Chapter 14
The State and Community-Based Projects of Environmental Conservation in Promoting Mountain Ecotourism in Lesotho

Tšepiso Augustinus Rantšo  
Department of Development Studies, National University of Lesotho, Lesotho

Khotso Ketsi  
Department of Historical Studies, National University of Lesotho, Lesotho

ABSTRACT

Lesotho is divided into four ecological zones, the Highlands, the Foot Hills, the Senqu River Valley, and the Lowlands. Many people in these geographic areas are faced with poverty, unemployment, and other social problems. As a result, they exploit the natural environment for making a living. To conserve the endangered natural species and promote mountain ecotourism, the Lesotho Government established national parks and nature reserves. These state-owned national parks followed a top-down approach where the locals were not involved in the decision-making. Thus, these were subjected to vandalism from communities in the adjacent areas. Some locals have established botanical gardens to conserve environmental resources, thus promoting mountain ecotourism. The state, NGOs, and private entrepreneurs support community-based projects of environmental conservation and mountain ecotourism. While some of the destinations have resulted in establishment of communication networks, many places in the Highlands remain inaccessible and thus negatively impact mountain ecotourism.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in many developing countries are characterized by social and economic challenges such as poverty and high unemployment rate. Although the means of living in the rural areas is subsistence farming, occurrence of natural disasters such as drought has affected production negatively. Therefore,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1302-6.ch014
mountain tourism is considered as an option to reduce poverty and improve the living standards of rural people. In this case, mountain tourism has been increasing in many parts of the world (Herberlein, Fredman, & Vuorlo, 2002). Recent studies show that mountain eco-tourism has been promoted by many countries over the past three decades.

Many people are attracted to the mountain areas by the scenery, especially biodiversity (Manwa, 2012). In this process, the mountain people benefit from tourists in different ways. First, the host communities earn some income from tourists by offering different services. For instance, the local people often sell artifacts to the tourists. Incomes earned from selling the handicraft goods are mostly used to maintain the households and provide for the basic needs such as education, health and food (Uddahammbar, 2006). In this case, one can rightly argue that mountain tourism promotes the entrepreneurial spirit among rural communities. Furthermore, many mountain people earn some incomes by engaging as tour guides. Many local people know about the places of interest in the close vicinity. Therefore, they guide tourists to explore these mountain places.

Second, mountain eco-tourism promotes conservation of biodiversity for both leisure and intergenerational equity. According to Nepal (2002) mountain eco-tourism has been the most important conservation strategy of degraded environments in many countries. In addition, some countries have promoted mountain eco-tourism to tackle some problems related to poverty and other social and economic challenges. It is a fact that many rural households depend on nature for survival or making a living, and this has caused extinction of both fauna and flora in many places. However, when people benefit from the available natural resources in the country, they are bound to preserve them (Kiper, 2013). Therefore, mountain eco-tourism is often commended for conservation of environmental resources in many parts of the world.

Third, places of attraction in the mountain areas promote establishment of communication networks. Research shows that there has been rural and urban divide in many developing countries. Rural areas are often disadvantaged in terms of provision of social services, infrastructure and many others. However, tourist attraction places in the mountain areas have resulted in construction of roads and communication networks. The advent of hotels, guest houses and other hospitality services has decentralized most of the services that were once found in urban areas. And this has promoted rural-urban linkages in many parts of the world (Tacoli, 1998).

**Objectives, Approach and Methodology**

The present study aims at assessing the contribution of mountain eco-tourism to development and livelihood-making in Lesotho. Virtually all eco-tourism activities in Lesotho are taking place in the mountains which cover about two thirds of the country’s natural landscape. Since the advent of the Lesotho Highlands Water Projects (LHWP) in 1986, mountain eco-tourism has taken mainly the form of national parks, and nature reserves, in combination with cultural heritage preservation. The study looks at the prospects and challenges of the mountain eco-tourism, drawing illustrations from selected mountain eco-tourism projects. These include the Sehlaba-Thebe National Park, Tšehlanyane National Park and the Katse Botanical Garden, which are state owned, on the one hand. On the other hand, the study examines, a small but growing number of community-based mountain eco-tourism projects. Examples are drawn from the Semonkong Botanical Garden, Ha Baroana Heritage Site and Botanical Garden, and the Kome Cultural Village/Caves. The study notes in particular the different kinds of challenges facing these mountain tourism attractions in general and public participation in particular.