

Great Himalaya Trail Development Programme Media Fact Sheet

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Introduction

With its spectacular landscapes, fascinating cultural heritage and many of the highest mountains in the world, it's no wonder that Nepal attracts visitors – more than half a million per year – from around the globe. The revenue from these visitors makes an important contribution to the GDP of Nepal and the lives of many people working in the tourism sector.

Over 100,000 of these annual visitors are trekkers and their wanderings among the mountains provide a valuable income source for rural communities.

The distribution of these tourism revenues however remains narrow, with around 90% of trekkers visiting the Annapurna, Everest or Langtang trekking areas.

Using tourism for poverty alleviation

It has long been known that tourism is a very useful “industry” for generating jobs and thus increasing incomes in (many) remote rural areas:

- Tourism is different to other industries as it has the ability to attract foreign and domestic visitors under-developed rural areas where unemployment is high.
- It is the only industry where the consumers come to the producers.
- It requires relatively low levels of capital investment to achieve meaningful results.
- The living standards of communities can be further enhanced by infrastructure development, social mobilisation, institutional development, education, skills training and support for entrepreneurs.

Consequently tourism, when sensitively planned and sustainably managed, can transform geographical remoteness and rugged landscape – normally obstacles to development in Nepal's remotest districts – into economic assets.

Upper Solukhumbu, Manang valley on the Annapurna circuit and Langtang are a few examples of tourism success stories. But they are relatively small areas in Nepal and to bring the benefit of tourism to other areas has remained a great challenge.

Why the Great Himalaya Trail?

All countries and their tourist destinations are in great competition with each other to attract more visitors. And it is not just visitor numbers that is



important, but increasing the length of stay and the amount of money that the visitors spend, and of course trying to encourage visitors to come again.

To do this, countries need to have exciting 'products' that will make people want to visit.

The Great Himalaya Trail is one such exciting tourism product. As described on the <http://www.thegreathimalayaatrail.org/> website:

“The Great Himalaya Trail is one of the longest and highest walking trails in the world. Winding beneath the world’s highest peaks and visiting some of the most remote communities on earth, it passes through lush green valleys, arid high plateaus and incredible landscapes. Nepal’s GHT has 10 sections comprising a network of upper and lower routes, each offering you something different, be it adventure and exploration, authentic cultural experiences, or simply spectacular Himalayan nature.”

The GHT 'product' works well because:

- The section-map with its colour scheme, that is a major part of the branding, educates people that there are other very interesting areas to visit in Nepal and encourages them to learn about trekking areas section by section.
- With its linked sections, the GHT tempts people to come back again and again to walk and 'complete' another section
- It promotes responsible tourism that “your holiday can, and will, make a difference”.

What is the GHT Development Programme and why is it needed?

The GHT Development Programme (GHTDP) is a two-year programme which will help bring more tourists to remote rural areas in Nepal and help poor local communities to be able to benefit from that tourism.

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It helps to consider an example.

It has long been possible to visit any part of Nepal as a camping expedition. But unfortunately this brings little benefit to local communities in the places visited.

Imagine two different treks leaving for the mountains. The first, a camping trip, brings all its food from Kathmandu, sleeps in its own tents brought from Kathmandu, and uses a trekking support team, again brought from Kathmandu.

A second trek stays in locally owned and built accommodation, run by local people, in a tea-house, lodge or home-stay. The trekkers eat locally grown food where possible, and use some local porters and local guides who know the area, its traditions and its people.

Apart from some camping fees, local people gain very little money from the first kind of trek, and they evidently benefit more in the second scenario. But getting to a point where tourism is benefiting remote areas requires a lot of work, and The GHT Development Programme has been developed to achieve this. The two-year programme has the following aims:

1. To support the Nepal Tourism Board in **marketing** less-developed areas of the country as trekking destinations.
2. To **promote** GHT sections to trekkers as alternatives to the long-established trekking areas.
3. To facilitate the formation of national, regional and local **tourism management bodies** to oversee all aspects of the trail and tourism.
4. To facilitate local people in developing products and services for visitors through providing **training** and **technical support**.
5. Promotion of **best practice** within Nepal’s tourism industry, through supporting carefully selected **Pro-Poor Sustainable Tourism** (PPST) projects and the **Responsible Travel Nepal** initiative.

The programme is being facilitated by SNV and a number of organisations are very much involved.

National Coordination	MoTCA
Industry representation	Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN)
Marketing & Promotion	Nepal Tourism Board
District Coordination	DDCs / TDCs
District implementation	Selected local capacity building organisations (LCBs)
Technical advisory & capacity-building support	SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.
Donor	DFID / UK Aid

The GHTDP has already been running on a small scale in two districts in West Nepal, Humla and Dolpa and has now started running in three new districts: Solukhumbu, Gorkha (Manaslu) and Taplejung (Kanchenjunga).

What kind of activities happen in the GHTDP?

There are different kinds of activities happening at different levels. A great focus is being put on training local tourism service providers who will have contact with tourists. In each district, approximately 200 participants will receive training in various practical subjects such as: hygiene and sanitation, first aid, conversational English, lodge management, trek cooking, guiding, portering as well as giving an overall idea of what tourists expect.

At the level above, the programme will help districts form Tourism Development Committees (TDCs). The TDCs will in turn be assisted to develop integrated Strategic Tourism Action Plans. The outputs of such plans can be as simple as building a clean, new toilet at an airport, to managing trails, waste management, signboards or provision of further skills training.

The work of the TDCs is very important to ensure that tourism is sustainable, and that the negative aspects of tourism are kept to a minimum.

At the national level, the programme is also facilitating the formation of an organisation to oversee the management of the GHT across all districts. This organisation, a collaboration between MoTCA, NTB and TAAN, will also be heavily involved in promoting the GHT outside of Nepal. A world-class, international marketing strategy is being developed currently, to be ready at the end of June 2011.

The operation is overseen and advised by a steering committee, which has members from diverse organisations including WWF, ICIMOD and other travel industry associations.

Expected results

It's early to say, but analysis of the pilot projects in Humla and Dolpa found that from 2008 to 2010, there was an approximate 30% increase in number of tourists using local food and beverages, a 20% increase in use of local accommodation and 31% average increase (Rs. 76,000 or US\$ 1,000) in annual income per participating enterprise.

Industry opinions:

“It's a very good product and if it's promoted well **internationally** rather than nationally, then it could not only boost the tourist inflow in Nepal but help the people who are in the remote region financially and will create employment opportunities - single most important factor!” *Niraj Shrestha, Managing Director, Himalayan Encounters*

“I greatly see the potential of tourism for overall district development. In fact tourism is the key driver for economic development and employment generation in remote and naturally unique destination like Dolpa. Dolpa DDC is pleased to have a partner like SNV who is actively supporting us through the implementation of GHTDP and guiding us for strategic tourism planning.”

Mr. Tilak Chhetri, Local Development Officer, Chairperson for Tourism Development Committee Dolpa

“I did not realize until the trainings, that my business could be bigger. After the trainings and tours, I came back and made changes that I saw from Annapurna region. I improved my lodge and restaurant. I also built better contacts with KTM based agencies. It helped; I had very good business in 2010. I am very thankful to GHT.” *Sonam Lama, Simikot Lodge, Humla.*

Frequently asked questions

1. What is the main concept behind GHT?

The main idea behind the GHT, beyond being simply a spectacular walking trail, is to diversify destinations that trekkers go to, and thus bring the benefits of tourism to more people in the Himalaya.

2. Who does one go to if one wants to do the GHT?

There is (or shortly will be) a list of companies offering all of the GHT stages on the GHT website, and so far there are just a few. There is already a list of companies who are offering sections of the GHT. But you can certainly approach any reputable trekking company and mention the area you wish to explore, and you should be able to build an itinerary together with them.

3. How is the sustainability worked in at the GHT project? Who will maintain the website (for example) once the project is finished?

SNV is working closely with the Government of Nepal as well as other stakeholders such as NTB and TAAN. There is now a department in the Ministry of Tourism that is being set up to manage the GHT. They will also take over management of the website in June 2011.

4. How did the GHT begin?

Check the website page: <http://www.thegreathimalayatrail.org/about/history/>

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5. What does the GHT include?

Do you mean what is it possible to see and experience?

If so, then lots. I suggest you read the “section by section” brochure that we developed which describes the different sections of the GHT. There is an incredible diversity of landscapes, cultures and flora and fauna.

There are the amazing mountain landscapes around Everest and Kanchenjunga, for example. The verdant valleys leading into the mountains, for instance in Makalu Barun National Park, are home to 47 species of orchid as well as Clouded Leopard, Asian Golden Cat and Red Panda. The forests span five bioclimatic zones from Tropical through Temperate to Alpine. It's a very special area.

If you walk from Langtang west towards Manaslu, you'll pass through communities of Tamang, Magar, Larke and Siar, Christian Gurung and Ru-Pa peoples and then Tibetan Buddhists as you head further north.

Then there is the remarkable and fabled walled city of Lo Manthang in Upper Mustang, the Trans-Himalayan landscapes of Dolpa with its ancient Bön culture that still remains in two villages, one of which is situated on the shores of the turquoise Phoksumdo Lake.

Further west still, there is the remote, timeless Limi Valley in Humla with ancient, colourful monasteries. Beyond this lies Tibet and the pilgrimage route to Kailash.

The diversity is truly incredible.

6. Why is it so special?

Well all of the above makes it special. You'll find beautiful and dramatic scenery in any mountainous region of the world. But rarely will you find such diversity. Nor will you find such high altitude and marginal lands inhabited by such different cultures. Together, these factors make Nepal very special.

7. Can I have a suggestion of the best way to do the GHT? All in one go, in parts (then how many parts etc.) what is the expert advice.

World Expeditions have lead the way becoming the first commercial organisation to walk the trail, setting off recently on February 16th. They were talking the route all in one go for some trekkers while having other groups along for sections. They divided the trail up into seven sections. Other companies offer it nine sections. The GHT website talks about 10 sections! This is simply by way of dividing up the great span across the mountains into distinct destinations with their own flavour and attributes.

Doing the trail in one go requires some excellent logistical management. It is certainly much easier to do the trail in sections. But it is up to you, and how much time you have, how you divide it up. And indeed where you go – there is no fixed route. A GHT route planner map, available in bookshops in Thamel, will let you gaze over the possibilities!

8. How much needs to be done on tents and how much can be done in lodges / homestays etc?

As a generalisation, if you are walking from section to section, you'll need a tent!

But there are many sections where you'll find teahouse accommodation. You can walk around Manaslu all the way to Lower Mustang without a tent. You can make a teahouse route through Helambu, Langtang and on to the Tamang Heritage trail. Rolwaling trek has lodge accommodation, but to cross the pass into the Everest region is obviously going to require tents. Everest region has a fantastic network of teahouses.

A big part of the GHT development project is about training people in remote areas to provide services to trekkers, be it accommodation, cooking, hygiene, portering and guiding. As time goes on, more trekking routes will become 'teahouse-able'. But for the wild regions of Kanchenjunga, Makalu Barun, Dolpa and Mugu, it is still required to camp.

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9. Is it a project, is it a marketing idea, what is it?

It is both. It's like a Zen question – will the trail exist if nobody walks it? Marketing is necessary to bring attention to the trail and encourage more people to venture out into these amazing areas. In fact a great marketing effort is needed, as for many people, the idea of trekking in Nepal is still limited only to the Everest base camp or the Annapurna circuit.

Then, as mentioned, training is needed so that trekkers venturing to these remoter destinations can do so more easily and economically, and, importantly, so that the local populations can benefit more from tourism in their areas.

Response to Joseph White of Associated Press regarding Sean Burch's expedition in 2010:

1. What do you think of Sean Burch's accomplishment? Can you give me an idea of how difficult it was to walk the entire trail in 49 days?

They say there are 6 directions in Nepal: North, South, East, West and then Up and Down. Crossing Nepal from east to west means consecutively crossing a great many river valleys and high passes. It's definitely a very tough challenge to keep going over that terrain for 49 days. But remember too that every day local porters accompanied Sean carrying up to 30 kg baskets, though for shorter stretches.

While many people have crossed Nepal from East to West, no-one has yet *run* the Great Himalaya Trail high route, though ultra-trail runner Lizzy Hawker is planning an attempt later in 2011.

2. Is the Great Himalaya Trail "officially" opened yet? Are there plans for an official ceremony to mark the opening of the trail?

The trail is new but uses existing paths, some of which have been used

for centuries, so it's not like a freshly built track being opened. However, there was a small send off for the very first commercial expedition to begin walking the trail (on Feb 16 2011) before they headed east to Kanchenjunga.

The Trail has been fully endorsed too by the Government of Nepal.

3. Is the Nepal Government promoting the Great Himalaya Trail as part of the National Tourism Year of 2011?

Yes, it has been trying to diversify the destinations that trekkers go to as Everest region and Annapurna are slightly suffering from their own popularity. The GHT helps with that by motivating trekkers explore remote regions of the Himalaya, which are “off the beaten track”.

4. Has there been any progress to have an official group take charge of the trail?

Yes. The GHT is quite new and the Ministry of Tourism is leading the way to oversee the management of the trail. The Nepal Tourism Board and Trekking Agents Association are very much involved as well with technical support from SNV. Senior officials of the ministry are now actively promoting GHT as the showcase new product for Nepal Tourism Year 2011.

5. I know that it's hoped that the Great Himalaya Trail will help the poorer people in the mountain areas by bringing in more tourism, but are you concerned that too many tourists could spoil those areas as well?

It depends what you mean by spoil. We're talking about relatively few trekkers and a huge area of mountains. But lessons certainly have been learned in the past, and organisations involved in the GHT are doing

developments differently now.

A key component of the GHT Development Programme entails expert sustainable tourism development advisors providing capacity-building support to both national government bodies (Ministry of Tourism, Nepal Tourism Board) and district government authorities (DDCs) in the GHT districts. They help the latter to develop and implement Sustainable Tourism Action Plans. This is complemented by working with the private sector in Kathmandu (where most trekking agents are based) and in the districts to raise awareness of, and expertise in, environmentally sustainable and socially responsible management practices.

Culturally speaking, many mountain people seasonally migrate to cities such as Kathmandu or to India and have done for years so their culture has lived hand in hand with the development of the world around them. The idea that people in these areas can earn a better living from tourism so they can better afford schooling and basic healthcare is very a positive outcome. The trick is to get these local communities trained to provide good basic services for tourists, and then to get tourists to use them as much as possible, rather than carry everything with them like old-style camping expeditions. This is what the GHT Development Programme is working on now.

6. Finally, could you tell me about your organization and website. Are you an independent group? Are you part of the Nepal Tourism Board?

The thegreathimalayatrail.org website and the GHT Development Programme was set up by SNV and is now managed by the close cooperation of the Ministry of Tourism, NTB and TAAN and SNV.