

Sustainable Tourism; Potential and Challenges in South Asia

Blessed with the oldest culture, tradition and archeological sites coupled with biodiversity and diverse landscape, South Asia offers tremendous potential for sustainable tourism. The region is richly endowed with diverse natural resources featuring extensive coastlines, tall mountains, fertile flood plains, vast deserts and an array of freshwater and marine ecosystems. However, these resources are under immense and growing pressure stemming from an increasing demand for various goods and services leading to unsustainable consumption and production. A major challenge faced by the region in relation to climate change includes unpredictable patterns of rainfall that increasingly come in short spells of heavy downpour constraining farmers' ability to farm productively.

In line with the 2017 theme "*Biodiversity and Sustainable Tourism*", South Asian countries are working hard for the protection and sustainable management of biodiversity at the level of species and ecosystems, which provides an important foundation for many aspects of the tourism industry. Biodiversity and tourism are strongly interlinked as rich biodiversity helps in the provision of a variety of goods and services in an area of a region. Therefore, a well-managed tourist sector can contribute significantly to reducing threats to and maintain or increase key wildlife populations and biodiversity values through tourism revenue. The South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) is working with the member countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) at the policy and planning level in increasing the capacity of national policy and planners for developing eco-friendly tourism policy and plans.

It has been observed that the cost of embarking on sustainable tourism is much lower than the costs associated with the repair and recycling of the mess that unsustainable tourism produces. It is very much clear that the cost of repair is more than the cost incurred on basic sustainable development principles in the tourism industry. It is more of an attitudinal approach in many such cases rather than funding that is required for ensuring sustainable tourism. People like clean natural beaches without any artificial environment, well-maintained mountain ecosystems and balanced biodiversity for the visitors that many of the South Asian countries offer to tourists. In a recent held Policy Dialogue on sustainable tourism to be held on 22-23 November 2016 at Male', Maldives under the Sustainable Consumption and Production forum of South Asia organized jointly by UNEP and SACEP, all the SACEP members participated and committed themselves for including sustainable tourism in their policy and plans. It is therefore expected that South Asia will incorporate the sustainable development principles in their tourism policy and plans.

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