

Letter to the editor of Kuensel, Bhutan's National Newspaper

April 1, 2001

Sir,

I agree with the arguments put forward in the article *Tourism industry: growth or stagnation?* (March 24), but I thought a few comments may help in the discussion on the future of tourism in Bhutan.

Although the percentage of trekkers may have decreased over the years, the actual number of trekkers appears to have increased (at least when deduced from the data presented in the article). Therefore, trekking may not be on the decline, it just hasn't increased as fast as cultural tours have. The question, then, would be how to further stimulate growth of treks and other outdoor activities.

It is true that the majority of trekkers walk to Jhomolhari, with the Druk Path probably coming in second. While new routes could take some pressure off the Jhomolhari trek, that alone would not solve the problem of overcrowding. After all, the Everest and Annapurna treks in Nepal are both horribly overcrowded, but still people flock to them in droves. The reason is that a majority of travellers wants to see the supposedly most famous sights of a country. So even if Jhomolhari became overcrowded, people would still want to see it – if it is so popular, it must be worth visiting, is the common perception. Moreover, the trek offers spectacular views without having to go over 4000m (for the easiest option). No wonder then, that all tour operators offer some flavour of the Jhomolhari trek in their programs. It would be difficult to offer a trek with similarly spectacular views without having to cross one or more 5000m passes. The only option I know of would be to construct a new trail along the Po Chhu from Punakha up to Lunana. The view of Table Mountain from Thanza certainly rivals that of Jhomolhari from Jangthang, and there are ample opportunities for hikes around Thanza.

For Jhomolhari, the best solution may be first of all to install some more permanent facilities at campsites along the trail, such as outhouses and garbage disposal facilities, and appointing trail maintenance crews to periodically maintain and clean the trail. If the number of visitors increases further, one could install a permit system. At this point this system would not have to turn back anyone, but can merely help the Department of Tourism (DOT) to spread out the trekkers evenly. Right now, on some days one has to share the campsites with a group of 40 people, while on the next day the camps are nearly empty. A trek management system maintained by DOT could record the number of expected tourists on each section of the trail at any given day. Tour operators could use this information to inform their clients of the days on which the trails are least crowded. A similar system is being used successfully to manage the most popular trails in New Zealand and other countries. It would be easy to implement here, as all treks are already being reported to the DOT. If the system were installed for all routes, the DOT and the operators could accurately track the popularity of the various routes throughout the year, and programs could be adjusted accordingly.

As for alternative treks, there actually is quite a selection of routes; in fact, two new routes have been opened this year: Bhey Laga and the Royal Trek. Yet most of the other routes are barely advertised. Or example, the pressure on the Druk Path would easily be relieved by opting for the Dagala Thousand Lakes trek instead. This route is as pretty as the Druk Path, has approximately the same difficulty and length, and is as close to Thimphu. There are even shorter (unpublished) versions of this trek that can be completed in 3 days. Yet it is barely used, partly because many operators find it hard to arrange horses for the trek.

Another major factor influencing trekking in Bhutan is the weather. In Nepal the spring and fall trekking seasons are about two-three months each, even in the high Himalayas. Trekkers wanting to see the views in the high Himalayas in Bhutan really only have one month in spring (April), and one

in fall (October). In the other months it either rains or the chance of snow closing the passes is too great. I agree with the writers of the article that to attract trekkers in other seasons, more low-altitude treks should be opened. However, that may be difficult with the present security situation. The Haa-Samtse area would be one option, but so far this area has been off-limits to tourism. Another option is to offer day hikes or short two-three day treks around Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha. Many of these hikes can be walked year-round, and could be combined with a cultural program or specialized activities like rafting or birdwatching. We are working on a guide with about 25 day hikes around Thimphu, which hopefully will encourage more people to take hikes in the mountains around the capital.

As the article noted, diversification is important for the future of tourism in Bhutan. However, the problem with many of the suggested activities is that not only they require more investment, but especially additional well-trained, specialized guides. Many of the small operators probably cannot afford to train specialized guides, and keep them on their pay-roll year-round. Yet if operators want to offer specialized tours, they will have to be able to offer proper guides. As mentioned, even now the number of good trekking guides is limited, especially for the less-travelled treks. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to training and licensing of specialized guides.

The article also suggested opening the east for tourism. Indeed the east has enough attractions to draw visitors. But, I feel that not only the lack of facilities is an obstacle, but also the amount of travelling required to get there. Many tourists are reluctant to sit in a bus on a windy road for two-three days just to reach their destination, even if costs were reduced. Unless tourists could come in directly from Guwahati, it may be difficult to attract large numbers of visitors to the east. Again the security situation may preclude that option for the moment.

Finally, the article correctly states that Bhutanese operators lack the resources to promote their programs abroad. The web could change that, and a number of operators have created websites in the hope to attract tourists directly. Although advertising through websites is cheap, it is also extremely difficult to attract clients this way, especially for small local operators. Besides, most of the operators' sites offer similar programs, and have similar limited information about Bhutan. One alternative would be to create a well-designed tourism portal for Bhutan, managed by the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators, which acts as a one-stop information stop for tourism information in Bhutan. Individual operators could market their products on the site, and even sell their tours online. The site could also maintain extensive information about the country. Having a common website would reduce costs for individual operators, and allow for more effective promotion, making it easier for clients to find the tours they prefer. The backing of the Association would provide a guarantee of quality for the clients. Larger operators wishing to maintain their own sites could still have their sites listed on the portal, thereby eliminating the need to advertise their own sites.

Clearly, there is ample scope for profitable high quality –low volume outdoor tourism in Bhutan. With some additional management of the present trekking programs, and innovative new outdoors programs one could certainly increase the number of outdoor tourists, without compromising quality.

Rogier Gruys
Thimphu