

**Development of Eco-Tourism in Mugu District,
Nepal: *Training of Local Women Guides and
Awareness Work with
Local Communities and Trekkers***

Proposal of
Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN)

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Working  for Women

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment for Women of Nepal

Nepalese women in rural areas are traditionally deprived of education and thus of economic opportunity. Since the stabilisation of the political situation in Nepal, the soon-to-be-booming adventure trekking industry represents danger for the fragile eco -systems in areas of the country that have not yet been touched by tourism and many missed opportunities for women to profit from this boom.

Even before the civil war, Lucky Chhetri foresaw this challenge and has been working to turn it into a great opportunity for protecting the environment and for helping women. In 1998, along with her two sisters Nicky and Dicky, Lucky established Empowering Women in Nepal (EWN), a training programme to help rural women participate in the financial and ecological changes bound to occur as adventure tourism grows into an industry in Nepal.

The Challenge

In the 1950's foreigners began coming to Nepal for tourism. The first tourists were explorers. They were primarily motivated by the love of adventure and of nature, especially by the desire to climb the highest mountain peaks in the world, the Himalayas and Mount Everest. The friendliness of Nepalese people, the fascinating art and culture of the country captured the imagination of western and eastern tourists. This paved the way for the preservation of Nepal's immense cultural heritage and is partly responsible for the change from 'nature tourism' to 'culture tourism'.

Tourism is now a major economic activity in Nepal, it contributes 2.9% to the GDP, foreign exchange earnings of 10.4% and government revenue (cf. *Economic Survey of the fiscal year 2001/02*). Thus far, there has not been a nation-wide planned approach to develop tourism and little concern about how it will affect nature or women and their families.

Tourism has many positive effects on Nepal's economy, but there are also negative effects. For instance, the benefits of tourism are not properly distributed throughout the country owing to the fact that it is concentrated in only a few areas. Moreover, much of the money spent in these areas is siphoned off to other countries or foreign businesses.



In addition, Nepal received a high number of tourists before it had the proper infrastructure and management capability to handle them. Because of delayed initiative, people's lack of awareness of the dangers for their region, poor implementation of plans for tourism and a lack of co-ordination among different governmental agencies, several issues important issues related to tourism development have arisen. The first is the seasonal aspect of tourism in Nepal which is concentrated into the few months from October to November and then again from February to May. The second is the poor distribution of tourist-related development. These two issues alone put an enormous

amount of pressure on the environment.

It is extremely more important that remote areas be carefully prepared now for tourism so that the mistakes and the resulting ecological disasters (deforestation for fuel, uncollected trash, indentured servants to cater to tourists) created in other areas of Nepal will not be repeated there.

EWN has researched and initiated concrete work to affect change in the interrelationship between tourism, ecological concerns and poverty. EWN plays a central role in advancing these concerns through eco-tourism in Nepal because it has close relationship with local communities and government authorities which will help prepare these new areas opening up to tourism.

Many women in Nepal lack nutrition, education, employment and good health not only because resources are scarce, but also because traditional social structures deny them the power to make basic decisions about the course of their lives. In the rural areas, only 14 percent of the women are literate, compared to 44 percent of the men.

In 2004 **Lucky Chhetri**, **EWN Director**, was awarded the **Ashoka Fellowship** for her work as social entrepreneur. The mission of the international organization Ashoka is to shape a citizen sector that is entrepreneurial, productive, and globally integrated, and to develop the profession of social entrepreneurship around the world. Ashoka identifies and invests in leading social entrepreneurs - extraordinary individuals with unprecedented ideas for change in their communities - supporting them, their ideas, and institutions through all phases of their careers.

www.ashoka.org

See Lucky Chhetri's Fellowship: <http://www.ashoka.org/search/fellows?country=NP&>

Low levels of education form a vicious cycle with a lack of decision-making power, each reinforcing the other to depress the social position of rural women. Without degrees or significant training, these women often seek income in the informal sector, where wages are low or nonexistent. As a result, rural women lack the leisure time and self-sufficiency to represent themselves in their local communities, let alone the national government.

While women in urban areas face a slightly better situation, they make up only a tiny fragment of the population; more than 85 percent of Nepalese women live outside cities, entangled by social and economic systems that too often leave them uneducated and underprivileged.

EWN sees eco-tourism as the way to ensure that the ensuing economic growth will take into account the most pressing needs, both human and ecological, of Nepal. EWN as an NGO is well placed to play a central role in advancing this proposition and shepherding it through the stakeholder communities and the local government authorities.

EWN Strategy

Lucky, Dicky and Nicky Chhetri are pioneers in the field of female trekking guides. In 1990 Lucky, who is the oldest of the Chhetri sisters, trained in The Himalayan Mountaineering Training Institute in Darjeeling, India. The training sparked her interest in an adventurous life and her desire to help foreign women trekkers who felt unsafe and too often had bad experiences trekking alone in the wilds with male guides and crews.



The three sisters were already running a guesthouse and restaurant in Pokara, a starting point for many treks. They all shared Lucky's love of the mountains and her dream of offering a service for women with women trekking guides. In 1994, their unique women's trekking guide service called 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking (P) Ltd was born. The Chhetri sisters have built on the great potential in the adventure tourism industry, where demand is high for



Four years later they started Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that trains local women guides for the trekking agency they created to serve women trekkers. EWN is a NGO that was registered in 1999 with the Nepalese Government under the Social Organization Act 2034. The EWN training centre is located at Khahare, Lakeside, Pokhara - 6.

For nearly 10 years now EWN has prepared Nepalese women to challenge discrimination in the job market, building on their natural skills to gain economic independence as well as women's close relationship with the earth and their constant concern for their future generations' welfare.

Nepal is very rich in terms of natural and cultural resources and only a fraction of these resources are so far utilized for tourism. If properly utilized, tourism could be developed as a number one industry. It requires developing a sound tourism strategy, complementary to the overall national development plan. Equally important is concerted effort from all sectors. This is what the EWN founders call 'eco-tourism': a healthy approach to tourism, which includes attention to human and ecological pitfalls.

EWN Mission Statement

EWN's aim has been, and continues to be, to empower and develop women while encouraging sustainable tourism through sound tourism practices which include attention to the preservation of nature and local culture in remote areas where there is often little hope for the future.

Aims & Objectives

- Provide skills training and education so that women can enter the workforce.
- Assist women towards financial and social independence.
- Promote Rural Community Development through eco-tourism.
- Assess the need for development in rural communities of different regions in Nepal.
- Co-operate with these communities to find alternative sources of income:
- Encourage awareness of basic rights such as health care, nutrition, education and safe shelter.
- Strengthen the social and economic status of underprivileged Nepali women and children.

Three Branches of the EWN

The present proposal is directly related to the first two objectives:

➤ 1. Training Women Trekking Guides and Job Placement

New knowledge and skills prepare participants in EWN's programmes to confront and transform stereotypes and discrimination that have hindered Nepalese women for hundreds of years. As these women find their own economic success, they directly contradict those who doubt the ability of women to compete in strained job markets. Loan programmes and alumni

networks support them in establishing development projects and taking leadership roles in their communities. EWN programmes help rural women move from lives of dependence and silence to lives of self-sufficiency and strength, creating a significant shift in the social structure of rural Nepal.

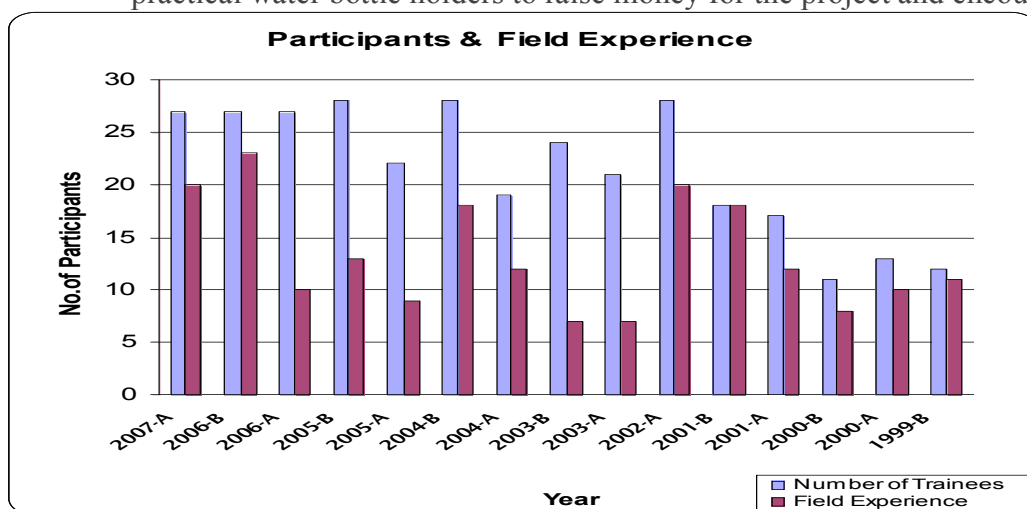
Women trainees learn to be physically and mentally tough, and to approach their life with confidence at work and in their home. They undergo an intensive four-week training programme on technical and conversational English that also covers a broad range of topics including history, geography and culture as well mountaineering skills and business management. There is a strong emphasis on ecological awareness and conservation with courses about water sanitation, crop rotation, waste management and alternative sources of fuel.

As trainees develop into adventure tourism professionals, they spread the ecologically sound practices they learn at EWN to the villagers they encounter along the treks and of course, to their clients. EWN women guides encourage iodine purification methods, for example, rather than relying on mineral water and littering the Himalayas with plastic bottles. They even knit practical water bottle holders to raise money for the project and encourage their clients to



protect the environment.

At the end of their training, women enter an apprenticeship programme where they earn a full salary and acquire field experience working as guides. From their



apprenticeship they gain immediate economic benefits and develop the skills they need to emerge as independent entrepreneurs. As they finish this stage, some women return to their villages to spread the programme among friends and neighbours. To support her trainees in becoming leaders for their community, Lucky has established a mutual loan programme that supports them in founding local development projects. She connects trainees in an alumni network where members can share ideas and plan collaborative projects. While most alumni find work in the adventure tourism industry, others may continue their education at university or may keep up their skills with EWN refresher courses.

With **over 400 alumni**, the EWN programme proves that Nepali women can successfully compete in tough job markets and is gaining recognition worldwide. EWN trainees have the reputation of being the best in the market. EWN's success has attracted significant media attention and the programme has now been featured on CNN, Japanese television as well as

other national and international media networks; this has led to new business for EWN trainees and a surge of applications from disadvantaged women in remote districts. The success of this venture inspired the Chhetri sisters to broaden their training to reach many more women.

The EWN strategy for expansion is largely based on mobile training sessions. Lucky launched a suite of mobile trainings in western Nepal in 2004, and she plans to spread the trainings across ten districts within four years.

EWN partners for this venture are the Nepal Tourism Board and Trekking Agents Association of Nepal, both of which have given high priority to Lucky's programme. With their encouragement, EWN and 3Sisters Adventure Trekking has reached beyond the country's borders to the Indian Himalayas and they intend to spread their programme into Tibet.



➤ **2. Mobile Training and Rural Community Development Through Eco-Tourism**

All of the mobile training sessions serve a two-pronged central purpose: to create opportunities for women and to protect the environment.

EWN's expansion into mobile training involves sending a team out of Pokara into remote areas of Nepal to do intensive courses similar to the training carried out in the EWN centre. The courses are carried out with the cooperation and approval of local government and business associations. Some of the women who participate in these intensive courses are then invited to come to Pokara for further training.

In addition, Lucky opened a cooking school, thus raising the level of the ethnic culinary skills of EWN trainees and also adding a delicious element to the travels of adventure tourists. The mobile training participants in Humla in 2006 benefited from this new course.

By acquiring financial independence, EWN women trainees elevate their social status, gain self-confidence and take their rightful role as leaders of social, ecological and cultural change in their communities through eco-tourism.

➤ **3. Himalaya House: A Home for Young Girls Rescued from Annapurna Region**

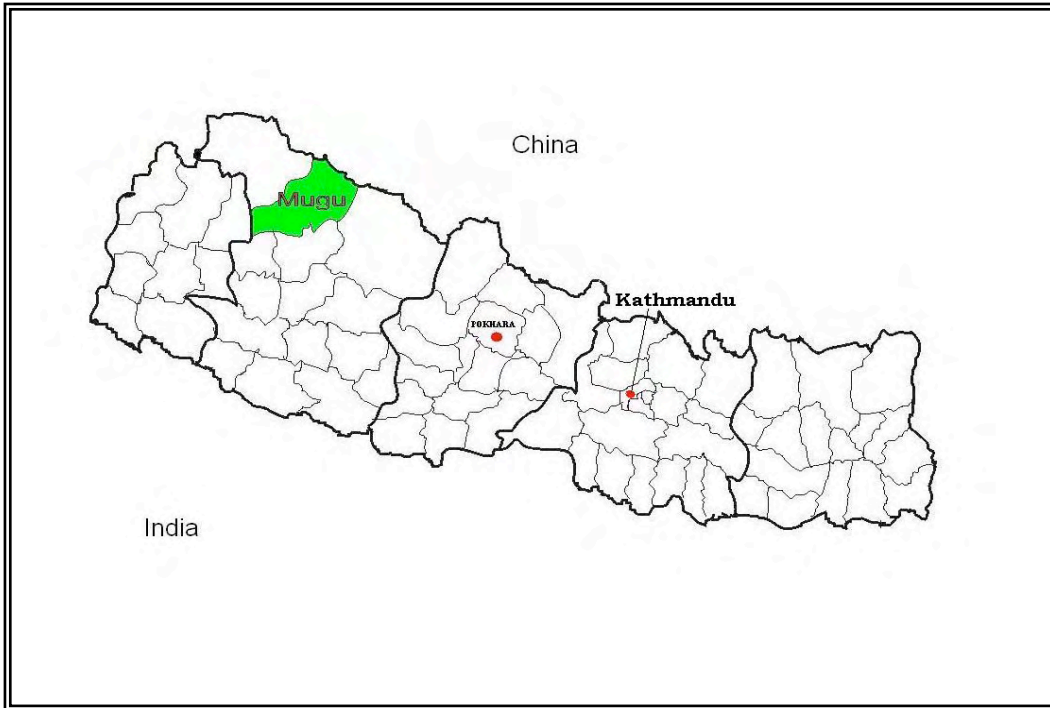
According to a 2004, UNICEF Report 31% of Nepali between the ages of 5 and 14 years old work as domestic slaves, porters, miners, labourers, carpet workers, pickpockets and prostitutes. Most Western clients are unaware of the situation and don't realise that the lodges they stay at recruit girls who are often from distant villages to work as indentured servants. Seeing this exploitation and destitution first hand during treks EWN started a grassroots project to help change the situation.

The mission of **Himalaya House** is to provide a safe home and an education for young girls rescued from domestic servitude. EWN is committed to providing access to education regardless of disability or family circumstance. The goal is to help each girl earn the School Leaving Certificate (SCL) with sufficient life skills to enable them to be financially and emotionally independent. This branch is not directly related to the present proposal but the EWN trainees will undoubtedly find girls that need the Himalaya House as they move into new regions with eco-tourism.

NEW PROJECT:

The Development of Eco-Tourism in Mugu District: *Training of Local Women Guides and Awareness Work with Local Communities and Trekkers*

As noted above, regions that have rarely received tourists are particularly vulnerable to unplanned and badly adapted growth of the tourist industry, the exploitation of the land and people.



Mugu District falls into this category. Many beautiful remote places in the district known for their difficult terrain and inaccessibility remain to be explored. The district needs good facilities and a high quality of services to attract tourists. The training of lodge owners in these areas is

necessary before opening the area to tourism.

Surveys of Western Nepal - Humla, Jumla and Mugu Districts

In 1993, many of the restrictions were relaxed on trekking in some of the poorest districts in the country, among them the three districts of Humla, Jumla and Mugu, located in northwest Nepal.

Three years later, the dangers of civil war effectively closed the area again to tourism. Ten years of war only worsened the situation for the local population who suffer recurrent famine and chronic health problems owing to insufficient a medical infrastructure. On the upside, this same isolation means that their remote and relatively untouched mountain culture has been well preserved from many potentially harmful outside influences.

In 2003, Lucky Chhetri and her team went into western Nepal to follow up the work of EWN trainees in the Jumla District and took advantage of this trip to survey the two other districts, Humla and Mugu, for eco-tourism development.

The EWN team met with local and national government authorities and women’s groups in the region. They spoke openly of their needs and pleaded with EWN to organise courses on health and hygiene, sanitation and nutrition, lodge management and hospitality, local food production and preparation.

Following the visit, thanks to sponsorship by the local government and women's organizations, five women from Humla and Mugu participated in the training at the EWN centre in Pokhara. Many more women are interested in participating in the training but they simply do not have the means to travel to Pokhara.

The **Humla District** is the highest, farthest north and most remote of the 75 districts of Nepal. It is part of the Karnali Zone, one of 14 zones of Nepal. In addition to the Humla District the Karnali Zone includes the districts of Jumla, Mugu, Kalikot and Dolpa. This remote

mountainous zone is not yet accessible by road. There are airfields with connections to the rest of the country from Jumla (Jumla District) and Simikot, the headquarters of Humla District. The lack of roads and the extremely difficult access by air are the most significant constraints to the development of tourism in the area. The advantage to these constraints has been the preservation of the Karnali Zone from the destruction unplanned tourism has reeked in other more accessible regions of Nepal.

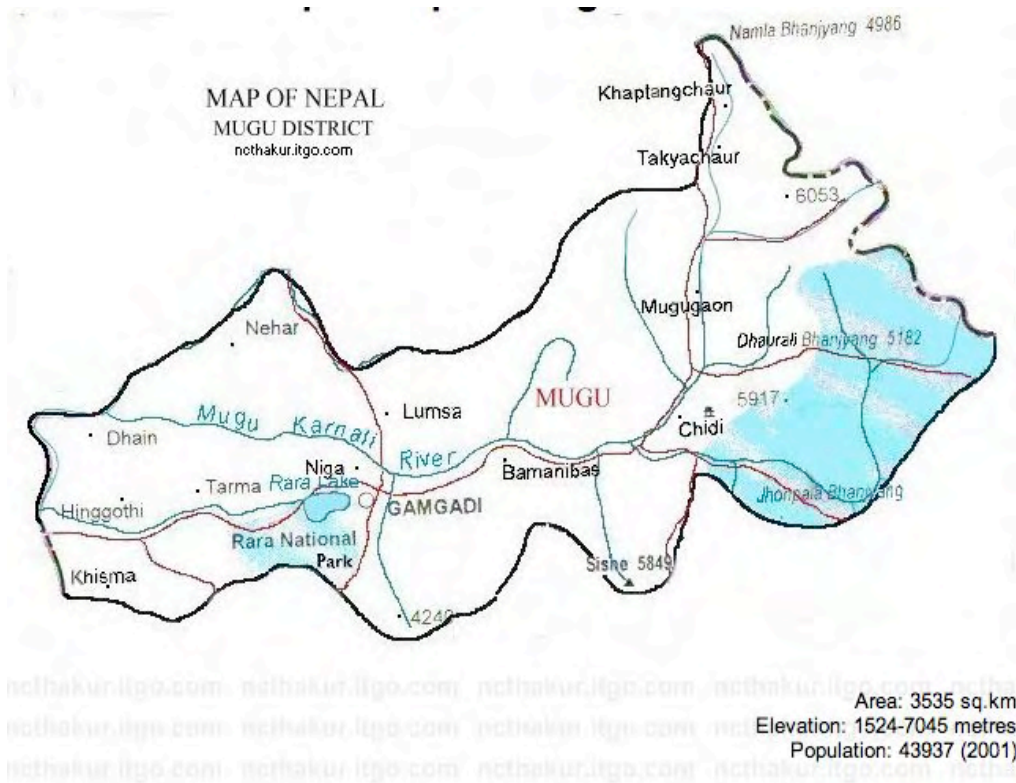


Humla is “culturally and scenically stunning” according to the Lonely Planet guide to Nepal, as well as an alternative gateway to Mt Kailash, Tibet. Mt Kailash is one of Asia's most sacred mountains and an ancient pilgrim site for both Hindus and Buddhists. Recently, it has become a popular travel destination for Westerners. Owing to the uncertain political situation in Nepal over the last ten years, it was inadvisable to propose this route to tourists to Mt Kailash.

The town of Jumla, located on the banks of the Tila River, at 2370 meters, is the zone headquarters for the Karnali Zone and the district headquarters of **Jumla District**. It is also the gateway for all treks into the Rara Lake National Park. Jumla is one of the highest rice growing areas in the world. The Tila Valley as well as the Sinja Khola Valley are covered with paddy fields growing the Kala Marci rice variety, a local land race with unique red rice tastier than white rice.

Mugu District, a remote mountainous region east of Humla, is considered one of the poorest districts of Nepal. Gamgadhi is the district headquarters. Mugu covers an area of 3,535 sq km and has a population (2001) of 43,937. The biggest lake in Nepal, Rara Lake, also known as *Mahendra Daha*, lies in the Mugu district. Food supplies are limited. The district also lacks many of other basic infrastructures necessary for development such as schools, hospitals,

roads, electricity, etc. The nearest transportation by road is a three-day walk from District headquarters. There is an air service but no regular flights are scheduled for the local people.



There is great potential for developing this area as a tourist destination, particularly for adventure-seeking tourists looking for new, relatively unexplored destinations. The Mugu District offers this possibility for those who wish to experience an ancient living Nepalese culture. The area is inhabited by people of Tibetan ancestry and is known as an old trade route into Tibet that follows the

Karnali River. The careful development of the concept of eco-tourism is important to preserve the region while at the same time supporting the local communities and bringing them new sources of income.

Rara Lake is the jewel of Mugu district. In May and June, this spectacular lake is surrounded by many different kinds of wildflowers that bloom in the trees as well as on the ground.

The district is also famous for the many different wild herbs used in traditional herbal medicine such as the one known as ‘Caterpillar Fungi’ (*yasergumba*) a very precious mountain plant used in the treatment of amoebic dysentery, *guchi chyau* which has an anti-spasmodic effect, *panchaunle* which is used as a tonic, *satuwa* a poison antidote as well as *bhutkesh*, *kutki* and *keshar*. These plants must be preserved for the sake of both the local population and foreigners. Only a thoughtful and ecological approach to the introduction of tourism into these areas, even if it’s only on a moderate scale, can hope to respect the eco-systems of these important plants.



Since 2006, the political situation has improved dramatically in Nepal; these remote areas are no longer dangerous destinations for travel for Nepali people and tourists. On the basis of Lucky’s survey EWN concluded that the conditions are good and that the time is now ripe for well-thought-out tourism development in these districts.

Mobile Training and Rural Community Development in Western Nepal

Between 2005 and early 2007, EWN conducted three mobile training courses, free of cost, which focused concretely on raising the living conditions of local women who want to

improve their situations and develop their communities. The choice of candidates is more flexible for mobile training courses and these included married women 15-38 years old.

Photo: Women's Initiation to Eco - Tourism, Simkot – Humla, 2005

Each of the three training sessions was held over six days (36 hours). The course content included health, hygiene and sanitation, women's health issues and food hygiene, tourism, eco-tourism, environment, leadership, trekking information and local food preparation. Lucky was seconded by experts on sanitation, geography and a language teacher (English).

Programmes	Year	District	# of Participants
Women's Initiation to Eco-Tourism Training	2005	Humla	15
General Cooking for Eco-Tourism Training	2006	Humla	14
Women Initiation to Eco-Tourism Training	2007	Jumla	32

The trainers used many visual aides, warm-up exercises with different games, group work and group interaction. A half-day field trip to a traditional village involving a two-hour walk was a new experience for all of the participants. They thoroughly enjoyed the practical aspect of this visit. During their field trip they saw different plants, mountains, culture differences from one place to another. Participants were eager to learn and keen to apply the knowledge and skills learned from the training programme. They considered the course very fruitful and successful.

Participants were required to complete a written test and received certificates for attendance. During the training sessions in both the Humla and Jumla districts participants were



enthusiastic to learn about eco-tourism. They actively sought to identify the resources they would need for eco-tourism development. The training made the participants more aware of the precious treasure they have in their culture and landscape, and that can be used to attract and promote tourism.

The following people expressed how important eco-tourism approach is for Humla tourism development:

- Women's Development Officer, Sabitra Shah, expressed her sincere thanks to the organizers. She said that the course opened their eyes to this alternative way of showing respect for their resources. In fact, they had never even thought about this approach but it makes sense for them and for the preservation of their way of life while improving it.
- Laxmi Lama, President of the Women's Welfare Society of Humla, greatly appreciated the training and asked that EWN continue this mission by organizing the next training course as soon as possible.
- A journalist, Mr. Rokaya Said: "The empowerment of women is essential to development in Humla. We must continue to involve women in tourism."
- Another journalist in Jumla said, Women empowerment is essential in Jumla unless they use in proper way.

The women participants of these three sessions are ready to initiate tourism development in Humla and Jumla districts using the eco-tourism approach. In Humla the aim is to keep the environment clean and to build a big and comfortable lodge with better facilities in Simkot – Humla.



After the Jumla session the participants feed-back included comments about how important it is for them to contribute to the preservation of their cultural treasures, appreciation for the emphasis on personal health and hygiene, family planning, women's health issues and they asked for a longer follow-up course.

Several of the women participants of the three training courses have already or will soon be travelling to Pokara for EWN's month-long course to learn about eco-tourism.

Projected Mobile Training in Mugu

The Importance of Tourism in Mugu District

Tourism represents the most likely scenario for any significant development of this remote region. Development of the Mugu District would be welcomed by the local population since it represents more jobs and business opportunities and also improved access to supplies for the local population. If done with the best interests of the local population and the land in mind, it would minimize negative risks and bring improved and cheaper means of transportation, better education and new health facilities.

Officials on all levels and locals agree that there are plenty of possibilities for development in the region through tourism. The questions that remain are related to how this development is to be carried out. It will help if the initiators are well educated and experienced in the practices related to eco-tourism.

Mugu District officials, i.e. District Development Committee (DDC), different local women's groups, and Dalit Welfare Organization have asked EWN for training course on tourism. They have specifically asked to learn about eco-tourism, health and hygiene, sanitation and nutritional food preparation and local income generating activities such as sewing, and the micro credit system.

The Need for Eco-Tourism in Mugu District

In addition to clear values and experience, good tourism requires unique products and skills in the marketplace.

As per our survey we realized the greatest lack is simply the fact that there are no standard tourist lodges. Lodge management requires a basic knowledge of health and sanitation, nutrition, production and preparation of local food for visitors. Combining this basic knowledge with eco-



tourism concepts must be the base of a training here.

Eco-tourism is an approach that will ensure respect for an area and its culture by both the local population and visitors. The implementation of eco-tourism will minimize the negative aspects of the development of tourism in the following ways:

- Involve the local community in setting up structures and decision-making processes;
- Ensure that the local community benefits directly from income brought by tourists;
- Develop skilled manpower/womanpower among the local population;
- Educate the local population and tourists about local products, their use and importance for the community;
- Encourage local traditional handicrafts
- Preservation and conservation of the eco-system
- Will help to sustain the entire atmosphere like environment and pollution;
- Develop transportation, education, health infrastructures to benefit locals and visitors.

Mugu District

- It is a trekking destination in itself and it is on the trail between Jumla and Humla.
- It represents trekking access to beautiful Rara Lake.
- It is a remote mountain biotope that has been rarely visited by foreigners.
- Its culture and eco-systems are well preserved and relatively untouched by classic tourism.
- It is of great interest to tourists interested in wild flowers.
- The district is well placed for research on mountain herbal medicines and plants

Proposed Mugu for June 2008: *Women Initiation in Eco –Tourism Training*

The needs are great in many regions in Nepal and many districts ask EWN to conduct training programmes. The resources of EWN are taxed and the NGO cannot respond favourably to all the requests. Nevertheless, EWN has put a priority on Mugu since few areas are as needy or as critical for eco-tourism as Mugu District.



still need to be built.”

Another one of the 3 Sister’s objectives is related to the issues around cooking, trash disposal, kitchen gardens and the organisation of the transport of food and fuel. Lucky says: “We encourage lodge owners to prepare local foods in a simple, clean and healthy way, and strongly discourage packaged foods. Kitchen gardens are a good source of fresh produce and promote a clean green environment. Good means of trash disposal vary little from region to region but it is difficult to deal with plastic. Alternative fuel sources are studied with each class.”

Target group:

A minimum of 30 people will directly benefit from the course as participants. Nevertheless, the whole district will benefit indirectly from training of teachers and the courses in tourism, health, as well as from the exploration of a particular area to see if it might be a good tourist destination.

Proposed program schedule:

The total number of training hours is 48 hours (6 hours a day for 8 days).

Training begins with a half-day formal inauguration.

There are 36 classroom or theoretical hours (6 hours a day for 6 days) and a half-day field trip at the end of the training.

The evaluation of the trainees takes another half day. Participants take written tests and their performance is evaluated before the certificates are distributed. They are also asked to evaluate the training programme so the course can be adapted to their needs and its

conditions improved.

The training session is closed with a time for fun and entertainment.

One of the goals of the course in Mugu will be to see which of the women would be suitable for further leadership training. The sponsorship of one woman for an intensive six-month EWN course in Pokhara costs € 500. This fee includes tuition, room and board, travel costs, basic trekking equipment, job placement and follow-up in her job placement.



Conclusion

The 3 Chhetri Sisters intend to finance their project in the Mugu District partially, as they have financed all of their new projects, by investing their own efforts and the resources that come from their trekking business. From time to time they receive help from people (often trekkers) who want to sponsor the training of one particular woman. Occasionally, EWN receives help from friends with a grant proposal to organisations interested in promoting eco-tourism and helping women.

“Our work in western Nepal is a long-term project,” Lucky notes. “We are dedicated to working in these districts in western Nepal where there is little tourism and sustainable development is desperately needed to help the inhabitants preserve their area and help their families. The programme presented in this project represents only half of the training we usually do in a district and thus, half of the cost. Furthermore, we are working on four other districts in this same region. It is our dream to bring about a successful transition for tourism that will benefit the local people and the land as well as tourists.”

“We will be pleased with whatever funding support we receive. A prestigious prize such as the Chamonix Mont Blanc Sustainable Development in Tourism Prize would make it easier for us to get funding from other sources. It would be recognition of our hard work and inspire us to go on and even take on bigger challenges to help our earth and the people living on it.” * * * * *

