

# INDEPENDENT BACKPACKER TOURISM: KEY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN REMOTE MOUNTAIN DESTINATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Multifunctionality of mountain ecosystems is a goal that is sometimes most compatible with independent backpacker tourism. Resilient to economic and political disturbance, undemanding in terms of infrastructure development, and driven by motives compatible with cultural and natural conservation, independent backpackers can also respond quickly to new recreational opportunities. This paper has four sections. The first section reviews current issues in ecotourism. It concludes that there are two distinct trends. On the one hand, the term has been widely used to promote a wide variety of operations, which collectively constitute "business as usual." On the other hand, the concept as used by "purists" does not, in the case of most remote mountain destinations, offer a means of sustainable development. The second section describes an ecotourism project in Lijiang (Yunnan Province, China). The objective was to promote independent backpacker tourism as a means of expanding economic opportunity while fostering cultural and natural conservation. This project may serve as a useful example of how opportunities can be recognized and yet missed. The third section describes an ongoing tourism development program in Rolwaling, Nepal. This program is being implemented by "Bridges: Projects in Rational Tourism Development" <http://www.bridges-prtd.com/>, an organization directed by the author of this paper. We hope that this innovative project will serve as a pilot for similar programs elsewhere. The fourth section proposes strategies for the expansion of independent trekking tourism, based on two survey studies as well as observations in Nepal and China.*

## INTRODUCTION

Visions of sustainable development in remote natural areas are generally associated with the precepts of ecotourism. In this paper we take note of current issues and trends in ecotourism and conclude that, while a mix of tourism types is usually both desirable and unavoidable, independent backpacker tourism is in many cases a preferable target for development. Not only is "ecotourism" as a market niche enmired in squabbles over who is and is not an ecotourist, but the trajectory seems headed for a developmental cul-de-sac, limited to upscale tourism in artificial social environments. Unfettered by utopian aspirations, recreational trekking routes for independent backpackers may serve as the template for a variety of microenterprises which dovetail with the pre-existing multifunctional relationship between local residents and their environment; and they may trickle-drip the economic benefits over a broad region.

By "independent backpacker" we mean someone who is traveling, either alone or with others, but not with a guided tour, and using a backpack rather than a suitcase or other form of luggage. An essential characteristic of backpackers as a market segment is that they can travel in virtually any environment, from urban to remote alpine. (Off-road, they are "trekkers"—or "independent trekkers,"

if the distinction is necessary.) Backpackers can be readily identified on the basis of a conspicuous visual marker, a marker that happens to play a key role in their travel behavior. The backpack allows them to travel around a country visiting urban centers for months, and then to take off into the hills for a two-week trek. Backpackers frequent teahouses as well as museums and cathedrals, travel by plane, bus and rail as well as by foot and (less commonly, these days) by thumb. Independent backpackers can be cultural tourists one day, sun-and-beach tourists the next, and adventure tourists on a weekend rafting trip on yet another day. They may join locally-based organized tours, or they may stop traveling and take a job. Likewise, commercial groups may be outfitted with backpacks, and even travel in the manner of independent backpackers. This is of little importance to us. The need to distinguish reliably between independent backpackers and other tourists is not urgent: we are neither counting on the other tourists nor trying to impose guidelines for true backpackers.

Many independent backpackers could actually be considered "ecotourists" and are sometimes attracted to ecotour operations, although they do not set out with that specific objective. However, from the point of view of development planners, focusing on this market as independent backpackers is simpler than targeting "ecotourists." It avoids the quandary of defining travelers accord-

ing to their intentions (which are essentially unknowable and arguably irrelevant) or according to the results of their visit (which can only be determined through long-term assessment, perhaps not at all).

From the point of view of remote mountain destinations, the independent backpacker market offers numerous significant advantages. Unlike members of commercial tours, independent backpackers are opportunistic (that is, open to new opportunities as they develop), flexible in itinerary, relatively undemanding regarding comforts and infrastructure, and often inclined to maximize their travel time by cutting expenses. Backpackers appreciate comfort but are also looking for adventure. “Roughing it” is actually an objective. (Note the name of one of the more popular guidebook series, *Rough Guides*.) Although they are generally equipped to hike, few are prepared for self-sufficient expeditions. Rather than sleep in tents and cooking their own food, most will take advantage of whatever local accommodations and facilities are available on the trail. Such “teahouse trekking” results in a high proportion of expenditures going directly into the pockets of local people with comparatively little “economic leakage.” While backpackers may not spend as much per day as conventional tourists, they generally stay longer. To reach this market, long-distance marketing is unnecessary. Word-of-mouth, bulletin board messages, internet postings, and a passing mention in a Lonely Planet guide book are sufficient. Independent backpackers are less likely than commercial groups to cancel plans due to actual or potential political disturbance or natural catastrophe. They are generally youthful (at least in outlook), ecosensitive, eager to learn and willing to help. All of these traits make independent backpackers the ideal market for new destinations in impoverished mountain regions.

Although basic infrastructure requirements are simple, initiating trekking tourism is not necessarily simple. In this paper the authors recount two attempts to establish such development, discussing setbacks and proposing opportunities to better exploit the potential of backpacker tourism in the future. The first sprang out of a collaborative research project undertaken in the early 1990s by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences and the Geography Department of the University of California at Davis which focused on the *Yu Long Xue Shan*, or Jade Dragon Snow Mountains, of Lijiang County, Yunnan Province, China.<sup>1</sup> Using ideas generated in this project, the authors founded Bridges: Projects in Rational Tourism Development (Bridges-PRTD), a small private company which since 1999 has been conducting research and assisting in development in the Himalayan valley of Rolwaling, Nepal.

While both these projects were conceived as community-based development, we have become increasingly aware of the need to attend to conditions on a broader scale. In the final section of this paper, which focuses on national and municipal planning, we discuss opportunities for increasing and enhancing the beneficial impacts of independent backpacker tourism.

## PART I: ECOTOURISM

The conjunction in 2002 of the UN-sponsored International Year of Mountains and International Year of Ecotourism reflects the perception that tourism, and particularly ecotourism, might offer a panacea for the troubles of impoverished remote mountain areas. Mountains may be repositories of rich natural resources, but the identification and extraction of that wealth can be expensive as well as damaging to the environment and to the people who depend on them. Tourism, on the other hand, capitalizes on the most accessible of resources—those that can be observed or experienced by passive visitors. Some forms of tourism, such as climbing or rafting, may require more active participation by the consumers requiring some development of infrastructure, but by and large the key resource is relatively inexhaustible, the market presents itself *in situ*, and start-up costs are trivial compared to virtually any other development.

Unfortunately, there are complications. Mountain communities are intensely dependent on a multifunctional relationship with their natural environment. In general, they are subsisting at or beyond the carrying capacity of their cultivated lands. Animal husbandry, hunting, and collection of forest products are all likely to be critical to economic survival. Isolated from services available to lowland communities (especially electricity and medicine), the mountain communities depend on local resources. The mountains also play a key role in the spiritual life of their human dependents. These multiple functions impose multiple constraints, and indigenous communities necessarily evolve relationships with their environment that allow sustained reliance on limited and fragile resources. The introduction of new consumers into this system tends to cause significant cultural and ecological disruption. The phenomenon of ecotourism is essentially an effort to accommodate guests into the natural and cultural ecology of remote destinations in a way that will optimize benefits and minimize hazards to all stakeholders, including flora and fauna, and also instill in the tourist a globalized consciousness of the importance of preserving Earth’s fragile biological and cultural bounty.

### DEFINITION

The definition of “ecotourism” has itself been a contentious issue (Wearing and Neil 2000). An underlying inconvenience is that the word has gained currency in the language-at-large as a vaguely conceived umbrella for any kind of ecosensitive travel. This usage is fully compatible with the original meaning intended by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, who in 1983 coined the neologism “ecoturismo” as a portmanteau for “turismo ecológico” (Wood 2002). In 1988, he defined ecotourism as travel “to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing

cultural aspects found in these areas.” This definition says nothing about the manner of studying, admiring, and enjoying, or whether all three sub-objectives must be intended by each ecotourist on every ecotourism occasion, or whether the object of “studying, admiring and enjoying” had to be the sole or even primary purpose.

The earliest definition proposed by The Ecotourism Society in 1991 eliminates the confusion about those purposes and adds a qualifier to the manner of travel, but it remains loose: “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.” According to both of these definitions, as long as you engage in some outdoor activity, refrain from unnecessary damage to the environment, and directly or indirectly contribute to the local economy (if there is one), you are a probably an ecotourist. Skiing, mountain climbing, and sunbathing are obviously compatible activities.

Revised definitions have become narrower and more specific, and there has been controversy on virtually every element of the concept. What, for example, is meant by “relatively undisturbed natural areas”? Some interpretations lean to “pristinity,” although that quality is not likely to be found anywhere much closer than the Moon, and it would certainly disappear with the arrival of the first ecotourists. Other experts would like to include, for instance, Central Park in New York City (Weaver 2001).

The problem of definition might be reaching a stasis with the publication by the United Nations Environmental Program (which shares with the World Tourism Organization the mandate for overseeing IYE) of a slender (and *a fortiori* more authoritative) volume entitled *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability*. The author, Megan Epler Wood, founder and president of the International Ecotourism Society, cites the definition adopted by the World Conservation Union (formerly IUCN) in 1996:

Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features—both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. [Wood 2002]

The brevity of the definition is vitiated, however, by the ancillary inclusion of lists of apparently canonical “Components of Ecotourism” and “Principles of Ecotourism,” as well as “Characteristics of a Good Ecotour” and guidelines for nature tour operators (Wood 2002).

#### ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION

By far the hottest issue these days is “ecotourism certification” or, more broadly, “ecolabeling” (Font and Buckley 2001; Honey 2002). In part, the push for accreditation stems from the fuzzy definition of “ecotourism,” as the positive connotations have encouraged a liberal interpre-

tation of the term among marketers (a.k.a. “greenwashing”). Certification is seen to be necessary for two basic reasons: (1) to encourage compliance with ecotourism objectives, and (2) to offset the costs of compliance by giving a competitive advantage to compliant enterprises.

By 1998 there were 46 ecolabel programs, mostly European, but the number and coverage is rapidly increasing. The Blue Flag Campaign, initiated in 1986 in France and adopted by the European Community in 1987, had by 1999 certified the quality of more than 2,500 beaches and marinas. Green Globe 21, based on the principles of UNCED’s Agenda 21, was established by the German Touristik Union International (TUI) in 1994 and is one of the most widely recognized certification programs for tourism enterprises throughout the world. The first ecotourism certification scheme to actually achieve official status at a national level, a step considered essential for effective implementation, is Australia’s National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) funded by the Office of National Tourism.

Despite the progress, a number of relatively intractable difficulties have been encountered:

1. For greatest impact, it would be best to have a single certifying authority. Given the range of services and contexts, and the lack of any pre-existing entity with jurisdiction in such matters, convergence is likely to remain impractical.
2. Most of the certification schemes are based on narrow checklists that tend not to cover all pertinent factors.
3. Inspection and monitoring is logistically problematic and expensive.
4. Objectivity is likely to be compromised as long as the operating costs of the certifier are underwritten by the applicants themselves. (Who in fact is going to certify the certifier?)
5. Virtually all programs are voluntary, with no provision for enforcement.

And, particularly in view of these problems, there is an evident need to monitor the impact of the ecolabels, which would involve another level of logistical problems and costs. A parallel phenomenon is the proliferation of codes of conduct aimed at the tourists themselves. Once again there are problems in the formulation of uniform and site-appropriate guidelines and also in monitoring implementation and effectiveness.

#### BUSINESS AS USUAL?

More distressing than the conceptual and procedural controversies are the attacks of those who maintain that both ecolabels for businesses and guidelines for tourists are little more than marketing devices for commercial enterprises. This charge is certainly justified in at least some cases, and as mentioned above, a major topic of discussion among

ecotourism exponents is how to distinguish *bona fide* ecotourism from “greenwash.” Not surprisingly, many of the most avid purists are actually interested parties and stand to gain financially both from the publicity of the controversy itself and also from the impact of accreditation.

Among those unconvinced by all the ecosensitive talk is a rather significant group of stakeholders. A coalition of indigenous peoples has been protesting IYE on the grounds that they were not adequately represented in the planning of the year’s agenda.

...For centuries, Indigenous Peoples have suffered from displacement and dispossession and we see the incursion of the profit-driven global tourism industry as well as the rhetoric of ‘sustainable development’ in the IYE as the latest threat to our lands and our communities... The IYE must not be used to legitimate the invasion and displacement of Indigenous territories and communities. (Declaration of the International Forum on Indigenous Tourism, prepared for the World Ecotourism Summit and the World Summit on Sustainable Development at Oaxaca, Mexico, March 18–20, 2002.)

#### CONCEPTUAL INCOMPATIBILITIES

Apart from these unseemly controversies, there are aspects of “ecotourism proper” that we find problematic from the perspective of tourism development in impoverished remote mountain regions. Some seem to proceed from oversights that might be corrected. For instance, one “principle” of ecotourism is the insistence on “minimizing the use of fossil fuels.” Clearly, the optimal energy solution in many remote mountain destinations would be micro-hydropower plants, but these are generally unfeasible in the earlier stages of development. This means that fossil fuels are sometimes the best hope. In the Khumbu of Nepal, for instance, the use of kerosene has been essential in the reduction of pressure on forest resources. The idea of minimizing the use of fossil fuels is actually quite ironic in the context of an industry that promotes travel to destinations on the other side of the world, consuming thousands of liters of (non-renewable) jet fuel per person.

A more fundamental problem is that many of the “principles” or “components” of “ecotourism proper” are predicated on the assumption that ecotourism is and will continue to be comprised primarily of packaged tours. Much is made, for instance, of the importance of education—not just passive observation and contemplation, but “interpretation,” with trained (and certified!) guides and material distributed to travelers even prior to departure. Aside from the presumption that tourists constantly need to be taught, and moreover that they couldn’t learn what they needed from guidebooks and other reading material or casual discussion with local residents, there is the assumption that the tourism enterprise would have the resources to keep trained guides on hand.

Other “principles of ecotourism” prescribe that revenues be directed “to the conservation and management of natural and protected areas,” and “that environmental and social base-line studies as well as long-term monitoring programs” be carried out (Wood 2002). These stipulations are clearly not going to be feasible in an impoverished remote destination where the first—and perhaps only—step toward involvement in the tourism industry may be the conversion of a few private homes into part-time teahouses catering to occasional independent trekkers.

In fact, projects that conform to current notions of “ecotourism proper” are likely to require substantial investments of outside time, know-how, and capital, and they will remain dependent on sophisticated marketing beyond the local region. They may serve a valuable function by way of demonstrating sustainable development, but they are not going to serve as a viable model for the thousands of communities that would like to participate but have no outside funding or assistance.

Given the tendency of both commercial and educational tours to include both natural and urban destinations, we might expect “ecotourism” to acquire an even broader application. After all, volunteer work and study (as well as appreciation and enjoyment) can easily focus on the ecology (natural as well as cultural) in relatively impacted as well as relatively un-impacted areas. In short, we believe it would be fair to use the word “ecotourism” to describe the kind of traffic we would like to see in remote mountain destinations. On the other hand, we find it simpler to avoid the term—which is why we call our company “Bridges: Projects in *Rational Tourism* Development.” We are not trying to establish a new branch of alternative tourism; we simply prefer to avoid the moral pretensions and lexical polemics that have become associated with “ecotourism.”

#### PART II: THE JADE DRAGON TREKKING PROJECT<sup>2</sup>

In 1993 and 1994, a collaborative research project involving the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences and the Geography Department of the University of California at Davis undertook an intensive study of six villages in the Jade Dragon Snow Mountains (*Yu Long Xue Shan*) of Lijiang County in Yunnan Province, People’s Republic of China, with special attention to issues of gender and ethnic equity (Ives and He 1996; Sicroff 1998; Swope 1995). This research was intended both as a source of baseline data for further studies and also as a basis for recommendations regarding appropriate and sustainable development.

In November 1994, toward the end of our second three-month research expedition, the YASS-UCD research team participated in public meetings at Wenhai and Yuhu to dis-

cuss the future. It came as something of a surprise that in both villages, despite the fact that only a handful of travelers had passed through in several decades, there existed a nearly unanimous conviction that tourism was the solution to all problems. Villagers presented numerous specific ideas as to how to exploit local natural and cultural assets. We took notes, and compiled an ambitious but scalable program to develop community-based tourism, which was subsequently approved in both towns by apparently unanimous voice vote. What follows is a summary of the principle elements of the proposal.

The feasibility of the proposed trekking routes depended on two fundamental considerations: Are the assets sufficient to attract tourists? Would such development suit the needs of the community? Of course, there are numerous potential obstacles to any development plan, and several were elaborated in our plan. However, there is no point in reviewing these here; instead, we will simply explain the obstacles that did in fact materialize.

#### BACKGROUND

Technically, both Wenhai (3050 m) and Yuhu (2730 m) are “administrative villages” within Baisha Township, immediately north of Lijiang City. The village generally referred to as “Yuhu” actually comprises two “natural villages,” Upper Yuhu and Lower Yuhu, which together with the natural village of Wenhua (two kilometers east of Yuhu) form the “administrative village” of Yuhu. Wenhai Administrative Village includes four natural villages: Upper (*Xia*) Wenhai, Lower (*Shang*) Wenhai, Runangu, and Enjiding. Upper and Lower Wenhai are both located near the administrative village headquarters on Wenhai Lake; Runangu is an hour’s walk to the northwest, across the valley from Enjiding village. Because of time constraints, our investigation focused on Upper Wenhai and on Upper and Lower Yuhu, with only cursory attention to the other natural villages.

#### NEED

Yuhu is one of the poorest administrative villages in Lijiang County. In 1992, the total income of the two natural villages of Yuhu was 474,824¥, or 442.11¥ (US\$54) per capita. According to 1992 figures, there were 273 households in the entire administrative village of Yuhu, with a population of 1,277. The number of members per household had dropped substantially over the previous four decades, from 6.00 per household in 1950 to 4.70 in 1992. These trends, in a minority region (where families are not legally restricted to one child) suggest the influence of poor nutrition, out-migration, and depressed economic opportunity. This is consistent with our finding in June 1993 that thirteen households (with 55 members) out of the 123 households in Upper Yuhu alone had insufficient resources to meet their basic nutritional needs.

At the time of our visits, there were no paved roads in Yuhu. The town was linked by a narrow one-kilometer dirt road to the new paved road that connects the village of Yulong (site of the Yufeng monastery, with its 10,000-Blossom Camellia) to the “highway” projecting north from Lijiang up the center of Lijiang Plain. Although a scant twenty minutes by taxi from downtown Lijiang City, daily life in Yuhu depended entirely on medieval technology. Fields were tilled by ox-drawn plows. Electricity was available on a limited scale, enough for a few dim lights; many households have radios, but there are no TVs. Plumbing was non-existent. The water supply was an open channel paralleling the main street; domestic animals waded into it for a drink, villagers washed their clothes in it, trash was tossed in or around it, and from it was drawn all water for cooking and drinking, generally in the early morning when it was somewhat cleaner. Toilet facilities were primitive outhouses; feces and odd scraps of paper or cigarette wrappers used as toilet paper accumulated where they dropped, or a few feet away, eventually to be spread over the fields as night soil. The only “modern” facility was the concrete latrine in the schoolyard, a wretched stinking open cesspool crawling with maggots and worms—like public toilets everywhere in China. The only recreational facility was a pool table attached to one of two minuscule convenience shops with window-counters facing on the widening in the access road that serves as a primitive market square. Here residents sold freshly butchered pigs through a haze of flies, and when the peddler came through once a week, bartered grain for noodles. A somewhat larger walk-in store on the south side of the village headquarters purveyed sneakers, flashlights, and a modest inventory of other household necessities.

Conditions in Wenhai were (and remain) even more primitive than those in Yuhu. The total cash income of Wenhai administrative village in 1992 was 346,540¥, or 419.54¥ (US\$51) per capita. Not only was productivity inadequate to provide for minimal nutritional requirements, but economic prospects were so bad that women from other villages were unwilling to marry young men from Wenhai. While Wenhai is only 23 kilometers by road and trail from Lijiang (and much less, as the crow flies), it is quite remote from modern influences due to its location at an elevation of 3,180 meters in the southern foothills of the Jade Dragon Mountains. The closest road is one that leads to Yuhu and Yufeng Si. It takes three to four hours to reach Wenhai by foot from Baisha, and all goods must be carried by humans or pack animals. Due to the elevation, winters are cold, without electricity, Wenhai was entirely dependent on fuel wood and charcoal for cooking and heating.

At the time of our study, it seemed unlikely that conventional agriculture could provide more than a meager subsistence way of life in either Yuhu or Wenhai. Illegal timber cutting, however, had become a significant element of the economy. Not only were important resources being

depleted, but essential labor was being diverted from field crops and animal husbandry. As is generally the case where black market activities compete with legitimate interests, there was collateral damage to the social fabric: fights and rivalries had broken out, and representatives of traditional institutions had been threatened and even attacked as they tried to enforce regulations.

As a supplemental and largely seasonal activity, tourism appears to be a potentially lucrative alternative to such current “sidelines” as basket and broom making, not to mention illegal exploitation of forest resources. Moreover, the need to provide hospitality at an internationally acceptable standard would introduce improvements in sanitation, water supply, waste disposal, and basic conditions, as well as stimulate interest in English, service training, and general education. These would inevitably enhance the general standard of living. Mere exposure to Western culture close at hand would broaden the horizons of all residents and motivate some to seek greater opportunities for themselves individually, for their families, and ultimately for the entire community.

#### CORE ASSETS

Both Wenhai and Lijiang share in the rich natural and cultural heritage of Lijiang County and of Yunnan as a whole. These are really too numerous to elaborate in any kind of detail. For our purposes it is sufficient to point out that the 1996 edition of Lonely Planet’s guidebook for China highlighted only two locales as having the potential to become “legendary backpacker destinations.” One was Xishuangbanna, in southern Yunnan, and the other Lijiang (Taylor *et al.* 1996:129–130).

Wenhai and Yuhu, though very different, have similar assets. Both are peaceful and exceedingly picturesque sanctuaries of a traditional way of life that elsewhere is rapidly dissolving and assimilating into mainstream Han culture. The natural surroundings are spectacular and diversified, with opportunities for picnicking, hiking, rock-scrambling, and mountain climbing.

In the Naxi language, Yuhu is called *Ngvlvkee* (“Foot of the Snow Mountain”), and indeed the village is perched on an alluvial fan at the foot of the southeastern escarpment, directly beneath the tallest peak in the Jade Dragon range. Though a small village, Yuhu is famous throughout the Naxi culture. For a long time, it was an important royal residence. The site of the palace itself is clearly marked by a group of cedars on the northern side of the current village. During the 1950s and 1960s glazed tiles with engraved designs were discovered there. In addition, Yuhu was home base for Joseph Rock, an exceedingly flamboyant Austrian-born naturalized American who, from 1922 to 1949, carried out pioneering studies in natural history and Naxi philology on behalf of *National Geographic Magazine* and Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum. Yuhu’s glamorous history and its connection with Joseph Rock are both important tourism assets.

Topographically, Wenhai’s setting contrasts strongly with Yuhu’s. The village is clustered around the northern shore of Wenhai Lake, an oval expanse about two kilometers long and three-quarters of a kilometer wide. During the dry winter, the lake drains away into limestone sinkholes at the southern terminus, leaving a broad meadow that is kept closely cropped by herds of mules, horses, and swine. To the west and east rise forested slopes; to the north, a humid forest of evergreens and rhododendrons stretches two or three kilometers before giving way to a broad deforested valley. Above Wenhai to the northeast towers the shimmering snow-clad peak of Shanzidou. The surroundings are dramatic, whether in late winter and spring, when Shanzidou looks down on a quaint little village of cottages and cobbled lanes and a vast green meadow dotted with horses and sheep, or in late summer and fall, when the meadow is transformed into a broad sapphire lake.

Although the name *Wen Hai* means “Culture Lake,” the town was never a significant cultural center; in fact, its traditional name was *Gan Hai*, or “Dry Lake,” and was changed after the Communist Revolution in order to inspire greater efforts to expand literacy. The current school is housed in the run-down shell of a monastery, which really ought to be reconstructed: with all the damage, the original beauty and grace is still evident, even to a non-specialist’s eye. Wenhai’s primary cultural attraction, however, must be the current way of life—admittedly, an unstable basis on which to build “sustainable” tourism, as the success of tourism development would change the object of its attention. In this regard, one of Wenhai’s stronger assets is surely its location. Just a few hours’ walk from Lijiang City, the nearest approximation to the twenty-first century in the northwestern part of Yunnan, Wenhai offers a glimpse of a traditional pastoral lifestyle. Remote (due to the topography), yet conveniently close at hand; impoverished, subsisting with very few modern amenities, yet not the least squalid, Wenhai is a natural destination for the culturally voyeuristic tourist.

Wenhai is a logical base camp for climbing expeditions. (When the British Royal Mountain Climbing Club mounted an expedition to climb Shanzidou in 1996, they stayed at Wenhai for two weeks, waiting for the weather to clear.) Apart from the main peak, there are nearby rock faces and caves, although the sharp and somewhat crumbly limestone may not be ideal for climbing.

Wenhai is also a good point of departure for visits to Runangu and other nearby villages. Runangu is even poorer and more authentic than Wenhai. Most of the Yi women still wear their traditional costumes, and their dance ensemble is a popular attraction when it appears in Wenhai and Yunshanping.

#### SYNERGISTIC MULTIFUNCTIONALITY: ANCILLARY DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

By providing an on-site market for under-exploited resources and by motivating shifts in energy allocation and

cultural priorities, a relatively small influx of visitors may initiate changes that have important repercussions beyond immediate tourism revenues. Such changes typically include strengthening of traditional life style, renewed interest in protection of natural resources, and introduction and expansion of cultivars and handicrafts. Given the extraordinarily high market value of specialty products when sold directly to a local end-consumer, tourism may catalyze initiatives that subsequently develop into new cash crops and cottage industries.

One of the immediate repercussions of a new tourist trade would be a small but relatively lucrative market for cash crops that would enhance the rather scant menu of staples generally consumed by villagers. Our experience in Nepal and elsewhere has shown that unusual luxury foods can become tourism magnets as important as any cultural or topographic attraction. Two notable examples on the Everest trekking route are cheese, produced at monasteries such as Thodung, and apple products (especially pie and cider), at Ringmo and on the Lamjura Pass.

The same cold climate and thin, sandy soil that limit productivity of the major field crops in Yuhu are actually quite propitious for other crops. The development of new markets for specialties has even encouraged reclamation of hitherto uncultivated land. Among the new crops are the large white bean (*da bai yun do*), and the *fen si gua* melon, whose seeds command a high market price. Prospects are also good for the expansion of horticultural crops, particularly apple and plum. Yuhu's cold climate is also suitable for growing apples, plums and other horticultural crops. Apples ripen much later in Yuhu than in other orchards in Lijiang County, giving the village an important competitive advantage.

Several potentially lucrative strategies for the husbandry development have been recognized in recent years. These involve *dzo* (yak-cow hybrid), *ximanda'er* (dairy cattle), pig, sheep, and fish. Some of these strategies actually involve the resurrection of traditional practices. From 1964 to 1987, there were still more than fifty *dzo* in the village. Since the implementation of "household responsibility," most of the *dzo* have been bought by the people of the Tibetan village Sandawan in the Hei Shui valley. The butter made from *dzo* milk is firm and tasty and stores well. It is also comparatively expensive: each kilogram of *dzo* butter can be sold for as much as 60¥, compared to 24¥ for ordinary cow butter. Sheep and goats, once numerous, can be exploited for the production of traditional woolen capes. The problem is that the traditional technique for making the capes has been all but lost in Yuhu; earlier, many old people were engaged in this handicraft, but now few are left. The consensus among the villagers is that, on an expanded scale, this cottage industry would be a useful addition to Yuhu's "sidelines" and would encourage the development of larger sheep herds. Sheep raising not only augments household income but also provides a source of high-quality fertilizer. The same cold-spring sources that are so important to Yuhu's herds also make Yuhu a good

locale for raising rainbow trout (*hong zun yu*), an introduced species that commands premium prices.

In Wenhai, there was considerable discussion of what to do with all the chickens when the tourism eggs started to hatch: there were many who spoke in favor of the purchase of a good stud yak so as to increase the quality and number of the cattle herds. This recommendation was ostensibly linked to tourism development insofar as the tourists would be a likely market for dairy products; on the other hand, it seemed evident to us that tourism represented something of a bird in the bush to many villagers, while livestock seemed a more reliable source of income.

Western tourists are notoriously fascinated with traditional Eastern medicine. Dr. Ho, a herbalist who caters to tourists in Baisha, has become the premier attraction of that town—a tourist draw far more important than the famous frescoes and architectural relics (Taylor 1996). Many of the important herbs are actually natives of the higher elevations, and Wenhai traditionally cultivates medicinal plants of very high quality. These plants include *chinguan*, *dangui*, *fuzi*, *muhang* and ginseng. The major medicinal plant today is marijuana. In 1972, the marijuana production was 100 kilogram from 5 mu; in 1992, 39 kilogram were harvested from 4 mu. (Sixteen mu equal one hectare.) While this particular crop might pose problems, the other crops could be marketed in sachets as tourist souvenirs.

Tourism can also work synergistically with efforts to conserve endangered natural resources. In the first place, residents quickly realize that the tourists are attracted to "pristine" natural environments and repelled by the kind of destruction caused by large-scale timber extraction. With sufficient economic motivation, the villagers are more likely to protect their resources.

This motivation would become even more compelling if villagers realized the potential market for specialized tours. Rhododendron and azalea tours would be a logical development, as there are 41 varieties in the area, many around the meadow of Xian Ji Ya. Already, villagers in Yuhu have undertaken to plant rhododendrons in their gardens. One, Jia Ya Lü of Lower Yuhu, learned during his work at the Institute for Botanical Studies at Kunming how to raise rhododendrons and began to cultivate them on his own in 1988. On a half-mu plot, he has grown some 40 different varieties, more than 30 from the local area. His plants have been sold to the Golden Palace (Jin Dian) in Kunming and to the Lu Shan Botanical Garden; he also sells specimens to Beijing and elsewhere. Jia Ya Lü's expertise could be the basis for specialized tours, with clients being led on a trek through the hills to see the rhododendrons in flower. The key problem is to prevent damage to natural stands through collection and transplantation. Specimens for export should be grown from seed or section. Reforestation of damaged stands would protect the resource and also enhance the tour.

Like Yuhu, Wenhai could be a good base for botanical tours. The rhododendron forests are in fact much more

accessible from Wenhai than from Yuhu. Wenhai is also close to some of the richest sources of alpine medicinal herbs; these lie several hundred meters above the trail that connects Wenhai and Runangu. The surviving fauna might be too rare to make much of, economically, except perhaps the birds. During certain months of the year, Wenhai Lake is visited by large numbers of migrating waterfowl, including rare cranes.

Bird-watching is another option. In the mountains above Yuhu there are still several species of pheasant, especially in the Xian Ji Ya area. In the early morning, the endangered white pheasant can be spotted. Ives and Messerli have proposed that, with protection and perhaps a captive-breeding program, the endangered endemic *Crossoptilon c. lichiangense* would be an enticing attraction for Western photographer-ornithologists (Ives and Messerli 1989:228).

Horses and mules have been used in recent decades primarily for illegal timber extraction operations. However, Wenhai's large herds of equines could become a tourism asset, whether to carry supplies for tourist consumption or to assist excursions and expeditions. The horses and mules are also picturesque, as they graze on the banks of the lake shore or on the meadow when the lake is dry. Many tourists have heard of Lijiang's reputation for horse breeding. A horse fair featured prominently in the BBC film "Beyond the Clouds," and guidebooks often refer vaguely to the possibility of finding someplace that rents horses for riding. This could become a lucrative option for Wenhai.

#### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Our proposal for the tourism in the Jade Dragon Mountains was essentially scalable. It could begin with modest steps in one or two locales, but we hoped that it would expand to embrace a large area with a wide range of attractions that would appeal to tourists with diverse interests. The basic concept was to promote tourism to Yuhu and Wenhai as stages of a longer route circumambulating the entire Jade Dragon Mountain range. This ten-to-twelve day route would encompass virtually all the villages in the region, and would accomplish two important goals: it would encourage trekkers to spend a maximum amount of time (and money) in the region without retracing their steps; and it would allow for an equitable distribution of tourism income. The full route would begin at Yuhu, ascend to Wenhai, traverse around to the northwest before descending near Qiaotou, continue through Tiger Leap Gorge to Daju, and return to Lijiang via the Nature Preserve. In some sections, new trails would need to be developed so that trekkers could avoid motor roads. The key attraction would be Tiger Leap Gorge, and it would be necessary to protect a hiking trail against encroachment by vehicular traffic.

Along the entire route, there are options for side trips that could become principal motivators in themselves, as

follows:

- From Yuhu: rhododendron and bird-watching walks; ascent to the meadow at 4,000 meters; walk up to a high ridge, or even a technical climb
- From Wenhai: hikes up the hills to the east and west, or over the pass to the southwest; walk up to the snow line; this is also the best place to launch a summit climb
- From Qiaotou: bus to Zhongdian, Sanpa, and Deqen, or even Tibet
- From Walnut Grove: trek to Haba village and then to the sinter terraces of Sanpa (an important religious pilgrimage site)
- From Daju: climb the northern peaks of the Jade Dragon Range (these are non-technical and do not require climbing experience)
- From Baishui: trek up Saba Gorge

These diverse attractions could bring trekkers who were not so intent on completing a full circuit on foot; or, they might become catalysts that motivate local interests to complete the trail links for a full circumambulation. In the shorter term, more modest circuits could be promoted: Yuhu-Wenhai-Yulong (site of the Yufeng Monastery with its 10,000-Blossom Camellia); or Yuhu-Wenhai-Lijiang (descending directly south of Wenhai, rather than returning eastward).

Initially, the key investment in Wenhai and Yuhu would be two small lodges capable of accommodating sixteen guests each. In Yuhu, the plan entailed the purchase of Joseph Rock's former residence and its conversion into a small museum. Other enhancements of Yuhu's current assets might follow, including the reconstruction of the Princess's island prison in Yuhu Lake, and the restoration of the Naxi kings' summer palace. To manage these developments—both with regards promotion and also as concerns the equitable sharing of labor and profits—it was agreed that each village would form a Tourism Cooperative and that the cooperatives would work together in developing and promoting the trekking circuit. Training of co-op managers would be provided by the Lijiang Cooperatives Project (Lijiang Naxizu Ziahixian Hezuoshe Choubei Lingdao Xiaozu), an institute founded in 1992 by members of Simon Fraser University (Canada) and the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences.

At Wenhai, there was the possibility of constructing a small dike around the sinkholes by which the lake drains away every year. This would allow more consistent exploitation of the lake as a tourist attraction, making boating and fishing possible. At the same time, the lake could be configured as a full-scale fishery, with isolated breeding and nursery pools, as well as weirs for convenient harvesting. (In the spring of 1993, the Lijiang County Water and Electrical Resources Department inspected the lake and estimated that a dike would cost 10,000¥, or US\$1,250.) One concern that is to some extent independent of the tourism project is how to protect wildlife at

Wenhai, especially waterfowl on the lake. At certain times of the year, the lake is visited by hundreds of ducks and other birds, including grebes, gulls, and even black storks (*Ciconia nigra*), a Category 1 Protected Species. These birds are hunted opportunistically by villagers despite existing laws protecting certain species. If the lake were designated a county-level nature reserve, it might be protected but at the risk of unappreciated outside interference. At any rate, this is a management issue that would certainly have to be addressed if Wenhai is to market itself to tourists for whom such wildlife resources constitute a significant attraction.

A somewhat more ambitious element of our plan was to set up a study-abroad program at Yuhu. Using the Joseph Rock museum and visitor center as an instructional base, students could come for instruction, research, and volunteer work in a variety of projects contributing to both tourism development and also to a database that would serve in the planning and monitoring of that development.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

From the small fund set aside for “mini-development projects,” the YASS-UCD team allocated 50,000¥ (about US\$9,000 at the then-current rate of exchange for Foreign Exchange Certificates, or FEC; US\$6,250, at the *ren min bi* exchange rate) to each of the two villages, Wenhai and Yuhu. Since the Ford Foundation declined to continue our funding beyond 1994, we had no role in the implementation of the Yuhu-Wenhai tourism project beyond the donation of this seed-money. Instead, a tourism cooperative was to be set up in each village, and they were to purchase land and buildings suitable for the establishment of a modest trekking lodge. It was hoped that the Yuhu cooperative would be able to purchase the farmhouse formerly occupied by Joseph Rock for conversion to a museum.

A farmhouse was soon purchased in Wenhai at a cost of 23,000¥, and some renovation was undertaken. This building was extensively damaged by the 1996 earthquake, and funds to complete the project were unavailable. In Yuhu, negotiations to purchase Rock’s former residence at a reasonable price proved unsuccessful. The owner wanted somewhat more than we had foreseen, and, though the difference was actually piddling by “real world” standards, a decision was made to construct a replica of that building as a trekking lodge. Land and materials were purchased, and a foundation was laid, but as in Wenhai, the money proved—somewhat mysteriously—insufficient.

Early on, we learned of several problems that had arisen concerning the Wenhai tourism co-op. First, due to widely expressed lack of interest in tourism development in Lower Wenhai, the co-op was set up within Upper Wenhai alone, despite the fact that the Lower Wenhai is an integral part of the target area and shares responsibility for the management of the lake. The exclusion of Lower Wenhai from the co-op exacerbates a long-standing friction between the

natural villages which began some years ago when Lower Wenhai allegedly appropriated part of Upper Wenhai’s collective forest. A second problem was the lack of training of co-op members in basic principles of organizational operation, especially in keeping records of decisions and expenditures. A third concern was that women seemed not to be involved in the co-op. The one female villager elected to the supervisory committee was soon replaced by her husband on the grounds that it was unseemly for a woman to go with men to meetings at night. Whether coincidentally or not, this woman had also been critical of the way certain funds were being spent.

When we visited Yuhu and Wenhai in May, 1997, we found both projects had stalled. The replica of Rock’s house in Yuhu was little more than a foundation, and although funding was unavailable, the Party Secretary said that there was some talk of building the lodge at the Yu Zhu Qing Tian scenic spot. We voiced numerous objections to this site, but, as funding was not available for that plan, there is little point in enumerating those objections here except to note that such development schemes are likely to go astray in the absence of continuous oversight.

The Wenhai lodge was much further along: fresh bedding was available, and my translator Yang Binghua and I were able to stay the night in relative comfort. The design and location of the lodge seem less than optimal: it is situated so that there is no unobstructed view of either the lake or the snow-clad peaks. Even if the building had been better located, the structure does not take advantage of the natural surroundings, as all the rooms are located at ground level inside a walled compound. When we asked how that property had been selected, we were told that a politically well-connected individual had been eager to sell it.

On the occasion of my May 1997 visit, we were able to observe Wenhai’s lake in its dry phase. We were surprised to see several hundred head of livestock grazing on the well-established pasture. Although the grass was still short, it seemed obvious to us that the lake-bed pasture must be a significant economic resource to many villagers; without it, villagers would have to move their herds and flocks to lands at least several hours away. We expressed our surprise to He Rong Zhi, the village headman, that villagers would contemplate damming the lake and foregoing the convenience of this pasture, even for a few months. He confirmed that in fact the villagers hated the lake. We asked him whether they had considered blasting out a channel at the lower end so that the lake would not form in the first place. He thought that sounded like a good idea.

In 2002, we found that our entire tourism development plan had been overtaken by events. Our ecolodges had stalled out by late 1997. Then, in 1998, the Nature Conservancy got involved in a huge project embracing an area of northwestern Yunnan the size of West Virginia. One of the elements of this project was ecotourism development in Wenhai. Using the YASS-UCD ecolodge as the basis of development, Graham Bullock and his colleagues revitalized the cooperative movement that had foundered in our

absence. The farmhouse has been rehabilitated, retrofitted with alternative energy technology, and is now prepared to welcome guests. The villagers of Lower Wenhai belatedly discovered an interest in tourism development, and a “home-stay” plan was developed involving five households.

The Yuhu component of our plan took a radically different route. A certain Mr. Huang used his private resources to acquire the original Rock farmhouse and convert it into a modest museum. (The unfinished “replica” was torn down.) Huang also constructed a rather spiffy hotel (more or less compatible with local architecture), and substantially modified the landscape at the northwest end of town, building shrines and stairs around the sacred sites. A parking lot was installed at the south end of town, bringing busloads of tourists. It was not possible for us, in the course of our extremely short visit, to determine the extent to which villagers were profiting from this development. Dozens stood around with caparisoned ponies hoping to find clients, with not much apparent success. For some reason connected with tourism development, a new ordinance had forced farmers to stop cultivating a number of fields at the south end of town. Despite the obvious opportunities for collaborative promotion, the Wenhai and Yuhu developments had proceeded totally independently. We were told that this was at least in part due to Mr. Huang’s acquisition of a captive monkey for the entertainment of his guests—a tactic incompatible with the Nature Conservancy’s *raison d’être*.

We believe that developments in Wenhai and Yuhu are typical of the two varieties of “ecotourism” that we disparage in the first part of this paper. Whatever the intentions of Mr. Huang, and we have no doubt that they were of the purest, Yuhu has become a mass-tourism destination. Tourists arrive in large groups, overwhelm the town with their simple numbers, commoditize everything in sight, and depart. Their contact with villagers is minimal. Certainly there is some economic benefit for the village as a whole, but the presence of a single starred hotel obviously impedes the development of smaller-scale lodges which would allow for much more equitable distribution of revenue.

The Wenhai project, on the other hand, is committed to doing the “right thing”: a large proportion of the villagers are involved financially, and there is a serious effort to minimize deleterious cultural and economic impacts. Yet the project is and must be atypical. The high cost of rooms (\$20 per night) is likely to deter independent backpacker tourism, and villagers cannot be permitted to compete with the communal ecolodge. The suppression of free-market forces entails social engineering and artificial constraints that are unlikely to be compatible with individual initiative, and they are probably unsustainable in the long run. In the short run, the project has moved at a glacial speed. Even after several years, there has been only a handful of paying visitors. The entire scheme depends on the continued presence of outside consultants and also on funding that is vastly incommensurate with the actual revenues gen-

erated by the lodge. More to the point, the project targets development only at one tiny village. It is unlikely that the Nature Conservancy could instigate such development in a dozen other nearby villages. Nor is there much likelihood that other villages will fall into line on their own to create a significant trekking route that would allow the economic and recreational benefits to penetrate the entire region.

Lijiang, meanwhile, has transmogrified from a remote and largely “undiscovered” destination into a mass-tourism Mecca attracting upward of a million domestic tourists per year. The Old Town (Dayan), now a World Heritage Site, has been gentrified and turned into a tourist ghetto. Where there were a total of six hotels in 1995, there are now more than 200. There is considerable prosperity, but much of the wealth is clearly in the hands of out-of-town interests.

The extent of the transformation is such that it is impossible to evaluate the impact on the fly. Clearly, the route taken by the Old Town is nothing like what is envisioned by World Heritage Site planners. Much of the development has been at the expense of ancient structures that should have been protected. Important local traditions, such as the weekly market in the Old Town square, have been discontinued. Ordinances require that at least one attendant in each shop or tourism enterprise wear some kind of ethnic costume at all times. But the costumes are not necessarily local, and the many of the people wearing them are newly-arrived entrepreneurs and not of the ethnicity represented by the garb. And yet the prosperity seems to be rather broad-based. Everywhere you look there are large showrooms offering scores of cellular phone models, and even the rickshaw drivers carry phones on the job.

As far as we know, our idea of creating a trekking route around the Jade Dragon range has never been formally presented to the authorities. In any case, the main attraction, Tiger Leap Gorge, can no longer be considered a next last-best-place for trekking. A road blasted through the west side of the gorge has obliterated the favored hiking trail; on the east bank, a new path has been blasted as far as the main rapids. The entire development is evidently intended to appeal to mass tourism. There are no villages on this route, and the primary source of income is surely from the scores of human-powered rickshaws that now expedite traffic. Furthermore, the government is still apparently considering a plan to damn the gorge in order to generate hydroelectricity. There is still a chance to reverse and repair some of the damage done to this magnificent natural site, but that would require a paradigm shift on the part of Chinese planners. Certainly, the continued work at Three Gorges does not bode well for Tiger Leap Gorge.

#### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

First, sustained supervision is necessary for any project based on innovations in social structure, and particularly where novel forms of community cooperation are required.

Conflict, corruption, and self-interest must be expected even in the most idyllic settings. Any plan predicated on social harmony and individual willingness to think first of the common good is likely to run into serious trouble. Second, unless the project managers happen to have absolute authority over the community (which we believe is not a good idea), plans must take into account the likelihood that local residents will choose not to work within a communal cooperative and elect instead to compete with the communal facility. Third, plans for development of remote mountain destinations must take into account gateway and regional development.

### PART III: BRIDGES TO ROLWALING

In 1998 we undertook a tourism development program which was intended to build on the ideas developed for and lessons learned in Lijiang (Sicroff and Alabajos 2001). Our strategies and objectives included:

- Provide trekking opportunities for independent backpackers as opposed to packaged commercial tours
- Offer educational and volunteer opportunities for tourists as an incentive to spend more time
- Promote research which would contribute to a database that would remain accessible to a succession of researchers in the focal area
- Foster individual initiatives without undertaking to engineer a traditional society as a precondition for development
- Develop projects that could be implemented without recourse to funding from donor agencies, both because we wanted the maximum degree of flexibility in formulating our agenda according to needs and opportunities as they presented themselves and also because we did not want the project to depend on potentially unsustainable financial resources

#### NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

Our company, Bridges: Projects in Rational Tourism Development (Bridges-PRTD), is based in Nepal's Rolwaling Valley, an area that presents an unusual combination of problems and opportunities linking biodiversity and tourism development. Beding is a remote and impoverished community of about 325 residents (all Sherpas) in Gaurishankar VDC,<sup>3</sup> Dolakha District. Spread out over three villages spanning half the length of Rolwaling Valley, Beding is three to five days' walk from the nearest road head. Relatively isolated and unimpacted, Rolwaling had been prevented from realizing its potential as an ecotourism destination by a regulation requiring trekkers to acquire expensive trekking peak permits, which also entailed traveling with fully-equipped caravans. While the Sherpas of Khumbu have become the most prosperous

minority in Nepal, their cousins in Rolwaling languished in a stultifying economic limbo due to the arbitrarily restrictive regulations on tourist access. There is a school that generally functions for part of the year, being closed during the cold season; there is no clinic, no police or postal service, no telephone, and no electricity. Virtually all of Beding's able-bodied men—except a handful of clergy—seek employment in tourist services outside Rolwaling for at least half the year; the women and children are left alone to harvest the potatoes, tend to the animals, gather fodder for the winter, and manage the households. Unsurprisingly, alcoholism is a serious problem.

Rolwaling's value as a biological refuge derives partly from its location and physical isolation. Running east-west for approximately 30 kilometers, it is separated from Tibet by a stretch of the Himalayas that includes Gauri Shankar (7,134 m), which for some time was thought to be the highest peak in the world. The Rolwaling River flows into the Bhote Kosi (one of several in Nepal); this Bhote Kosi soon becomes the Tamba Kosi. Simigaon, at the confluence of the Rolwaling and the Bhote, is about 90 kilometers east of Kathmandu as the crow flies. It can be reached by a four to five day trek from Barabise, which lies on the road to Tibet in the next valley to the west, or by a two to three day trek from Dolakha, the district administrative seat, located on a short branch off the Swiss road that connects Lamosangu with Jiri. The latter trail, the lower trails in Rolwaling itself, and particularly the steep ascent to Simigaon, are subject to frequent damage during the monsoon season, a problem that has recently been alleviated somewhat by improvements initiated by the Austrian agency EcoHimal and by the Tsho Rolpa GLOF hazard mitigation project being carried out by Nepal Hydro and General Construction in conjunction with Bhutwal Energy and HMG's<sup>4</sup> Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM). To the east of Rolwaling is Khumbu District, which in 1976 was gazetted as Sagarmatha National Park. The wall of peaks between Rolwaling and Khumbu is breached by the formidable Tashi Lapsa Pass. With good weather, one can make the crossing between the last settlement in Rolwaling and the most westerly settlement on the Khumbu in about four days. Altogether, access to Rolwaling is not quite impossible, but definitely more inconvenient than the most popular trekking routes, several of which can now be approached by air.

One of Rolwaling's assets as a tourism destination is its status as a sacred valley. Aside from the traveler's mundane interest in picturesque local sites, customs, and beliefs, there is a special interest in transcendent reality (Bernbaum 1990). Whether on pilgrimage or in search of "adventure," tourists are generally looking for something like a spiritual experience—inner renewal, the scale and meaning of life, respite from routine. It is no accident that this sort of experience has traditionally been sought in remote and dramatic landscapes; secret valleys, lofty

peaks, and mysterious lakes have inspired spiritual epiphanies, rapturous travelogues, slideshows and postcards home.

According to local lore, Rolwaling is a beyul, a “hidden valley” plowed out by the tantric saint Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) 1,200 years ago to serve as a sanctuary for dharma in a future time of intolerance—a clear reference to the Chinese invasion. Rolwaling’s special status has meant that Buddhist traditions are taken more seriously than elsewhere. Religious festivals are frequent and enthusiastically celebrated—not just with tantric rituals, but singing and dancing late into the night. Cultural conservatism has resulted in ecological conservation. Hunting and slaughter have never been acceptable. The forests, on the north-facing slopes especially, are essentially unimpacted.

Compared to neighboring Khumbu, Rolwaling’s peaks lie somewhat higher in the sacred pecking order. Everest’s resident goddess Miyolungsangma is easily trumped by Tashi Tseringma (Luck Long-Life-Female), who has an abode atop Jomolhari, the most sacred mountain of western Bhutan, and on Gauri Shankar in Rolwaling—which is also venerated by Hindus as the abode of the great god Shiva in his ascetic form. In addition to Gauri Shankar, Rolwaling can boast of more than a dozen discrete sacred sites, including the local pilgrimage route to the sacred lake Omai Tsho (Sacherer 1977).

Like many Himalayan valleys, Rolwaling has rich ethnobotanical resources. Sacherer (1977, 1979) has elucidated the vital connection between the flora and spirituality in the consciousness of Rolwaling Sherpas. These plants include those with application as medicinal herbs, poisons, foods, dyes, incense, forage, fertilizer, and handicrafts. Many could have economic value if they were collected (in a sustainable manner) or cultivated. Locally, they could serve the needs of the residents, and they could also be sold to tourists. HMG has long been interested in promoting the identification and exploitation of such resources, and there are many international non-government organizations and pharmaceutical enterprises that would likely be interested in assisting the project. Clearly, such development would both enhance cultural self-esteem and also reinforce the perception of Rolwaling as a sacred valley.

Rolwaling’s assets are, of course, not limited to the sacred. A significant opportunity may be found in the geographical factors that have been seen as limiting constraints. It is true that Rolwaling lacks an Everest, but many trekkers would be interested in an alternative route of egress from Khumbu, one that would allow them to avoid retracing their steps and also to avoid the relatively expensive and overbooked flights from Lukla. (As noted above, Rolwaling is only a few days’ walk from the road at Dolakha or Barabise, from which one can take the bus to Kathmandu for less than three dollars.) At the same time, this alternative would relieve some of the pressure on

Khumbu facilities, which typically experience near gridlock in high season. The route up the Thame Valley and across Tashi Lapsa pass, however, has been perceived as too difficult for most independent trekkers. On the other hand, if more tourists could conveniently undertake this trek, it would not only assist in the development of the poorer communities on the Thame side but also meet the thirst for challenge and adventure that motivates increasing numbers of trekkers. In most cases, Khumbu trekkers have already visited Kala Pattar or Gokyo, and are therefore well acclimated. The problem has been that the route requires camping and climbing equipment, as well as a guide and porters, generally available only through outfitters located in Kathmandu. Very few independent Everest trekkers wish to hire a team for their entire Khumbu trek, much less for the Jiri walk-in, both of which are straightforward and require no special equipment or assistance. We believe that one solution would be to establish an agency in Beding (or in Na, just up-valley) with a branch in Thame, the westernmost village in Khumbu. This agency could offer a shuttle service with regularly scheduled guided crossings. If all the equipment and the personnel were locally available, the cost would be reduced, and trekkers could conveniently make the decision to take this route even on the spur of the moment.

## PROJECTS

“Bridges to Rolwaling” combines research with volunteer development work. Starting in 1999, we began to bring in very small international and interdisciplinary teams of students and professionals to collaborate with the people of Rolwaling in designing and implementing plans compatible with local needs and opportunities. Students benefit from the opportunity to plan and implement research projects for which they may seek credit at their home universities under the rubric of independent study or internship programs; or they may use their research to jumpstart research projects for graduate programs. In either case, Bridges-PRTD retains the right to use the results of this research in promoting tourism development and also in evaluating the impact of that development. We are also committed to ensuring that our database will remain accessible to future researchers.

Until now, most of our efforts have focused on research. We have carried out gathered demographic and economic information, and we are working with anthropologist Janice Sacherer Turner to update her unpublished doctoral dissertation, which was the first full-scale study of Rolwaling.

We have also initiated a broad range of development projects, based on the desires of local residents and the interests and skills of our team-members. These projects are intended to expand economic opportunities, whether directly tied to tourism or not. Although our basic objective is to foment independent backpacker tourism, this goal

is seen as compatible with efforts to conserve the traditional culture and environmental resources. Those already initiated include:

- *Waste disposal:* In 2002 we helped locate and publicize the first official garbage dump at Beding.
- *Gompa restoration:* We donated materials and labor to assist in providing a face-lift for Beding gompa (monastery).
- *First aid and hygiene:* We held a series of workshops to give instruction in basic hygiene and common medical problems. We also established a small medical dispensary that is accessible to both villagers and visitors.
- *Lodge and restaurant development:* Until now we have found home-stay accommodations for all Bridges team members. Last year our team helped four families convert private lodgings to lodges. While structural modifications have so far been limited, we did help all the lodges develop English language menus featuring locally available foodstuffs. We also erected lodge signs as well as a centrally located informational kiosk so that independent backpackers would be able to locate accommodations. The kiosks also inform tourists of nearby scenic and cultural attractions.
- *Dutch Rock:* In 2001 Bridges established a cairn at a promontory on the western lip of Tsho Rolpa that we named "Dutch Rock" in recognition of the early and persistent efforts of Summit Trekking agency, the Netherlands-Nepal Friendship Association, and Wavin (the company that manufactured the siphon pipes). We plan to enlarge the cairn considerably during our next expedition, and we intend to try to position Dutch Rock as a sort of terminus (à la Kala Pattar) for the Rolwaling trek. This will involve production of posters, t-shirts, and postcards, as well as targeted promotion through guidebooks, news releases, and trekking agencies. Somewhere down the line, we would like to convert the cairn to a stupa to celebrate harmony (between humans and nature as well as hosts and guests) in the Sacred Valley.

We have also committed ourselves to a panoply of other projects, most of which are scheduled for implementation during our next expedition.

- *Rolwaling Hydropower Project:* We engaged FEED (P) Ltd, a Nepali consultancy specializing in hydropower development, to carry out a feasibility study which resulted in plans for the installation of a 3kW Peltric set at a waterfall on Jomo'i Gol Chhu, a tributary to the Rolwaling River, with its headwaters arising on the south face of Gauri Shankar. This plant will provide lighting for each household in the village, facilitating the education of Rolwaling residents (both children and adults), as well as for minimal needs of tourists at the lodges. A larger allotment of power will be attributed

to Beding's schoolhouse, allowing for space heaters which will permit operation during all or part of the fall and winter; if this enhancement of the school leads to further improvements, it could result in less reliance on boarding schools outside of Rolwaling Valley. Enhanced local educational opportunities are considered vital in motivating the return of some of the more well-to-do villagers who have relocated in Kathmandu. We expect to install a second plant within a few years which will provide electricity for cooking, mitigating the stress on forest resources.

Several of our projects aim to develop economic opportunities that will make use of the new power source:

- *Dried foods:* There is an excellent opportunity for the preparation of dried potato products for trekkers. Some items, such as finger chips, could be dehydrated by solar devices. One item that we feel would be particularly marketable, *shakpa* ("Sherpa stew"), would require an assist from an electric food dryer.
- *Trekking equipment manufacture:* Bridges will initiate a small trekking equipment manufacturing enterprise with the "Rolwaling" logo. Light-weight materials will be imported to Rolwaling, where they will be sewn and marketed locally as well as supplied to Rolwaling-based outfitters and trekking agencies. We will start this enterprise with three mechanical (treadle) sewing machines, to be replaced later by faster and more efficient electric machines. A master tailor will be brought from Kathmandu to train the equipment makers. In addition, to support the trekking equipment manufacture, we will donate two or three computers so that orders and design modifications can be e-mailed from Kathmandu; this equipment will also be used to begin computer training in Beding. An internet connection will be available through the telephone to be installed at the Hydrology and Meteorology Department office
- One of our more ambitious projects is Summiters: Rolwaling Mountaineering School. Summiters is a collaborative project, sponsored jointly by Bridges-PRTD and by the Mt. Everest Summiters Club (MESCC), a Nepali non-government organization (NGO) whose thirty members are all Everest summiters from Rolwaling.<sup>5</sup> In 2004 Bridges will inaugurate this climbing school for tourists in association with the "Bridges to Rolwaling" program. The school will have two options. The "Just-Do-It" option will focus on mountaineering skills, in which experienced Sherpa instructors will share their skills as well as their appreciation of their Himalayan home. The "Heritage Interpretation for Ecotourism Professionals" option will combine this same training with lectures, workshops and exercises in the presentation of natural and cultural attractions for tourists. One practical goal will be the design of a visitors' center and museum, with two themes, "Rolwaling, the Sacred Valley," and "Beding, Cradle

of Heroes” (commemorating the exploits of Rolwaling climbers). At the same time, the mountaineering school will serve as a basis for the development of the Tashi Lapsa shuttle service mentioned above, and provide the expertise and initial market for “Rolwaling” trekking equipment.

In all these projects, an important principle is that Bridges-PRTD should own nothing in our development area. Instead, we are assisting local entrepreneurs, as well as the Village Development Committee and the Mt. Everest Summitters Club (MESC), in jump-starting enterprises that they will carry forward. We are well aware that the Sherpas of Rolwaling have a broad network of family and relations in Kathmandu and Khumbu who have the experience and expertise to transform Rolwaling. Our basic task is to help remove impediments to the kind of independent backpacker traffic that will be of most economic benefit and will also be committed to the protection of those natural and cultural assets that attract them.

While our primary interest is the mountainous areas, the highland-lowland linkages are such that we have had to expand our scope to include the gateway urban areas. To give a simple example of the inevitability of the broad approach: we had hoped to develop a project that would regularly remove non-biodegradable waste from the trekking area. As it turns out, the garbage processing capability of the urban area is so negligible that it is pointless to transport the waste to Kathmandu. It would just end up dumped in a river, contributing to a far greater problem than the one it was meant to solve. Therefore, we became involved in an effort to upgrade the impact of tourism at the trekking gateway.

Specifically, we are working with the Durbar Square Tourism Promotion Committee to enhance living conditions and economic opportunities in a key area of Kathmandu. This area, which became known as “Freak Street” when hippies hung out there in the 1960s and 70s, is actually the cultural heart of Nepal. The area includes the most important temple district in Nepal, a World Heritage Site that is apparently utterly unfunded and unattended. The ancient alleys are home to hundreds of craftspeople, among the most skilled silversmiths, weavers, tailors, carvers, musical instrument makers, and painters in the world. However, in the last 20 years another district of Kathmandu has captured virtually all of the Freak Street’s former clientele. Thamel, an area with virtually no attractions of its own, has become a tourist enclave, bursting with shops, hotels, restaurants, taxis, rickshaws, moneychangers, drug pushers, and Tiger Balm hawkers catering to the seasonal throngs. Freak Street is virtually abandoned, seedy, and economically depressed. The western boundary of the area is a river that has become a feculent sewer. And yet it has possibilities, if only because Thamel has become so overcrowded that people are ready for the peace and quiet of a former Mecca.

The thing that is holding back the Freak Street renaissance is, not surprisingly, money. Tourists these days, unlike the hippy trailblazers, are relatively demanding. The comparatively sleek hotels (still unbelievably cheap by our standards), the cybercafés, ice cream parlours, and the well-appointed shops have become significant elements of infrastructure. Rehabilitation of Jhochhen Tole is going to require investment. We think that part of the solution is to enable local craftspeople to reach a global market without moving to Thamel. That means Internet. However, relatively few of the producers can afford a computer or Internet service. Even telephone service is hard to come by, requiring a lengthy wait or a large bribe. A credit card merchant account is practically out of the question for all but the wealthiest—due to the soft currency, a huge deposit is required. Thus, one of Bridges’ projects has been to collaborate with a local producer to develop a marketing vehicle for pashmina textiles. Tsering Choekyap, a Tibetan refugee who has been operating a foundering trekking shop in Jhochhen Tole, has been able to sell his own products as well as purses and silver jewelry made by his neighbors.<sup>6</sup> We are now expanding this pilot project into a Durbar Square Bazaar, an e-mall where any local merchant or producer will be able to market goods overseas with virtually no start-up costs.<sup>7</sup> Even a moderately successful effort along these lines will make a huge impact in the economic resources of the participants, and will (we hope!) encourage investment and cooperation in community projects to enhance tourism—which, after all, is the local market for those same products.

*Garbage In, Garbage Out!* We have been working with Tsering Choekyap since 2000 on another project: the design and production of the “Garbage Out! Bag.” This is a device that enables trekkers to conveniently carry their garbage until they reach an appropriate disposal area. It is currently being marketed by the Kathmandu Environment Education Project (KEEP).

#### CONCLUDING REMARK

By and large, judged on its own terms, Bridges has been successful. Certainly we have created excitement and raised expectations among the villagers of Rolwaling. However, we have committed ourselves to an ambitious array of projects that are still incomplete. This year, we have had to cancel our work in Rolwaling due to the Maoist insurgency. Tourism to Nepal in general has dropped dramatically since the massacre of the royal family in June 2001 and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency. This is a reminder that no development project can pretend to be entirely community-based. Political disturbances, global economic depression, and natural disasters are only a few of the factors that influence tourist arrivals. Many other factors are more susceptible to management by the national government and by municipal planners in

Kathmandu, the gateway for almost all international tourism in Nepal. We have recently directed more of our efforts toward compiling a blueprint for the promotion of independent tourism that we hope will have some influence on government planners.

#### PART IV: INDEPENDENT BACKPACKER TOURISM

In virtually all domains, mountains are impacted by important highland-lowland linkages, and backpacker tourism is no exception. In the first place, trekking is only one of many reasons that backpackers travel, and it may not even be the most important. If conditions at the trekking gateways (and even further from the destination) are not conducive to budget travel, much or all of the potential market will be lost. Even if tourism is a high priority, specific development plans and policies implemented in the populated lowlands may favor mass-market tourism at the expense of trekking opportunities. (A good example is Tiger Leap Gorge, with its road blasted through the primary trekking route.) In many respects, the linkages extend beyond even the regional scale. Although tourism is a growing industry, it is still competitive, and new “last best places” continue to be opened up. And, finally, tourism is subject to economic and security crises that are played out on the global scale.

#### PROMOTING INDEPENDENT BACKPACKER TOURISM: A BLUEPRINT

Based on our two surveys and on observations in Nepal since 1974 and in China since 1993, Bridges-PRTD has compiled a series of recommendations for the promotion of independent backpacker tourism.

First, the hosts at tourism destinations should recognize and provide for the interests of independent backpackers. Under-recognized interests and needs include:

- *Volunteer work.* Villages and urban neighborhoods should have offices organizing volunteer work—listings of projects suitable for short-term visitors with different backgrounds and different time constraints. Tasks could range from garbage collection to temporary instruction public schools.
- *Study,* especially language, but also dance, music, and many other fields
- *Hanging out:* places to sit, read, write, and socialize. Assets include adequate lighting, comfortable furniture, terraces with a view.
- *Communication:* [cheap and effective] Internet, bulletin boards, means to meet other backpackers
- *Urban entertainment:* dances, concerts, public events
- *English language media,* and especially periodicals with prior notification of public programs and transporta-

tion schedules. (Too often, newspapers in Nepal publish articles about events only after they have occurred.)

- *English signage* (especially street signs and transportation information)
- *Opportunities to shop and splurge:* while independent backpackers typically are on tight budgets, many enjoy shopping and like to splurge occasionally on fancy meals. High-end restaurants and casinos, especially, ought to understand that backpackers are potential clients. (In Kathmandu, even the most expensive restaurants such as the Yak and Yeti are well within the means of a large proportion of backpackers.) Since many are located at some distance from tourist enclaves such as Thamel and Freak Street, they might consider providing free shuttle service. Coupons are remarkably effective. In remote destinations, particularly, the development of crafts and production of souvenir goods should be a priority. Many locales do not even have decent postcards. Also, as noted above, many tourists feel compelled to bring back gifts for friends and family at home—especially around Christmas. Shopping assistance is a potential tourism service. Since the shopping activities of tourists (and particularly long-term backpackers) are constrained by weight and bulk limitations, it is essential to develop (and regulate) reliable packing and shipping services. Specially trained assistance should be available at the post office.

Second, planners should recognize and mitigate impediments and turn-offs:

- *Pollution:* uncollected waste in the streets, dirty rivers, smog, noise (from air, karaoke, music shops, uncontrolled honking); eliminate plastic bags, plastic water bottles.
- *Double pricing:* especially admission fees for tourists (generally identified by racist assumptions), but also in hotels and transportation; the worst tactic is charging admission to urban tourist zones.
- *Hassles:* street hawkers, vendors, touts (especially at airports, at bus and rail stations; and on buses), beggars; hard sell tactics in shops. (Merchants should realize that Western tourists like to browse, and expect to find fixed prices marked on all goods; they do not generally want to be assisted until they *ask* for assistance.)
- *Deceptive commerce:* prices should be marked and fixed.
- *Political issues:* human rights violations, corruption, abuse of animals, gender inequity, child labor, oppression of other countries, saber-rattling.
- *Travel permits and visa hassles:* short terms, renewal issues, recurrent charges and fees.

Third, planners in host nations should foster independent backpacking at the global level. Useful, but admittedly ambitious, steps would include:

1. Publication of well-illustrated periodicals (e.g., *Backpack Nepal!*). Contents should include:
  - News
  - Logistical information for travelers
  - Pertinent academic articles (for instance, on local development projects, culture, and natural history)
  - Personalities: trekkers, especially, are interested in knowing about local personages (for instance, religious figures, mountain climbers who are running lodges and restaurants, artists, and so on)
2. Provision of cheap and reliable air service. The government or tourism associations could sponsor charter flights during high season.
3. Organize concerts featuring international rock stars as well as local performers. Bridges-PRTD has been trying to organize such an event: "Back to Kathmandu" would be billed as something of a reunion and celebration of the original "hippies" who put Nepal on the map. Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in reaching Bob Seger, the rock star who composed the generational anthem, "Back to Kathmandu"; however, we believe that this event is feasible if the Nepal Tourism Board takes an active role ... provided, of course, there is a resolution of the current Maoist insurgency.
4. Set up innovative tourism offices around the world; these should feature extensive gift shops in which items would be marked with not only the applicable prices but also the approximate prices at which similar items could be purchased in the destination country. Tourism offices should also feature reading rooms and research facilities, and they should sponsor slide shows, films, and other events. Book clubs could be organized, with meetings at which members would discuss selected publications and even meet with the authors.
5. Orchestrate a Mountain Tourism Entrepreneurs Corps. There is quite a bit of talk about "indigenous knowledge" these days, as if traditional medicine and agriculture constituted the primary intellectual property base of mountain communities. Actually, some of these communities have considerable expertise in catering to the international tourism trade. Why not find a way to sponsor teams of Khumbu and Solu Sherpas, for instance, to go into prospective tourist destinations and assist them in designing infrastructure, managing resources, and cash commerce?
6. Assist in the organization of an International Backpack Alliance (IBA):
  - a. Rationale:
    - Backpackers are not currently perceived as a significant economic and political force (hence the emphasis on "quality tourism," and the preference for mass tourism infrastructure).
  - b. Solution: an "Independent Backpacker Alliance," with interactive Web site, sponsoring a circuit of regular conventions around the world. These IBA conventions would entail:
    - "Country rooms," where backpackers (past and prospective) could meet to share experiences, show their slides and videos, and reunite in a relaxed atmosphere.
    - Promotional kiosks: destinations at all scales (national down to remote mountain village) could send representatives, CD-ROMs, or brochures, to inform prospective tourists
    - Policy formulation: representatives could be chosen to hammer out position papers, and consult with national tourism boards.
    - Sponsors: equipment manufacturers and other interests would find this a target-rich environment for promotion.
    - Web site content and functions: (1) Traveler feedback on destinations and facilities, (2) Information and opinion on relevant topics,
    - Facilitation of homestays and joint travel
  - c. Other IBA functions:
    - Members could help remote destinations prepare informational and promotional CD-ROMS, etc., for the Web site and the IBA conventions.
    - Members could assist in development of facilities in new destinations.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no question that tourism will and should continue in a variety of forms. We believe, simply, that independent backpackers constitute a market segment that is particularly useful in the development of remote moun-

tain destinations. Unfortunately, ecotourism has attracted a disproportionate amount of attention from planners at the national and regional level and has become something of an obsession with international agencies. There is no point in trying to suppress the phenomenon of “green-wash”: inevitably, tourists will become aware that very few of the agencies promoting “ecotourism” are actually committed to natural and cultural conservation. The few organizations that do have truly ecosensitive priorities will continue to have limited impact. A more useful approach is to focus on enhancing those assets and mitigating those liabilities that influence the decisions of backpacker tourism. In most cases, the changes that ensue will please not only tourists of all sorts but also the residents of the host countries. They will also go a long way toward increasing political stability in the host nation and conserving the natural and cultural heritage of our planet.

## NOTES

1. One of the authors, Seth Sicroff, wrote his masters thesis based on this project; for the full text, see <http://www.yulong.org>.
2. This section is based on Seth Sicroff's unpublished Masters thesis, “Approaching the Jade Dragon: Tourism in Lijiang, Yunnan, China” (University of California at Davis, 1998). This thesis synthesizes data collected by the entire YASS-UCD team in 1993 and 1994, in addition to data collect by J. D. Ives in 1985. The principal investigators were Prof. He Yao Hua of YASS, and Prof. Jack D. Ives of UCD; important contributions came from Yang Fuquan and Feng Zhao; funding came from the Ford Foundation and the United Nations University. Since little information about this phase of development in Lijiang has been accessible, we have thought it proper to present extensive information here in order to allow those working in the field to form a more accurate overview of recent events. Insofar as we do not have current information about many particulars, we have resorted to an inconsistent use of present and past tenses in describing recent conditions. For further information, see <http://www.yulong.org>
3. Village Development Committee, the lowest level of elected government.
4. His Majesty's Government.
5. Dawa Chhiri Sherpa, General Secretary of MESC, is Director of the Summitters school. Pepper Etters, a member of the Bridges 2001 team, is the Field Manager. For more information, see <http://www.summitters.org>
6. See <http://www.sunrise-pashmina.com>
7. See <http://www.durbarsq.com>

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