Nepal. Thirty years later that number had increased more than fifty-fold, but just who benefits from tourism is less clear.

Rural environment and the tourist economy

Tourism in the hills and mountains has many potential benefits. It increases demand for vegetables, milk, eggs, and meat, and can thus stimulate agricultural production. Tourists need lodges, restaurants and tea houses, communications, and transport, and buy handicrafts. Tourism provides employment for guides and porters during the agricultural off-season.

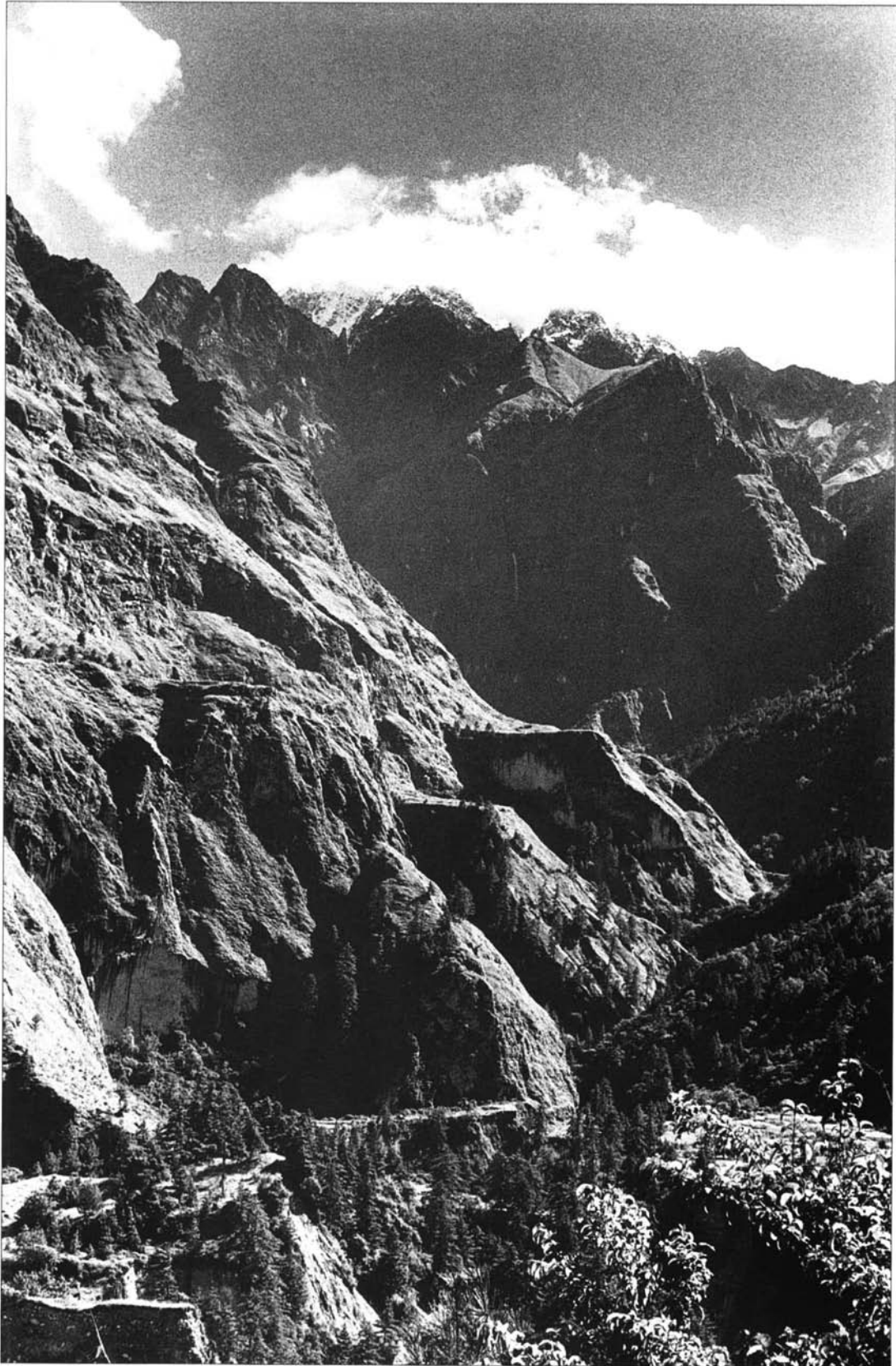
However, research into the costs of a British mountaineering expedition showed just how little the rural economy benefits from such expensive visits. About 69 per cent of the total cost was spent outside the country. Of the money spent inside Nepal, nearly half was spent in Kathmandu, including the cost of the climbing permit; and only 14 per cent went on wages to local porters, and just over one per cent on expenses on the journey to the mountain.

Some of the larger tourist agencies claim that high-yield/low-impact tourism is much more beneficial than independent low-budget trekking that Nepal encourages and which is increasing every year. 'Group trekkers leave more money behind in the hills than do individual trekkers'

Tourists come from all over the world to visit Nepal. Here, Austrian tourists meet up with two Indians, who are on a religious pilgrimage to sacred sites.



Opposite page:
Near Ghasa. Spectacular mountain scenery is one of Nepal's major tourist attractions.



Tim Malyon/Oxfam

says Lisa Choegyal, PR and Marketing Director of one such agency. She says that her company pays camp-site fees, buys as much food as it can locally, carries kerosene, and removes all non-biodegradable rubbish, pays its Sherpas retainers, as well as day-rates when they are on trek, and looks after their medical treatment and health insurance. Other researchers estimate that only five per cent of food required by organised groups of trekkers is purchased locally. In contrast, independent trekkers buy most of their food locally.

But these potential benefits have to be weighed against the negative effects on the environment: increased demand for livestock, fuel wood, and lodges have led to overgrazing and deforestation. Sustainable waste disposal is almost non-existent, and careless disposal of non-biodegradable items is polluting the environment. Finally, increased demand and money supply in rural areas is causing inflation, and thus financial hardship for local populations.

There is certainly a place for a stratagem that prices out environmental degradation. In Upper Mustang, opened to tourists in March 1992, the Government exacts a conservation and development tax on every tourist wishing to visit the area. Upper Mustang is sparsely populated, has hardly any forests, produces very little food, and the ecosystem is extremely fragile. Part of the US\$700 charged to each individual for a 10-day permit goes towards conservation and development work with the local communities carried out by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), a local NGO.

Not all tourism in Nepal need be as restrictive as that in Upper Mustang, but letting tourist numbers rise unchecked, with the consequent degradation of the environment and culture, is not the only way of increasing Nepal's earnings from tourism. If visitors could be encouraged to stay longer, and to spend more in Nepal, and if some of the imports required could be replaced by local products, the benefits from tourism could be greater, and be distributed more widely.

Tourism for tomorrow

Ghorepani is a high point for visitors to the Annapurna region, in more ways than one. It is, for many trekkers, a place to relax and enjoy well-earned views of the peaks of Annapurna I, Annapurna South, Hiunchuli, Dhaulagiri I, Tukucho, Nilgiri and others. Well-earned because most will have reached the resort, at 2,775 m, and nearby Pun Hill (3,193 m), after a day's climb from the villages of Tatopani or Birethanti, both some 1,700 m lower.

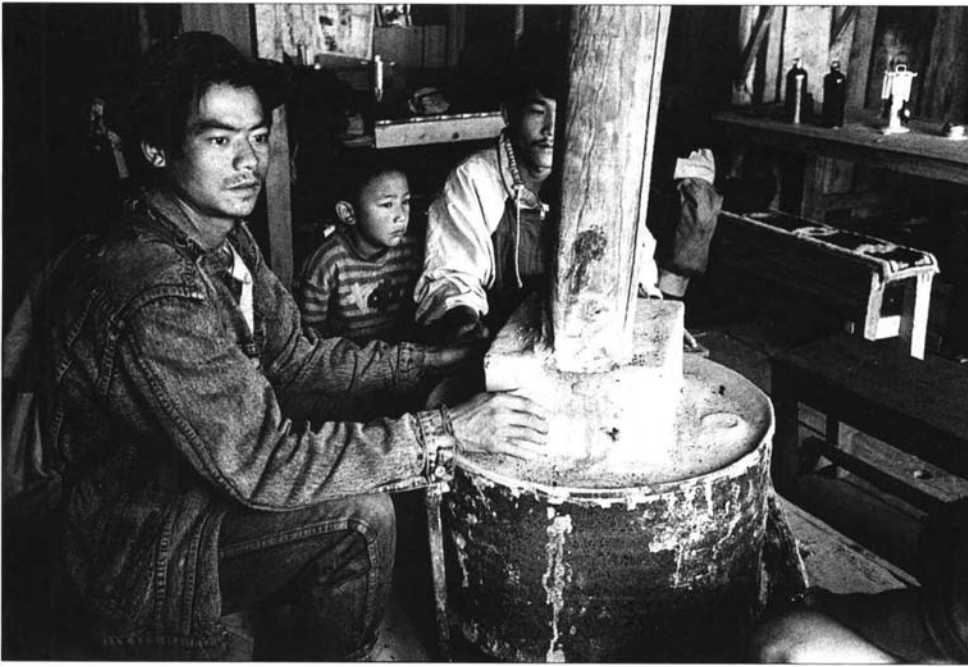
Ghorepani owes its existence to tourism. The only building to be seen there 25 years ago was a cow shed, according to Dr Chandra Gurung, director of ACAP. The rest, Dr Gurung recalls, was a magnificent ancient rhododendron forest that was almost impenetrable. Word of the spectacular views attracted more and more visitors and there are now about 20 lodges at Ghorepani, all built from the forests that were cleared. The lodge-keepers vied with one another to provide the most luxurious service. Hot showers, camp fires, and menus so varied as to tickle the taste buds of anyone from Mexico to Madras made huge demands on the forests for fuel wood. Researchers in 1987 estimated that some lodges were burning up to 330 kg of wood per day to satisfy the demands of tourists for food and hot water — enough to meet the needs of a local six-member household for a month or more.

Due to the efforts of NGOs like ACAP, tourism in Ghorepani is much more fuel-efficient today. A visitor centre educates trekkers about the environmental issues and how to enjoy Nepal without harming it. Most of the lodge kitchens now have a back boiler — a galvanised iron drum half sunk into the traditional mud-walled cooking stoves. At the same time as the heat from the burning wood cooks food or heats kettles, it also heats water pipes that lead to the drum. The common sitting rooms and dining areas in the lodges are heated by fuel-efficient space heaters.

Footbridge near Pokhara.

Tim Malyon/Oxfam





Tim Malloy/Oxfam

People-friendly conservation

But ACAP's work is not only concerned with fuel-efficient technology. The organisation, a project of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, was established in 1986 to find ways of development which would not damage natural and cultural integrity. 'For 15 years, the Trust had a 'preserve' mentality, with fencing and army guards to preserve and protect the resource from encroachers.' In 1985, 75 per cent of the country's budget for its (then) seven national parks was spent on paying the army to keep people out. 'There was an urgent need for an approach that addressed the development needs of the local inhabitants as well as the needs of tourists and conservationists,' Dr Gurung explains. The focus area was the Annapurna region, which attracts 64 per cent of all tourists trekking in Nepal.

There are many reasons for its popularity. The area is home to people of a wide range of ethnicities including Manangi, Bhotia, Magar, Thakali, Gurung, Tamang as well as the Hindu castes. The visitor can not only appreciate the changing landscape, agricultural systems, and architecture but also the various lifestyles and

cultures of the people who live there. In the more remote parts of the region can be found musk deer, red panda, snow leopard, and blue sheep. Visitors to the area must pay a conservation fee of Rs 650 per week, which is channelled into conservation and development activities in the area, such as forest conservation, tourist awareness programmes, and community development projects.

Dr Gurung stresses the need to first 'win the hearts of the people' in order to achieve real participation in decisions on priorities for development, and designing and implementing projects. But he is also realistic about the time scale; winning trust and raising awareness about natural and cultural conservation takes a long time. The area also attracts the interest of visiting philanthropists. A school, drinking water scheme, and a medical post have already been established by outside donors. Many lodge owners are critical of ACAP. They want a microhydro scheme to bring electricity to the village, and claim that ACAP is not working fast enough. They know that if they cannot get ACAP to do things their way, and at their pace, they will be able to find alternative sources of funding.

Educating the visitors

Environmentally conscious individuals and groups in Nepal are trying to educate tourists and communities about ways of making tourism sustainable. ACAP has devised a minimum impact code for tourists which is delivered with trekking permits to the Annapurna area. Another group, called Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP), offers advice on cultural and environmental sensitivity to tourists from their office in Thamel,

Kathmandu's main tourist area. KEEP also holds training workshops for guides and cooks on fuel-efficient cooking on trek, educating tourists about disposing of human waste and non-biodegradable items and respecting the culture. Sagarmatha National Park has published *Trekking Gently in the Himalaya*, with assistance from the World Wide Fund for Nature, which is full of useful tips for trekkers. The main points from all of these codes are listed below.

- **Save wood.** Be self-sufficient in fuel. Use kerosene and wear warm clothes. Do not make open fires and do not ask for hot showers unless the lodge has a back boiler or uses kerosene. Choose to stay at lodges that have energy-saving devices such as back boilers, space heaters and fuel-efficient stoves. Avoid ordering six different kinds of Western food at different times; if your group orders local food, all at the same time, it will help to save fuel. Take water-purifying tablets or filters with you rather than asking for boiled water, unless you stay at lodges with back boilers.
- **Do not pollute.** Burn all dry paper, if possible in an established fire pit. Bury biodegradable items. Pack out non-biodegradable items such as bottles, plastics and batteries, or deposit them in rubbish pits if available. Use toilets when available. If none exist, ensure that you are at least 20 metres away from a water source and bury your waste. Do not shampoo in streams or hot springs and try to use biodegradable shampoos and soaps. Supervise trekking staff to make sure they cover toilet pits and dispose properly of wastes.
- **Camp conservatively.** Choose established camp-sites whenever possible, even if it means sharing a site with another group. Avoid trenching around tents; if the site is sloping and on high ground, a plastic sheet under the tent should prevent seepage of rain.
- **Tread carefully.** Do not walk through planted fields and be careful not to destroy bunds. Close all gates after you and repair anything you damage, such as dry stone walls or water conduits. Steer clear of water buffalo, yaks and donkeys on the trail in case they bolt. Stick to the main trail. Steeper trails encourage erosion. Do not make new trails across meadows and do not walk through shrubs.
- **Be a guest.** Do not damage, disturb or remove any plants, animals, animal products or religious artefacts. Respect local customs in your dress and behaviour. Women should not wear shorts or revealing blouses and men should always wear a shirt. Avoid outward displays of physical affection. Dress decently when visiting monasteries and remove your shoes. Do not offer half-eaten food to people. Never point your finger, feet or step over someone. Give and receive with both hands. Do not dip into food to be eaten by others. Ask permission to take photographs and respect people's right to privacy. Do not encourage begging by giving to beggars. Do not barter for food and lodging — many communities have established lodge management committees that set standard rates. Encourage young Nepalis to be proud of their culture.
- **Remember the ACAP motto.** Nepal is here to change you, not for you to change Nepal.

Whose environmental problem?

The litter left behind by mountaineering and trekking expeditions has given the Everest base camp a new nickname of the world's highest rubbish tip. The discovery led to worldwide publicity and concern which spawned several local and international clean-up campaigns. The sullied Everest became an environmental issue that evoked shame and anger. But, as Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, former warden of Sagarmatha and Rara national parks, points out: 'To local residents, the question of litter on the High Himal is not a big issue because they have no business to go up there unless paid to do so by a foreign expedition. It is an out-of-sight, out-of-mind matter for most... From the perspective of the local inhabitants of the Khumbu, the declining agricultural and pastoral productivity, inflation, shrinking forest reserves and rapid cultural erosion are of equal concern, if not greater.'

Clearly, perceptions of what constitutes an environmental problem vary. For example, the inhabitants of the major towns in the terai and the Kathmandu Valley are justifiably disturbed by atmospheric pollution caused by motor vehicles — infections of the upper respiratory tract are now accepted as the price to pay for living in the capital, as is the fact that the Himalayan snow peaks are now much less frequently visible from Kathmandu. But atmospheric pollution is not something much thought about in the middle hills and high mountain, where more than half the population of the country live.

In the mid-1970s, Nepali farmers were being blamed for exporting, free of charge, Nepali soil to the extent that new islands were being formed in the Bay of Bengal

(*chars*). Mismanagement in the middle hills was supposed to have increased flooding downstream. Although it is true that loss of tree cover exposes the soil to rain and wind, thereby increasing its erosion, particularly from steep slopes, those losses have to be put in perspective. Closer analysis suggests that, although

Nepal is largely dependent on wood for most of its energy needs.

Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam



deforestation affects the amount of local erosion and run off, it contributes very little to major flooding elsewhere. Soil erosion and sedimentation is higher from degraded and overgrazed forests, but it will always have been high in an active mountain-forming area such as the Himalaya.

This is not to deny the negative impacts of deforestation, however, which has greatly contributed to poverty and emigration. Nepalis in town and country rely on wood for fuel. In rural Nepal, 98 per cent of energy consumed is derived from wood; the figure is 83 per cent for urban areas. However, the perceptions of outsiders about the country's ecological crisis was very different from those of its inhabitants. People knew very well the limits of their ecosystems and had evolved ways of coping which, as is often the case, crumbled under the power of external forces (in this case, legislation which robbed them of ownership of forest resources).

Today, many forests are in better shape. Landowners have responded to the fuel crisis by planting more trees on their lands, and planting in private forests has also increased. Although deforestation is still a problem in pockets of the terai, most of the forest land in the hills that could have been converted to crop land has been cleared for that

purpose, and so loss and gain of forest cover has stabilised. Afforestation projects are gradually increasing tree cover in the hills.

The decreasing fertility of the soil is also of great concern. Farmers traditionally fertilise their land with green manures and livestock dung. Fertilisers are available and used mostly in the terai, although hill farmers whose lands are close to road heads have access and, if funds permit, will purchase fertilisers.

Springs, streams and rivers and wells provide water for most of the rural population. Lack of sanitation often leads to contamination of the water supply, and gastrointestinal infections are common. The studies of water quality that have been carried out in the Kathmandu Valley, and major towns show that, despite chlorination, the piped supplies are rarely safe. Water pipes often run parallel to sewage pipes; low pressure and their state of disrepair leads to contamination. Industries, growing in the capital and towns of the terai, use rivers as tips for untreated wastes. This has led to such a deterioration of water quality in rivers, Kathmandu's Bagmati, for example, that they are no longer able to support aquatic life at certain stretches. Once a destination for ritual bathing, pilgrims now think twice about dipping into the Bagmati at Kathmandu.



Silt washed from eroded hillsides being deposited in the bend of a river

Environmental care, from the ground up

A group of schoolchildren stand in a circle. In the centre, a group leader holds a ball of string. This facilitator is playing the role of the Sun. The Sun's rays support all plant life, played by another child in the ring. The facilitator holds the end of the string and passes the ball on to the 'plant child'. Cows eat plants, so the 'plant child' grasps the string and passes the rest on to child playing the role of the cow. And so the ball is passed from one child to the other, forming a web, a visual representation of the web of life, the interdependencies between living organisms in an ecosystem. What happens if farmers start to use pesticides? Insects living on the plants would die so 'insect child' lets go of the string; 'frog child', which eats insects, lets go too; 'snake child', which eats frogs, similarly, lets go. The web begins to sag and eventually disintegrates.

This game is one of the 600 or so

activities that the volunteers of ECCA have invented or collected from around the world in order to teach Nepali schoolchildren about their environment. ECCA stands for Environmental Camps for Conservation Awareness, five-day training camps in environmental awareness and intervention for school children. ECCA first identifies interested members of a local group — perhaps simply a sports club — with whom to work. ECCA trainers then train some members of the group in conservation issues and how to facilitate a camp. The trainers then pass on this information during the five-day camps to schoolchildren. Those children then take the message and expertise home to their parents and, thus, the rest of the community. 'Very often the problem exists, the solution exists but somewhere, the two are not linked', says Anil Chitrakar, a founder-member of ECCA.

Almost no written material is used in the camps. Games, experiments, practical training and fun take the place of books.

Gathering fuel wood,





Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

During the camp, 10 boys and 10 girls, chosen to represent the ethnic and caste diversity of the village, go on a nature hike around their village, designed to make them ask questions about the sustainability of natural resources. Children also learn about arts and craft, culture, technology, health and sanitation and so on.

After the camps, parents are invited to a workshop in which they and their children discuss what they can do to solve the major environmental problems identified by the children. It may be lack of fuel wood, or river pollution. For Saraswoti Khanal of Bal Sundar School, in Nayapati near Kathmandu, the camp was an unforgettable experience. She had learned how to make a smokeless stove and, with the help of counsellors, installed one in her own home after the camp. Her parents were delighted. After camps in the Sheopuri watershed area, the demand for smokeless stoves shot up dramatically, despite the existence for more than one year of a project to promote their use.

'There have been schools where, following a camp, children have demonstrated for a toilet to be installed; others where children have written to the Prime Minister on environmental problems', said Anil Chitrakar. In 1986, when ECCA was formed, six camps were held and the number has been increasing every year. The NGO now covers 32 out of Nepal's 75 districts.

Community forestry comes of age

Local people know their forests and know what they want from them. Nepal is one of the few developing countries to have reflected this in legislation. The Forest Act 1994 empowers District Forest Officers (DFOs) to hand over ownership of national forest to users' groups as community forests. DFOs grant forest users' groups (FUGs) certificates of entitlement once they are satisfied with the groups' operational plans, which outline how the forests are to be managed and how their products are to be sold and distributed.

The community forest legislation came

just in time. Successive waves of occupation of the terai, from the nineteenth century to the present day, have led to the destruction of large tracts of what was once almost impenetrable forest, and the degradation of the remaining forests. Pressure from a growing population in the middle hills has led to the clearance of forests for agriculture; a process that is almost complete today.

The largest wave of deforestation in the hills occurred after 1957, when, in a well-meaning but ill-fated move, the government nationalised the forests. Communities lost their sense of ownership, and older systems of community management of forest resources crumbled. A decade or more of widespread deforestation ensued, despite the Government's deployment of armed soldiers to guard the forests. Indeed, it was said that the health of the forests was a good indicator of the health of the government: when the government was weak, the forests were plundered. The landscape of Nepal has profoundly changed. More than 80 percent of the land below 4,000 metres was once forested, but now only 19 per cent of the country remains under tree cover. In the 1970s and 1980s, Nepal was widely reported to be on the brink of ecological disaster.

However, reforestation programmes in the 1970s are beginning to show their effects in certain areas, although the new forests have been established on grazing and shrub land and the species planted are often not as useful as indigenous species. Scarcity of fuel wood, fodder and timber in the middle hills has stimulated more planting of useful trees on private lands.

The handing over of government forests to FUGs is helping to consolidate a stabilisation of forest cover in the middle hills. In the eastern hills, in which the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) has been supporting community forestry since 1979, FUGs are well established and many have succeeded in successfully rejuvenating community forests. In the words of one woman, Maling Phang Rai, a member of Pakha FUG in Dhankuta municipality: 'Before we formed the group

Opposite page:
Parlepani tree nursery. These seedlings will be used in reforestation schemes, and will eventually produce timber useful for housebuilding.

Hills near Chautara.
Reforestation is
beginning to show results
in some areas.



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

the forest guards used to steal the products. There was never any good grass or good wood. We who depended on the forest were always in the position of thieves. Now all this is changed. We can cut when we want.'

Maling Phang's words reveal the radical changes that have taken place since ownership of the forest passed into the hands of her community. The FUG's operational plan has effectively protected the forest, managed its resources to benefit the whole community, and imposed fines on those who disobey its regulations: erstwhile 'thieves' have become responsible managers. Her FUG has taken advantage of government subsidies on vegetable seeds and use patches of forest land to cultivate vegetables for sale.

A change has also taken place in the attitude of forest officials. A joint project run by the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project and the District Forest Office (DFO) has been set up to run workshops for Rangers, Assistant Rangers and Forest Guards, which emphasise the importance of self-government of forests and the valuable role that forestry staff can play in stimulating the formation of FUGs and

supporting them when established. The training lasts three weeks, and half the time is spent in a village, to facilitate the formation of a FUG and help to prepare the operational plan.

While members of FUGs in general fully understand the community forest legislation and their joint responsibilities once they assume ownership, the individual members' responsibilities and rights to modify operational plans to suit their needs is less clear. This ignorance of rights is often seen in female FUG members even though women, rather than men, are responsible for collecting fuel wood and fodder and therefore have much more to do with the day-to-day management of forests.

For example, Damber Bishwokarma, as a single mother of three children, found the responsibilities of membership of her local FUG hard to cope with. Her husband left to work in Saudi Arabia, and Damber Bishwokarma tries to survive on her tiny plot of land and by working on other people's fields. She had to participate in the community planting of seedlings in the forest, as laid down in the FUG's operational plan, or pay a fine of Rs50. Each time, she had to leave her children at home, She had to cook a meal for them when she

returned in the evening. Since formation of FUG, four months ago, no one has been allowed to collect wood from the forest. Since grass and fuel wood from her own land is insufficient, Damber Bishwokarma has to spend a long time gathering it from more distant areas. But Damber Bishwokarma has not felt able to explain her difficulties at the FUG meetings. 'Sometimes I attend the meetings. After one of them, I spoke to the secretary and other committee members about the fact that I have no free labour. But they just said that I would have to go to do the community work anyway.'

Other women are more outspoken: 'Before, I used to spend about two hours collecting good firewood. Now I have spend five hours and it is not very good wood. It is us women who have to collect the wood, not the men.'

But they realise the importance of protecting the forest. 'So far, we haven't complained because, if we do, where would we get wood in the future? The forest is ours. If they allow us to cut wood it will be completely finished.' Now the

women burn maize husks, stubble and some fodder species which are all hard to cook with and much faster burning. Not only is their fuel of lower quality but it takes them much longer to collect.

It is all too common for the needs of women to be ignored, even though they are members of their FUGs. The women felt that their personal hardship did not justify jeopardising the health of the forests and therefore the greater good of their communities.

The rules have been made without their participation, despite the project's recognition of the need, during the formation of FUGs, to set up sub-groups that represent weak, disadvantaged or special-interest groups, such as women, low-caste groups or fuel-wood vendors. These sub-groups are then supposed to raise their needs before the village agrees an operational plan. According to the team leader of the project, a separate strategy to ensure the participation of poor women in the running of FUGs is being developed, in a fresh attempt to create a truly empowering environment for all forest users.

Ring-barking on a hardwood tree preparatory to felling.



People power



Tim Malyon/Oxfam

The birth of lobbying and human rights organisations illustrate the new freedoms that Nepali citizens enjoy since the demise of the Panchayat system. Such groups are becoming increasingly articulate and armed with the skills required to lobby with government and multilateral institutions.

When the World Bank decided to abandon the long-planned and controversial Arun III hydroelectric power project, it is likely that the decision was to some extent influenced by opposition from Nepali pressure groups such as the Alliance for Energy. Some countries, such as Germany and the USA, which had originally pledged funds to the World Bank for Arun III, had become more cautious about the project, largely because of pressure from environmental groups in their countries. Such large-scale projects create enormous disruption, displacing many thousands of communities, and their long-term performance is less cost-effective than was once thought. The World Bank is now planning to help Nepal to develop several smaller hydroelectric schemes, in place of Arun III.

In smaller ways, a new sense of freedom is being felt and expressed even in rural Nepal. The increased transparency of the processes of government, the rapid growth of print media, the increasing reach of non-formal education initiatives are all helping to increase the confidence of villagers in their own ability to shape their futures.

The Chelibeti Club, near the inner-terai district town of Gaighat, is a small example of this positive trend. Women from Bhujal, Magar and Rai communities from a village called Baraghare and a squatter settlement of landless people on the banks of the river below Baraghare formed this women's

group in 1991. All are considered low-caste in the area. They run literacy classes and a discussion group, network with other NGOs in the area, run a savings scheme and an income generation project involving goat rearing. According to Tara Kumari Rai, president of the Club in 1994, 'Although the village is near the town, the women here don't know anything about education. But after we ran the non-formal education class, they understood that education is important. Now they are aware, and that's the main benefit. Now we are a group, not just individuals, we feel we can achieve something.'

One thing they achieved, against tremendous odds, was to build a road from their village to the district town of Udaipur. They wanted a road because the old path was long and circuitous, between fields along bunds which would become increasingly obscured as the crops matured. The club members also thought that easier access would raise the price of their land and attract better-off people to settle in their village. The land belongs to the government but, throughout Panchayat times, was farmed by a powerful land-owning family. During the first phase of building the road, there were 300-400 volunteers digging. They made half of the 3-km road three times only to have it destroyed during the night by members of the family who were farming the land and therefore opposed to the road. Each time the volunteers rebuilt the road.

Tara Kumari Rai recalls, 'all the people helping us to dig were very poor and had no money for food, but we didn't have food to give them. My second child was only 25 days old. I had to leave the baby with my mother-in-law, she fed the baby with cows' milk. Sometimes we asked ourselves, "why are we doing this?"'

The clubs opponent's have already taken the members to court and lost. 'We thought, why are we bothering, it's not as if the road is just for our benefit! We had no time to eat. We were so tired, and then we had to go to court as well,' Tara Kumari Rai recalls. Yet the club members struggle on to fight for what they know is their right.

This struggle would probably never have happened in the old days. But old norms are constantly challenged today. Even caste divisions are beginning to break down as more and more villagers begin to see the value in standing together to improve their lives. However limited the power of democracy nationally, it is helping to empower people locally.

Opposite page: Small-scale hydroelectric scheme in the middle hills, near Tatopani. This type of development could greatly benefit the country's economy and improve the lives of Nepalis.

Tulashi Pandua joined the Chelibeti club to learn to read and write. With her new-found confidence, she quickly got involved in other activities, including goat-rearing. The club provided her with some breeding goats, and when they produce kids which she can sell, she will pay back to the club the value of her goats.

Annemarie Papatheofilou

