

NATION

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COVID-19 & Challenge Of Conservation Funding



Kamal Thapa

Landscape, there was an exchange of fire between poachers and park security men. Similarly, illegal loggers and poachers are caught and brought into custody in Bara, BNP, Kapilvastu and Morang district, to name a few.

Conservation situation has aggravated not only in Nepal but around the world. Media reported that in Virunga National Park in Congo, 12 rangers and five others were killed during their regular patrol. In Thailand, a park ranger was shot dead by poacher on 4th May while on duty. All these national and international incidents are example of how tough it is to work for nature conservation, during the pandemic.

Nature conservation is a costly business and includes both direct and indirect cost of protected area management that often cost human lives. But, during the time of crisis such as armed conflict and current pandemic, patrolling, wildlife monitoring and law enforcement should be carried out more extensively than any other time to save wildlife and nature. The local cost (indirect cost) of nature conservation and protected area management is often higher than what the government invests in its management (direct cost). Some costs are unaccounted in the management of protected areas which are to be borne by locals, such as loss of land to protected areas, depredation of crops and livestock. Although it was a brutal act, the elephant that died due to eating of firecracker-filled

pineapple in Silent Valley National Park in Kerala of India in early June, can be linked to local farmers who often scatter such fruits to keep pest animal out of their fields to save crops. Similarly, there was an incident where an elephant was electrocuted in the buffer zone of Bardia National Park, a month ago.

To meet all the costs associated with nature conservation, national government and global community have to invest in conservation but this is not in the priority list over other infrastructure. One can see the bilateral and multilateral financing institutions providing fund to nature conservation but this is far beyond the actual requirement leaving a big gap between what is required for conservation and what is available. Global study by Credit Suisse, WWF and McKinsey & Company showed that the cash flows have to be increased by 20 to 30 times of the current level of USD 10.4 billion to meet the worldwide conservation funding. This funding gap prevails in Nepal too.

Taking the case of world renowned Sagarmatha National Park (a World Heritage Site), successful implementation of its five year management plan (2016 - 2020) requires more than Rs. 714 million with first year (2016) funding requirement of more than Rs. 233 million, excluding operational and administration cost. Unfortunately, the total funding available for the same year (fiscal year 2016/17) was just under 74 million which shows government approved management plan

itself lacks sufficient funding to secure the park values and resources.

Although the investment in nature conservation is beneficial, it is difficult to convince government officials in the national treasury to allocate sufficient fund for conservation. Long term economic benefits from protected areas has never been appreciated by planners over short term financial gains from other sectors.

Nepal's protected area receives about 37 per cent of all international tourist visits in the country. Visiting parks by nature-based tourists also means more income for parks in terms of entry fee and other kind of users' fee which is then invested back in conservation and development projects within the protected areas and buffer zones to secure its ecosystem services. However, COVID-19 has brought significant drop in international tourist arrival by 60-80 per cent, as UNWTO predicted.

Lack of income from tourist fee means low funding available for protected area management, economic deprivation of local people who were dependent on tourist and loss of other jobs who were directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry. A study carried out by this author in Langtang National Park estimated the recreational economic value of the park to be more than US\$ 6.6 million, which in the absence of tourism means loss of this economic potential. At one point, lack

of funding for park authority means low capacity in the operation of routine duty whereas loss of income to local people increases dependency on park resources, undermining its conservation objectives.

Protected area income support most of the parks to self-fund but COVID-19 has its negative impact. Now, the question lies where the money will come from. Can the government ensure guarantee of fund flow? Nature-based tourism in Nepal is flourishing due to strong natural resource base such as wildlife and natural landscape but if we fail to secure those resources, then we will fail to raise tourism. Government source aided by philanthropic and multilateral/bilateral agency grants remain the main source for Nepal. However, intermittent support from international agencies cannot assure the long term financial needs.

Creation of a trust fund aiming to support protected area finance in the future and combination of multiple sources of funding can increase financial security for nature conservation. Further, volunteer mobilisation and community vigilance against illegal activities in their own area also help achieve conservation goals. In such a global pandemic, we have to support nature to benefit ourselves in the present and future.

(The author is a PhD candidate at James Cook University, Australia. He is specialising in ecotourism and protected area management. thekamal@gmail.com)

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While the COVID-19 pandemic halted the globe for some time, we are now entering into the stage of new normal. If there is anything that benefitted from current situation of global health crisis, then, this is nature. Pictures that appeared in global media outlets and on social media showed charismatic animals coming busy street and relaxing. But, at the same time there is a challenge like never before for frontline conservationists.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has been an opportunity for some environmental criminals. For example, in Bardia National Park (BNP) an elephant was electrocuted to death. In Chitwan and Sagarmath National Parks, three gharial crocodiles and six musk deer were killed respectively. In Parsa National Park, one of the most important protected area of the Terai Arc