

The Annapurna Road

Development and Tourism on the
Annapurna Circuit

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Abstract

The Annapurna Circuit has oft been called one of the best treks in the world. Its popularity has brought countless trekkers to the region, resulting in a strong local dependence on tourism. In recent years, plans to develop rural regions of Nepal have resulted in extensive road networks being built along the route of the circuit. These roads have helped some locals and hurt others. This study investigates the implementation of roads in the Annapurna Conservation Area and the effects on both trekkers and locals. Further, it examines the New Alternative Trekking Trails that have been implemented along sections of the Annapurna Circuit and those that are continuing to be built in other areas. In order to learn about these issues, I traveled along the Annapurna Circuit, conversing with locals, trekkers, and conservation officials. These forms of communication ranged from casual conversations to formal interviews, but essentially every interaction was relevant and informative. This paper attempts to understand how the relationship between roads and trails has facilitated rural improvement while striving to satisfy tourists as well.

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Introduction

Nepal is known throughout the world for its incredible trekking. Containing eight of the world's ten highest mountains, the Himalayan mountain range attracts expert mountaineers and casual hikers alike.¹ The wide variety of activities that Nepal's tourism industry provides brought 800,000 tourists in 2013, and of these, almost 400,000 visited national parks and protected areas.² Established in 1986, The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Nepal's largest protected area, covers 7,629 square kilometers and is home to the world-renowned Annapurna Circuit, or Round Annapurna Trek.³ This 200-kilometer trek circumnavigates the Annapurna Himalaya and brings 115,000 trekkers each year, roughly 60% of Nepal's total.⁴ Opened to foreigners in the 1980s, it quickly attracted an unprecedented number of tourists to the region.⁵ This rapid influx of visitors was not without consequences, however, for the 100,000 people residing within ACAP.⁶ Due to the increased interaction with the outside world, these rural mountainous regions rapidly developed, and one of the main changes that this development has brought is the creation of roads.

As the Annapurna Circuit passes through multiple district headquarters, it was the clear route along which to build roads. Now, the majority of the circuit is actually accessible by jeep.⁷ Of course, there are both beneficial and detrimental aspects to the new roads. Some lament them as the destructors of a once pristine wilderness; presently, many people blame the roads for ruining what was once one of the best treks in the world. On the other hand, they have allowed significantly easier access to important resources for those that live in villages along the route. This increased ease of travel allows for a higher standard of living for locals that many trekkers fail to consider. Yet still, the traffic along the Annapurna Circuit is discouraging trekkers. Between the many negative reviews the road receives and

¹ Stephen Bezruchka. *Trekking in Nepal: A Traveler's Guide*, 7th ed. (Seattle, WA: The

² "Nepal Tourism Statistics 2013" (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, Kathmandu, 2014), 2.

³ "Achievements Fact Sheet" (National Trust for Nature Conservation Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP)), 1.

⁴ "Nepal Trekking Agencies Doubt Annapurna Safety Report," *The Big Story*, July 24, 2015.

⁵ Shannon Davis, "The Perfect Circle: Hiking the Annapurna Circuit," *Backpacker Magazine* (March 2009).

⁶ "Achievements Fact Sheet."

⁷ "Annapurna Circuit," *Besthike.com*, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://besthike.com/asia/nepal/annapurna-circuit/>.

tour companies that are choosing not to offer trips along the circuit, the flow of trekkers is becoming a common worry for those living in the region.

With trekking being such an important contributor to the economy, ACAP is worried about the economic ramifications of the decreasing number of trekkers. In 2013, the tourism industry brought almost half a billion US dollars into the Nepalese economy.⁸ In order to ensure that ACAP continues to earn revenue, it is building alternative trekking trails that reroute the Annapurna Circuit and keep it off the roads.⁹ These new trails, however, can mean that most trekkers will no longer pass through certain villages. As the alternative trails continue to become more popular, there are problems regarding their development as well as the repercussions that they may have.

This is a time of rapid change in the Annapurna Conservation Area. For locals and trekkers alike, opinions and lifestyles are noticeably transforming. There are many implications that these changes can have, and this paper will investigate both the positive and negative effects that have been seen and will be seen in the future.



Map of the Annapurna Circuit (Red) and Surrounding Region

Source: oshoadventure.com

⁸ "Nepal Tourism Statistics 2014," 94.

⁹ "ACAP Identifies New Trekking Trails in Annapurna Region," *Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal*, February 28, 2013.

The Circuit

The Annapurna Circuit offers a unique trekking experience. With altitude ranging from around 800 meters at the lowest to a breathtaking 5416 meters at Thorung La Pass,¹⁰ the varied climate, biodiversity, and range of cultures allow trekkers to experience multiple distinctly different areas. Most trekkers opt to travel counter-clockwise around the circuit, beginning in the district of Lamjung and trekking north then west along the Marsyangdi River. Turning north again after the town of Manang, the route then climbs up to cross Thorung La Pass. After enjoying a cup of tea on the pass, trekkers descend through Muktinath to the Kali Gandaki Valley, where the route turns South and concludes by encircling the Western edge of the Annapurna Massif. This famous Himalayan range includes the 8,000-meter peak of Annapurna I, as well as Annapurna II, Annapurna III, Annapurna IV, Annapurna South, Machhapuchhre, Nilgiri, and many more. The trek is popular largely due to the incredible mountain views, but its uniqueness stems from the wide range of sights and activities that it offers.



Sunrise over the Annapurna Range
Photo by Ben Skach

Starting Point

The “Annapurna Circuit” is a term used to describe a trek that has been changing over time. There is no single “correct” way to complete the route, and the creation of roads has meant that the “start” and “finish” of the trip are now open to debate. Andrees de Ruiter is a Belgian who has co-authored a guidebook about the route and helped to paint trail markers along the entire trek. In his opinion, “there is not anymore ‘one’ official Annapurna Circuit,” instead, he points out that “the whole area has now a grid of hundreds of possible trail combinations.”¹¹ Having completed the trek many times, de Ruiter prefers to start from Begnas tal, a lake Southeast of

¹⁰ *Around Annapurna* [map], 1:125,000. Nepa Maps, Himalayan Maphouse, Kathmandu, Nepal.

¹¹ Andrees de Ruiter, “Project about NATT,” e-mail message to author, April 25, 2016.

the city of Pokhara and an uncommon choice from which to begin trekking.¹² For some purists, the trek must begin from Besi Sahar; Hector, a British trekker completing the circuit for his second time, claimed that “the only true Annapurna Circuit starts out of Besi Sahar.”¹³ This viewpoint, shared by the itinerary provided on Nepa Maps’ *Around Annapurna* map,¹⁴ traces back to when the road ended at Besi Sahar, and trekkers did not have the choice to continue further. Yet, even before the road reached Besi Sahar in the 1980s, the newly-formed (at the time) town of Dumre along the Kathmandu-Pokhara highway served as the gateway to Lamjung and Manang.¹⁵ In 1980, Donald A. Messerschmidt wrote an article discussing the creation of the town of Dumre as a gateway to the Marsyangdi Valley. In the next decade after his article was published, the road to Besi Sahar meant the rapid expansion of the previously minor farming town into the new “gateway” to the valley. Today, a road all the way to Manang has created multiple subsequent gateways, giving trekkers many options that simply did not exist several decades ago. Perhaps the most common choices of starting point are now Bhulbhule and Ngadi, which de Ruiter describes as the “perfect” start for people aiming to hike the whole circuit.¹⁶



Road Near Dharapani

Photo by Ben Skach

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hector (British trekker, 2nd time hiking the Annapurna Circuit) in discussion with the author, April 18, 2016.

¹⁴ *Around Annapurna* [map].

¹⁵ Donald A. Messerschmidt, “Gateway-Hinter Relations in Changing Nepal,” *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. VIII, No. 1. (December 1980): 31-32.

¹⁶ Andrees de Ruiter, “Project about NATT.”

The new road gives tourists the choice to take jeeps farther up into the mountains than before, meaning that some people begin the trek at towns such as Chame or even Manang. De Ruiter suggests that “people with limited time can also drive a part up by jeep.”¹⁷ This increasingly popular option can allow trekkers to eliminate several days of trekking. Eric Hauer, a German trekker, decided to ride in a jeep to the town of Chame in order to make sure he had enough time to return to Kathmandu for his flight home.¹⁸ While this helps trekkers hoping to complete the trip quickly, it also means missing out on the first few days of the circuit. Hector, who is a firm believer in hiking the entire circuit, argued that taking a jeep “just isn’t the same. You just don’t get the full experience.”¹⁹ Alex Jacobs, an American trekking with his girlfriend, agreed, discussing how much cultural and ecological variance there is along the trail. For him, it was a much more fulfilling experience to begin at Bhulbhule and spend four days hiking along the Marsyangdi river, witnessing the vegetation transform from lush jungle to arid mountains.²⁰ Beyond the natural benefits, he pointed out the apparent cultural transformation as well,²¹ referencing the change from Hindus living in the middle hills region to the Buddhist Gurung and Thakali people in the more mountainous areas.²² For Alex, Hector, and many others, the environmental and social shifts that are visible in the first several days of trekking are an essential part of the Annapurna Circuit experience.

Acclimatization

Although Andrees de Ruiter acknowledges the practicality that jeep travel introduces for certain tourists, he emphasizes the dangers it can have too. Acclimatization is a major element of the Annapurna Circuit, as Thorung La Pass’ 5416-meter elevation is notorious for causing altitude sickness in the unacclimatized. De Ruiter claims that “the latest point [of] driving should be Chame, otherwise the risk of altitude problems will dramatically rise.”²³ A concept echoed by his guidebook, which he co-authored with friend and colleague Prem Rai, proper acclimatization is of the utmost importance. De Ruiter and Rai’s book, *Trekking in the Annapurna area along the new NATT – trails which avoid the roads*, argues that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Eric Hauer (German Trekker) in discussion with the author, April 7, 2016.

¹⁹ Hector.

²⁰ Alex Jacobs (American trekker traveling with his girlfriend) in discussion with the author, April 5, 2016.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Karma Gurung (Souvenir Salesman from the town of Ghyaru) in discussion with the author, April 7, 2016.

²³ Andrees de Ruiter, “Project about NATT.”

"it is absolutely necessary that you stay at least two...nights in the upper Manang valley before you continue further up."²⁴ For people attempting to rush through the trek, the decision to ignore these warnings can be disastrous. During ten days that de Ruiter spent in the upper Manang valley, he witnessed ten separate helicopter evacuations due to altitude sickness, suggesting that many trekkers opt to take a jeep to Manang, missing several days of vital acclimatization.²⁵ Even after trekking the entire route and taking acclimatization days, it is not uncommon for trekkers to still experience altitude sickness. Bart and Braum, two Dutch men hiking with a group of friends, both experienced problems due to altitude sickness on the pass, despite taking all the recommended precautions.²⁶ Hari Raj Bajracharya, a Nepali



Trekkers Celebrating on Thorung La

Photo by Ben Skach

student on vacation from University, chose to take the jeep to Manang in order to complete the trek in few enough days. Having to return to Kathmandu by April 14th, he decided to risk the consequences of altitude sickness. Fortunately, he was able to trek for five days, visiting the popular Tilicho Lake and Thorung La Pass, without any problems.²⁷ For Bajracharya, the jeep allowed him to visit "one of the [most]

²⁴ Andrees de Ruiter and Prem Rai, *Trekking in the Annapurna area along the new NATT – trails which avoid the road*, 2013.

²⁵ Andrees de Ruiter, "Project about NATT."

²⁶ Bart (Dutch trekker traveling with three friends) in discussion with the author, April 13, 2016.

²⁷ Hari Raj Bajracharya (Nepali student trekking the circuit) in discussion with the author, April 12 & 13, 2016.

beautiful places [he] has ever been to.”²⁸ Starting from Manang, he also ended his trek at Muktinath, where he took vehicle transportation to return home.

Ending Point

Perhaps even more than the starting point of the circuit, trekkers are choosing very different points at which to finish. Pema Maps’ *Around Annapurna* map lists Nayapul as the ending point,²⁹ while Hector firmly believed that the route should follow the Kali Gandaki River to Beni.³⁰ In the past few years, however, more and more commonly trekkers are choosing to end their trip after crossing Thorung La. The road to Muktinath means that busses and jeeps offer rides to Jomsom, at which point many trekkers can either fly or catch a bus to Pokhara. Bret Love, co-founder of Green Global Travel, was “saddened by the high numbers of tourists who opted to cut their trek short in order to meet their itinerary.”³¹ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, an assistant officer at the ACAP office in Jomsom, claims that the majority of trekkers on the circuit are no longer continuing past Jomsom.³² He believes that many people come to “cross the pass, take a picture, and show it to friends and family.” For him, this is a poor reason to hike the Annapurna Circuit. He recommends that “if you want adventure, go out and climb mountains or [go] paragliding.” The circuit offers an opportunity to put yourself in unfamiliar situations, interact with people from contrasting lifestyles, and “find out more about how life is.” Compared to simply hiking over the pass, Yungdrung believes that completing the whole circuit gives trekkers a more eye-opening experience.³³

Roads Along the Circuit

In order to improve the lives of those living in rural parts of Nepal, the government has been operating various projects to increase access to vehicular transportation. Roads in Nepal are categorized as either strategic roads or rural

²⁸ Instagram Post, Hari Raj Bajracharya, April, 2016.

²⁹ *Around Annapurna* [map].

³⁰ Hector.

³¹ Bret Love and Mary Gabbett, “Hiking The Annapurna Circuit: Why It May Be Now Or Never,” *Green Global Travel*, July 6, 2012.

³² Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung (Mustangi, Assistant Officer, ACAP office in Jomsom) in discussion with the author, April 17, 2016.

³³ Ibid.

roads.³⁴ The Strategic Road Network, including national highways and feeder roads, is managed by the federal Department of Roads (DOR), while the Rural Road Network, consisting of district and village roads, is managed by local District Development Committees (DDCs).³⁵ The DOR views these road networks as a step towards “national integration and socio-economic development.”³⁶ Its mission statement, “to contribute towards the betterment of living conditions of the people through effective, efficient, safe and reliable road connectivity,” asserts the beneficial effects that roads have in Nepal. Along the Annapurna Circuit, various road projects have fallen under different categorizations and have been managed by different organizations.

The Department of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR) is an agency under Nepal’s Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development that has been overseeing many road development programs. Operations such as the Local Roads Improvement Programme (LRIP), the Rural Access Program (RAP-3), and the Rural Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Sector Development Program (RRRSDP) all aim to improve road access within specific districts.³⁷ The RRRSDP applies to almost 40 districts across Nepal, split between “core” and “non core” districts.³⁸ The majority of the Annapurna Circuit lies within the districts of Lamjung, Manang, Mustang, and Myagdi, all of which fall under the jurisdiction of RRRSDP; Mustang and Manang are both core districts of the program. RRRSDP aims to “reduce rural poverty” by developing infrastructure in districts that are “immediate post conflict development priorities.” The broad goal of RRRSDP is to reduce the percentage of rural population living below the poverty line from 34.6% to 25% by the year 2020. To achieve this, road development projects will place 75% of the population in the target districts within a 4-hour walk from a road; this would be an increase from 64% before the implementation of RRRSDP.³⁹ This

³⁴ “Sector Assessment (Summary): Agriculture and Natural Resources,” *Decentralized Rural Infrastructure and Livelihood Project*, 1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “DoR Vision & Mission,” *Government of Nepal Department of Roads*.

³⁷ “Programs and Projects,” *Government of Nepal Deparment of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR)*.

³⁸ “Rural Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Sector Development Program (RRRSDP),” *Government of Nepal Deparment of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR)*.

³⁹ Ibid.

program has included the creation of roads through the Kali Gandaki Valley,⁴⁰ and to the district headquarters of Manang.⁴¹

RRRSDP is funded by local bodies, such as the Government of Nepal and the Department for International Development, and foreign forces, such as the Asian Development Bank and the Swiss Development Cooperation.⁴² In 2004/2005, the Department of Roads reported a total budget of NPR 5.3 billion. Of this, 1.1 billion was domestically funded, while 1 billion came from foreign grants, and 3.2 came from foreign loans.⁴³ This money was then funneled through DoLIDAR and other agencies to be distributed to specific projects. The road from Besi Sahar to Chame received NPR 21 million⁴⁴ and was implemented by local DDCs under the oversight of the RRRSDP and ACAP.⁴⁵

Nepal's Rural Development Plan of 1999 laid a framework for much of the road network development in years to come. One of the major goals that this plan set was to build roads connecting district headquarters with national highways.⁴⁶ Despite falling within the Strategic Road Network, the DOR often delegates the local creation of roads to DDCs and Village Development Committees (VDCs).⁴⁷ Under the advisement



Vehicles for Construction near Bhulbhule

Photo by Ben Skach

⁴⁰ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” *Government of Nepal*, March, 2011, 1.

⁴¹ Babu Lal Tiruwa (Manager of Manang ACAP office) in discussion with the author, April 11, 2016.

⁴² “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” 1.

⁴³ “Road Sector Budget for FY 2004/2005 (061/62),” *Government of Nepal Department of Roads*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

⁴⁶ Hubert Job and Anu Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” *Erdkunde: Archive for Scientific Geography*, Bd. 68, H. 4 (October-December 2014): 236.

⁴⁷ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

of ACAP, the Manang DDC constructed the road from Besi Sahar to Chame in order to provide access to the ACAP district headquarters.⁴⁸ It wasn't until 2010, however, that pressure from locals motivated ACAP and the DDC to extend the road to the town of Manang, the district headquarters; this road is still under construction, but was opened to traffic in 2014.⁴⁹ Yambahadur Gurung, an ACAP official working in Manang, is glad that the road was extended for the benefit of locals. Bret Love, however, voices the thoughts of many foreigners, hypothesizing that "roads will eventually cover the entire route,"⁵⁰ but ACAP has no such plans. Yambahadur reiterated that the road to Manang strongly benefits the locals, whose desire for a road led to its creation, but a road any further along the circuit would not bring the same advantages. Since it would be purely for the sake of tourism, he is confident that it will not be built any time soon.⁵¹

After crossing the pass, however, it is only a matter of hours before trekkers once again find themselves on a road in Muktinath. The Kali Gandaki Highway, which runs from Beni, through Jomsom and Lo Manthang, to the Nepal-China border, has brought major changes to Myagdi and especially Mustang.⁵² As a major project under RRRSDP and a significant addition to the national Strategic Road Network,⁵³ this highway occupies a "dominant position of [trade] in the Himalaya."⁵⁴ The construction of this road, completed in 2014,⁵⁵ "could eventually turn Mustang into one of the most important transit points for Indo-China in the future."⁵⁶ While this road serves as a "strategic economic transit corridor,"⁵⁷ like other roads in rural Nepal, it has also brought meaningful change to the lifestyle of locals and the behavior of tourists.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Yambahadur Gurung (ACAP official in Manang) in discussion with the author, April 11, 2016.

⁵⁰ Love and Gabbett, "Hiking The Annapurna Circuit: Why It May Be Now Or Never."

⁵¹ Yambahadur Gurung.

⁵² "Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District," 45.

⁵³ Job and Kumari Lama, "Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area," 237.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁵ Tsewang Samdup Bista (Lo Manthang local, Upper Mustang tour guide working for Explore Himalaya) in discussion with the author, March 15, 2016.

⁵⁶ "Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District," 45.

⁵⁷ Job and Kumari Lama, "Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area," 236.

Positive Effects of the Road

There are benefits and drawbacks to roads along the circuit. While some may criticize them for ruining a perfect trekking route, others praise the levels of development they have allowed for locals. As the governing body of a conservation area, ACAP has a responsibility to preserve the natural resources of the region, but also to elevate the quality of living for those within the protected area. Anu Kumari Lama and Hubert Job conducted a study on road development in protected areas, focusing on the Annapurna conservation Area. Kumari Lama and Job discuss two “opposing philosophies” with which conservation can be approached: pure “preservation/protectionism” or “utilitarian conservation.”⁵⁸ This disagreement, which Kumari Lama and Job claim to be a conflict between poverty and environmental concerns, can be applied perfectly to the development of ACAP’s road development. The roads bring “economic growth and development,” but also damage environmental purity. While there are proponents on both sides, there are undeniable benefits to both of these approaches. There is no right or wrong way to approach conservationism, but rather each approach focuses on different priorities. Kumari Lama and Job point out that the two philosophies need not be mutually exclusive:

“Within the [protected area]...sustainability hinges on trade-offs between conservation and development; the issue is not one versus the other, but in how best to integrate these two opposing philosophies for its sustainable management.”⁵⁹

ACAP has been implementing roads using this intermediate strategy. By attempting to maximize benefits while minimizing or compensating negative outcomes, the creation of new roads has had relatively successful effects within the conservation area.

Accessibility

For the majority of locals, roads have significantly raised the quality of life. Babu Lal Tiruwa, officer-in-charge at Manang’s ACAP office, elaborated on the many ways that the road from Besi Sahar to Manang has improved the lives of those living in villages along the circuit. The biggest benefit that he emphasized was simply the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 230.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 231.

increased ease of travel.⁶⁰ Not only traveling within the region, but also the ability to reach Pokhara and Kathmandu is much easier now that there is road access. Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung echoed this concept in Mustang. For those living in Jomsom, local travel takes minutes instead of hours, and the trip to reach Pokhara has changed from five days of walking to a one-day jeep ride.⁶¹ Yambahadur Gurung, also from the ACAP office in Manang, brought up the fact that better access to vehicular travel means that the sick and injured can receive medical attention much more easily.⁶² While transportation for medical aid previously required an incredibly expensive helicopter evacuation, the road has eliminated the need for this, and has also allowed medical goods to easily reach remote towns like Manang.⁶³

Now, many rural towns have access to goods, and not just medical supplies, that were nearly impossible to access before. Years ago, in order to supply foreign and manufactured products in rural areas, either human porters or horse/mule caravans needed to carry everything from the nearest road, which was often days



Cargo Truck and Local Bus near Marpha
Carrying supplies and transporting locals

Photo by Ben Skach

this is a relatively inconsequential trip compared to the several days it took a decade ago. This has benefited Karma, and many others that he knows, in both their

away. This labor meant very high prices for any products coming from Nepal's more developed regions. Karma Gurung, a souvenir salesman from the town of Ghyaru who spends hours each day carrying his merchandise to his usual selling location on the trail, has noticed drastically decreased living costs since the road was built.⁶⁴ Ghyaru is still a few hours walk from the road in Lower Pisang, but

⁶⁰ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

⁶¹ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

⁶² Yambahadur Gurung.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Karma Gurung.

personal and professional lives. The cost of living goods has significantly decreased, and Karma no longer relies solely on selling souvenirs that he makes and buys locally; he can now easily and cheaply import products from other parts of Nepal.⁶⁵ The accessibility provided by the road has remodeled the way in which people live in these regions. Kumari Lama and Job illustrate how “socio-economically, road connectivity has intensified the integration of the local economy with the global.”⁶⁶ For locals, this relationship means an overall cheaper cost of living and higher levels of development.

Apple Farming

Roads have not only benefitted the importation of goods, but exports have increased local profits as well. Mustang’s apple trade is a prime example of the road directly benefiting the local economy. The Kali Gandaki Highway has “created renewed opportunities for local farmers in producing fruits and vegetables that are in high demand in the cities.”⁶⁷ Now that apples can be efficiently exported, Mustangi farmers have profited greatly from increased prices. Andrees de Ruiter reports that the selling cost of apples has increased from NPR 20 to 80 per kilogram.⁶⁸ This increase in profit has transformed the agricultural system in Mustang, introducing a shift from subsistence farming to the farming of apples as a cash crop.

In 2011, Mustang produced 3099 tons of apples, but only 700 tons were exported due to lack of road accessibility.⁶⁹ Since Upper Mustang was not yet connected by road to Pokhara and Kathmandu, the financial benefits felt by lower Mustang had not reached apple farmers in Upper Mustang. Also in 2011, the Department of Agriculture released a document analyzing the state of apple production in the district of Jumla.

“With the present increasing trend in connectivity (road network) in remote high mountains and inaccessible districts such as

⁶⁵ Idib.

⁶⁶ Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 239.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 240.

⁶⁸ Andrees de Ruiter, “Project about NATT.”

⁶⁹ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” 14.

Mustang...there is a great potential for increasing area and productivity of these fruit crops.”⁷⁰

The same publication claimed that the development of roads in apple-producing districts such as Mustang and Jumla would greatly help the domestic apple market in comparison to imported apples from China and India.⁷¹ Nationally, apple farming represents only 4.75% of total fruit production and 5.6% of land use for fruit.⁷² In Mustang, on the other hand, by 2014 apple farming constituted 72% of fruit production, and 41% of total agricultural land.⁷³ The same year, a Mustangi apple farmer reported that “because of the road, we now have an easy access to supply our fruits and other agricultural produce to the markets of Pokhara and Kathmandu.”⁷⁴ The Chinese-built road between Lo Manthang and Lhasa has also opened Mustangi apples to new markets, contributing to the blossoming business.⁷⁵ The District Agriculture Office in Jomsom reported that in 2015, production in Mustang had increased to 4,500 tons, selling for up to NPR 90 per kilo.⁷⁶ Between local farmers transitioning to apple farming and the creation of “community owned large scale apple farming projects,”⁷⁷ the agricultural status of Mustang has completely changed due to the Kali Gandaki Highway.

Effect on Trekking

Yet, in examining the effects of these roads, it is important to consider two separate categories of locals. The main occupations in much of the area along the Annapurna Circuit are “subsistence business, hotels and lodges for tourists,

⁷⁰ “A Value Chain Analysis of Apple from Jumla,” *Ministry of Agriculture & Cooperatives, Department of Agriculture*, January, 2011, 8.

⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

⁷² S. Amgai et al., “Analysis of Marketing Practices of Apple in Mustang District of Nepal.” *Agriculture Development Journal*, Vol. 11 (July 2015): 738.

⁷³ Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 240.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Catlin, Elizabeth, *Exploring the Layers of Development: How Modernization has Affected the Lives of People in Lower Mustang, Nepal*, (Spring 2010), 20.

⁷⁶ District Agriculture Office Official (Jomsom) in discussion with the author, April 17, 2016.

⁷⁷ Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 240.

agriculture and livestock farming.”⁷⁸ This can be divided into those whose businesses directly benefit from tourists and trekkers, and those whose do not. In the Mustangi villages between Kagbeni and Jhaite, business and commerce (largely consisting of hotels) comprises 63.6% of total occupation, while agriculture and livestock makes up only 36.4%.⁷⁹ This figure represents the large percentage of locals along the Annapurna Circuit whose income relies on tourists. Andrees de Ruiter knows that “roads are good for many villagers not working in the trekking business,” but has also seen the road “greatly [affect] trekking tourism.”⁸⁰ The narrative of roads hurting tourism is a topic of discussion all along the Annapurna Circuit; trekkers, locals, officials, and essentially everyone else has an opinion on how this new development has changed trekking in the region.

Internet Reviews

While planning a trek, many tourists will begin by utilizing online resources to choose a location. Before leaving America for Nepal, Alex Jacobs scoured the Internet to find out as much as possible about the Annapurna Circuit.⁸¹ While it is hard to find a website about the circuit that does not celebrate the landscape and people of the region, it is also becoming difficult to find one that also does not address the roads. Besthike.com once listed the Annapurna Circuit as one of its “top 10 treks in the world,” but lowered the ranking because “road construction has degraded the experience.”⁸² “Last Footfall in Nepal,” an article for the *New York Times* by Ethan Todras-Whitehill praises the beauty of the Annapurna Circuit, claiming that it “marries natural grandeur, cultural immersion, and relative luxury in a union found nowhere else.”⁸³ Nevertheless, Todras-Whitehill states that the road to Manang is “the last nail in the coffin of what was once the greatest trek on Earth.”⁸⁴ This seemingly melodramatic statement demonstrates the increasingly common notion that roads have critically damaged the Annapurna Experience. “Ruined” has become a popular term to describe the effect they have had on the circuit. Bret Love wrote an article, published on his website *Green Global Travel*, titled “Hiking the Annapurna Circuit: Why it May Be Now or Never.” In this article,

⁷⁸ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” ix.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁰ Andrees de Ruiter, “Project about NATT.”

⁸¹ Alex Jacobs.

⁸² “Annapurna Circuit,” *Besthike.com*.

⁸³ Ethan Todras-Whitehill, “Last Footfall in Nepal,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 18, 2010.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

he discusses roads that have been built along the circuit, arguing that they are “[terrible] for trekkers who want to experience the full beauty and terrain of the Annapurna Circuit on foot.”⁸⁵



Religious Carvings Near Timang

Cultural attractions such as this are being talked about less as roads are discussed more
Photo by Ben Skach

Total Number of Trekkers

A major worry for ACAP and many of the locals, whose living depends on a steady flow of tourists, is that all the negative publicity caused by the roads is decreasing the number of tourists who choose to trek along the Annapurna Circuit. When potential trekkers read online that the circuit has been “spoiled by the constant flow of tourist-filled jeeps honking, whizzing by, and kicking up rocks and dust in their wake,”⁸⁶ it does not sound like a particularly enjoyable experience. Many officials working for ACAP believe that the detrimental attention that the circuit receives has been and will continue to discourage trekkers from choosing this region. Yambahadur Gurung believes that the number of trekkers passing through Manang, which steadily increased for many years, is not increasing as much

⁸⁵ Love and Gabbett, “Hiking The Annapurna Circuit: Why It May Be Now Or Never.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

as it used to due to the road.⁸⁷ Peregrine Adventures, an Australian tour company, no longer even offers tours along the Annapurna Circuit, citing “traffic on the road and building activity” for downgrading the quality of the trek.⁸⁸

For many trekkers, this is a totally valid concern. In two hours spent walking on the road between the towns of Syange and Jagat, one trekker encountered two motorbikes, ten jeeps, and two cargo trucks.⁸⁹ As a trekker, each vehicle that passes entails getting honked at, stepping off to the side of the road, and several moments of attempting not to breath or coughing on the dust and exhaust permeating the air. Yambahadur Gurung strongly believes that the dust caused by the traffic is particularly bothersome to tourists.⁹⁰ Eric Hauer expressed his disdain for time he had to spend walking on the road, insisting that it was severely impairing his enjoyment of the trip.⁹¹ While this opinion was one of the more extreme views, trekkers on the circuit almost unanimously agree that walking along the road is an unpleasant necessity of the trek. Yambahadur’s supervisor, Babu Lal Tiruwa, believes that this typical sentiment will mean a decreasing number of trekkers in future years.⁹²

Sectional Trekkers

An even more immediate consequence being seen due to the road is the drastically reduced number of trekkers that choose to hike the circuit from Besi Sahar to Nayapul or Beni. The road has allowed trekkers a myriad of options from which to start and end their treks, and a few hours of travel by jeep has become a popular alternative to days of trekking through the lush, but less mountainous, Marsyangdi and Kali Gandaki Valleys. Aditya Tamang, a hotel owner just outside of Ngadi, has witnessed firsthand the decline in the number of trekkers visiting his guesthouse. He explained that towns like Manang are receiving an unaffected flow of tourists, but his town of Ngadi has noticed a significantly lower influx of tourists recently.⁹³ As more and more trekkers choose to eliminate days off the circuit’s itinerary, towns like Bhulbhule and Ngadi are simply bypassed.

Efforts are being made to discourage this occurrence, but they have been relatively ineffective. A sign in the Trekkers’ Information Management System

⁸⁷ Yambahadur Gurung.

⁸⁸ “Annapurna Circuit,” *Besthike.com*

⁸⁹ During my time walking between these two villages, I recorded these numbers.

⁹⁰ Yambahadur Gurung.

⁹¹ Eric Hauer.

⁹² Babu Lal Tiruwa.

⁹³ Aditya Tamang (Guesthouse owner just outside of Ngadi) in discussion with the author, April 3, 2016.

(TIMS) check post in Besi Sahar informs trekkers that the jeep ride to Chame and Manang is dangerous, and encourages them to walk instead. Upon seeing parts of this road that have been blasted out of the cliffs, it is apparent why the jeeps bouncing along, inches from a sheer rock face, might not be the safest option by which to travel. Yet, Babu Lal Tiruwa admits that there are rarely safety issues along the road; instead, he explained, by discouraging trekkers from opting to take the jeeps, ACAP and TIMS hope to promote the value of choosing to trek the whole route.⁹⁴ “It’s not a legal requirement. If they want, they take the jeep,” but he hopes that this suggestion has helped encourage trekkers to begin walking from earlier points, spreading business to as many towns as possible.⁹⁵

The road to Jomsom is causing similar problems on an even larger scale in the Kali Gandaki Valley. Between local busses, jeep access, and airplane flights, trekkers can easily return to Pokhara from Muktinath or Jomsom without walking at all. Hector, who chose to finish his trek in Beni, was astounded by how few trekkers he encountered in the days between Jomsom and Tatopani. He recognizes the convenience that ending early can have for those on tight schedules, but he thinks that “it’s really incredible...how few people want to walk here.”⁹⁶ Paul and Lynn, an American couple, chose to take a jeep out of Jomsom, but not for lack of desire to continue trekking. They admired those who managed to finish the trek, expressing their desire to visit Poon Hill, but unfortunately, they simply did not have enough time. They had chosen to begin hiking from Bhulbhule, and therefore could not finish the whole circuit within the time constraints they faced.⁹⁷ Kisan Kumar K.C., accountant for the Jomsom ACAP office, has noticed this trend. He is disappointed that so many people choose not to continue past Jomsom and is worried about the financial repercussions that this choice is having.

Effects of Fewer Trekkers

For people living along the circuit who depend on trekkers for their income, the prospect of a diminishing tourist population presents a troubling uncertainty. The Government of Nepal’s 2011 “Initial Environment Examination” regarding the Kagbeni-Jhaite road in the area labeled the effects as “direct, medium in magnitude, [and] local in extent.”⁹⁸ This means that for the locals that are affected by trekking,

⁹⁴ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

⁹⁵ Yambahadur Gurung.

⁹⁶ Hector.

⁹⁷ Paul and Lynn (American trekkers) in discussion with the author, April 7, 2016 & April 23, 2016.

⁹⁸ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” 27.

the government acknowledged that there would be direct, negative impacts resulting from the road. Now, these effects are being noticed.

Karma Gurung's main source of income stems from trekkers buying souvenirs and snacks between Upper Pisang and Ghyaru. His sales location, a hill on the north side of the Marsyangdi Valley, overlooks the road to Manang below. In the years since the road was opened to jeep traffic, he has noticed fewer trekkers along the trail to Manang that passes through Ghyaru.⁹⁹ It is difficult to attribute this phenomenon to any specific cause, however. Perhaps it is due to a general decrease in the number of trekkers, or more likely, trekkers are now choosing to walk along the road. This option, which follows the Marsyangdi River from Lower Pisang to Manang, eliminates several hours of trekking, including a steep climb to Ghyaru and descent back to the valley floor. In Karma's opinion, "only boring people" choose to walk on the road rather than the footpath, but he admits the appeal that the physically easier alternative may have.¹⁰⁰ Another possible cause of Karma's observation regarding the trekking traffic is that jeeps allow them to drive straight to Manang, skipping Upper Pisang and Ghyaru. As this is still a relatively uncommon option for trekkers, this explanation likely has a minimal effect. However, in villages before Chame, this is a tremendous issue facing business owners.

Aditya Tamang's guesthouse near Ngadi receives far less business than it used to. As more trekkers take jeeps farther up the valley, fewer hike through towns like Bhulbhule, Ngadi, and Bahundanda. Andrees de Ruiter has seen this problem in villages throughout the lower Marsyangdi Valley. With specific reference to Bahundanda, de Ruiter says that when the road first reached Jagat, which is about two days of walking from Besi Sahar, hotels to the South lost around 75% of their business.¹⁰¹ While business somewhat rebounded from this deficit, it has not fully recovered in many lower villages. Before the road to Manang was completed, de Ruiter predicted that the completion of said road would "probably destroy the lodges below Chame."¹⁰² The TIMS recommendation in Besi Sahar to avoid traveling by jeep is an attempt to mitigate these financial struggles. By referencing safety concerns, the sign aims to minimize the number of trekkers who skip the first few days of trekking. In doing so, this sign would help revitalize the businesses that are suffering. Aditya Tamang hopes that strategies such as this will succeed in bringing his guesthouse more business.

⁹⁹ Karma Gurung.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Andrees de Ruiter, "Project about NATT."

¹⁰² Michael Sabelli, "Jeep Trekking: The Consequences of a Road on the Annapurna Circuit," *Dispatches International*, March 24, 2013.

On the Western side of the circuit, the problem of struggling businesses has been crippling. Since so many tourists now end their journeys at or around Jomsom (Muktinath and Marpha are also common choices), villages to the south have been severely affected. Michael Sabelli, a journalist who hiked the circuit in 2013, noticed that “though the road helps locals working in Agriculture...those dependent on tourism continue to suffer.”¹⁰³ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, who is very worried by this prospect, believes that villages between Tukuche and Tatopani are facing the worst of the problem. He knows many guesthouse owners, especially in Ghasa, who are considering closing their hotels due to lack of business. Because of this sizeable absence of financial capital that has disappeared from the area, locals are often turning to other alternatives. Anu Kumari Lama and Hubert Job noticed this during their 2014 study of road development in ACAP.

“Owners of large hotels and lodges are minimizing the risks of the impacts by adopting apple/vegetable farming and investing in the transportation business. [Those] operating small local inns and restaurants have either been displaced or moved out of the business.”¹⁰⁴

Further contributing to this dilemma, the popular trek to Jomsom and Muktinath is facing the same problem. It used to be fairly common to travel up the Kali Gandaki Valley by foot, but this has changed. Kumari Lama and Job explain that “the operation of SRN,” meaning the Kali Gandaki Highway as a part of the Strategic Road Network, “has reduced the classic seven to eight days long Jomsom/Muktinath trek, to just two to three days.”¹⁰⁵ By eliminating up to five days of the trek, these tourists omit many of the towns that previously received business from trekkers to Muktinath. Yungdrung also addressed this when talking about the absence of trekking business in Ghasa. Some tourists simply take jeeps or busses to save time, but others “are not satisfied by walking [on the] road,” and are motivated to fly straight to Jomsom.¹⁰⁶

Despite the very apparent problems caused directly by trekkers choosing to travel by jeep, ACAP is concerned with the long-term problem of trekkers choosing to visit another region altogether. Yambahadur Gurung believes the number of

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ R Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 240.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

tourists has increased less in previous years,¹⁰⁷ and Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung worries that the number may actually begin to decrease in the near future.¹⁰⁸ Because people dislike walking on the road so much, the potential decline of the Annapurna Circuit's popularity is a legitimate fear for many locals. In 2013, Jo Gurung, an ACAP official working in Manang, anticipated that the road to Manang would have this exact effect.

"I think fewer trekkers [will] come. Trekkers like to walk on trail not road. The trekkers go somewhere else. They change places."¹⁰⁹

This fear remains, with some believing that it has already started to occur, although on a relatively small scale for the moment.



View of Manaslu from Timang

The Manaslu region is rapidly gaining popularity due to its lack of development
Photo by Ben Skach

Consequentially, ACAP development projects will suffer if this trend continues. ACAP receives much of its income from the NPR 2,000 that every foreign tourist must pay to enter the area. This money goes into funding for projects such as

¹⁰⁷ Yambahadur Gurung.

¹⁰⁸ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

¹⁰⁹ Sabelli, "Jeep Trekking: The Consequences of a Road on the Annapurna Circuit."

“alternative energy, safe drinking water stations, health, mother’s groups, and sustainable tourism,” which are “designed and operated by local people.”¹¹⁰ If fewer tourists choose to travel to the Annapurna region, this means less income for ACAP from permits, and less ability to fund and implement these projects. Considering the nearly universal sentiment shared by trekkers that the road is detrimental to the trekking experience, this is an alarming possibility. If other regions of Nepal, or the world for that matter, offer similar or equivalent trekking routes without roads, many trekkers would likely choose these alternatives.

Benefits for Trekking

Many people, however, believe that the number of trekkers will continue to increase. Aditya Tamang laughed at the idea of a decreasing trekker population in the region, saying that more and more people hike the circuit each year.¹¹¹ Statistics posted on the walls at every ACAP office support his claim. Between 1995 and 2013,¹¹² the number of trekkers passing through the Manang tourist check post increased by a yearly average of 9.1%. In 2014, the number decreased, most likely due to the deadly blizzard in October, which killed 43 people.¹¹³ As a result, October of 2014 saw over 1,200 fewer trekkers compared to October 2013, resulting in a yearly decrease of 2%.¹¹⁴ In 2015, the devastating earthquake in Nepal resulted in a 34% decrease in the number of trekkers.¹¹⁵ Because of these disasters, it is difficult to determine what effect the road to Manang, which was finished only two years ago, has had on the total flow of tourists. Yambahadur Gurung cited these statistics, making a point that the number of trekkers has been negatively affected.¹¹⁶ Babu Lal Tiruwa, however, thinks that it is difficult to determine anything this soon, especially taking other causations into consideration. He sees no evidence to suggest that this is a significant problem at the moment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Aditya Tamang.

¹¹² This excludes the year 2002, which experienced a 29% decrease, making it an outlier

¹¹³ Ryan Cholnoky, *Nepal’s Tourism Industry, a Brief Study*, (Fall 2014), 12.

¹¹⁴ “Comparative Annual Tourist Data (1996-2015),” *Annapurna Conservation Area Project*, Statistics Poster, Tourist Check post & Visitor information Center Dharapani, Manang, 2016.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Yambahadur Gurung.

¹¹⁷ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

Aditya believes the opposite to be true, claiming that the roads “do not ruin the trek” because they simply do not outweigh the beauty of the region’s scenery.¹¹⁸ The roads have even opened new opportunities for tourism that did not exist before. Anu Kumari Lama and Hubert Job elaborate on the increased range of tourists that are attracted to the region.

“Once mainly visited by young and thrill seeking backpackers and environmentally conscious trekkers, the place now receives a mix of tourists (such as international, Indian, and domestic) of diverse ages (who now can travel in vehicles).”¹¹⁹

Previously, people who did not want to walk for days to see places like Muktinath and Manang simply did not visit. Now, these tourists have an unprecedented level of access. Eric Hauer, who did not appreciate the road for his own trekking experience, noticed that it is attracting “less backpackers, but more travelers.” Since people can avoid walking up the valley, towns like Jomsom and Muktinath are for more tourists than before. As Muktinath is the site of an important Hindu and Buddhist religious site, the number of pilgrims has also significantly increased. After the road was opened between Beni and Jomsom, locals reported that the number of Nepali and Indian tourists visiting Muktinath increased by over 200%.¹²⁰ Compared to Manang’s 9.9% annual increase between 2007 and 2014,¹²¹¹²² Jomsom’s tourist check post received an average increase of 13.8%.¹²³ Considering that the road to Jomsom was opened in 2006,¹²⁴ the comparative growth advantage was likely due to the higher number of pilgrims and trekkers just visiting Muktinath. Between the years of 1996 and 2006, Jomsom experienced an average of 62.6% more tourists than Manang, whereas this disparity increased to 87.3% between 2007 and 2015.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Aditya Tamang.

¹¹⁹ Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 239.

¹²⁰ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” 20.

¹²¹ “Comparative Annual Tourist Data (1996-2015),” Manang.

¹²² Again, this figure excludes the data collected for 2015, due to the earthquake in April causing the year to be an outlier from the rest of the data.

¹²³ “Number of Foreign Tourists in Jomsom 1995-2015,” *Annapurna Conservation Area Project*, Statistics Poster, Unit Conservation Office Jomsom, 2016.

¹²⁴ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

¹²⁵ “Number of Foreign Tourists in Jomsom 1995-2015,” and “Comparative Annual Tourist Data (1996-2015),” Manang.

Again, this demonstrates how road accessibility has brought an influx of tourism to Mustang.

Now, there are even more options for tourism activities along the circuit. Hauer expressed excitement at the prospect of taking a mountain bike down from Muktinath,¹²⁶ an option that has become more popular after the road was completed. Both Muktinath and Jomsom offer shops at which tourists can rent mountain bikes, and road development means the opening of new frontiers for those hoping to explore the area by bike. Beyond this, roads have made new areas available for foot travel. Between erosion damaging trails and rivers that are too deep to cross, roads have helped to “facilitate the trekkers who are facing difficulty to cross” in certain areas.¹²⁷ Overall, while many trekkers disapprove of what the road means for the Annapurna Circuit, there is no denying that it has diversified and benefitted the number of tourists in the region as a whole. “Socio-economically, the growth of tourism,” that can be seen due to the road, “indicates that the future tourists will be very mobile and their activities very diverse, ranging from short treks and pilgrimage to sightseeing and adventure sports.”¹²⁸ Hauer’s personal favorite benefit that the roads have brought is sitting down after a long day’s trek and enjoying a nice beer.¹²⁹



Himalayan Vulture near Manang
Wildlife attracts many visitors to ACAP
Photo by Ben Skach

¹²⁶ Eric Hauer.

¹²⁷ “Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) Report of Kagbeni-Jhaite Road Subproject Mustang District,” Annex XVII.

¹²⁸ Job and Kumari Lama, “Protected Areas and Road Development: Sustainable Development Discourses in the Annapurna Conservation Area,” 243.

¹²⁹ Eric Hauer.

Alternative Trails

ACAP has three main objectives that it aims to fulfill within the Annapurna region:

- Conserve natural resources of ACA for the benefit of present and future generations
- Bring sustainable social and economic development to the local people
- Develop tourism in such a way that it will have minimum negative impact on the natural, socio-cultural and economic environments

These three objectives, quoted directly from the ACAP page of the National Trust for Nature Conservation's website,¹³⁰ represent the motivations for all actions that ACAP takes. Regarding the construction of roads, ACAP, and other organizations involved, have succeeded in aiding the social and economic development of locals. Unfortunately, despite some benefits to the tourism industry, many people are suffering due to the negative effects that the roads have brought. Fortunately, ACAP has realized this, and the construction of alternative trekking trails has begun to reverse many of these detrimental consequences.

Andrees de Ruiter explains that for many Nepalis, there is no downside to walking on the road. He calls their view of the roads "practical," which "clashes with that of trekkers."¹³¹ Since trekkers visit the Annapurna Circuit for enjoyment purposes, this poses a problem: walking on a dusty, loud road is simply not enjoyable. In 2011, de Ruiter and his colleague Prem Rai began a project to paint trail markers along the entire Annapurna Circuit. These markers, red and white horizontal stripes and arrows, remain today, helping trekkers to easily find their way along the route. He saw this project as a "training opportunity to explain to ACAP how western trekkers are thinking."¹³² Despite noticing a "highly negative impact on trekking tourism" when the road reach Muktinath,¹³³ de Ruiter thinks that it was not until 2011 that ACAP "slowly started to believe that trekkers don't like walking on gravel roads." Due to this realization, although it arguably occurred

¹³⁰ "Annapurna Conservation Area Project," *National Trust for Nature Conservation*.

¹³¹ De Ruiter and Rai, *Trekking in the Annapurna area along the new NATT – trails which avoid the road*.

¹³² Andrees de Ruiter, "Project about NATT."

¹³³ De Ruiter and Rai, *Trekking in the Annapurna area along the new NATT – trails which avoid the road*.

before the year 2011, alternative trekking trails have become an important development in ACAP, as well as other parts of Nepal.

According to de Ruiter and Rai's guidebook, somewhat contradicting de Ruiter's previously mentioned claim, ACAP was already planning alternative trekking trails along the whole Annapurna Circuit by 2006.¹³⁴ Originally called New Annapurna Trekking Trails,¹³⁵ the acronym NATT has been adopted to describe these trails, although this term itself has received a variety of interpretations. Between New Annapurna Trekking Trails, New Alternative Trekking Trails, and Natural Annapurna Trekking Trails, there is somewhat of a disconnect in communication between various agencies that have published information about these trails. This lack of a unified effort to promote the new trails has meant that many trekkers do not even know they exist. Yet, for those who do know about the alternative trails, they offer a much more enjoyable hiking experience.

Alex Jacobs knew about efforts to keep trekkers off of the roads, so he was very pleased with the alternative trails between Besi Sahar and Dharapani. He thinks that "it is much more peaceful. The trail is so much cleaner, and there is no dust," and he suggested that these alternative trails, on the East side of the river, opposite the



Signs Advertising the Alternative Trail to Chame
Photo by Ben Skach

road, may encourage trekkers to avoid taking jeeps up the road.¹³⁶ Even though there is no continuous footpath between Besi Sahar and Manang, sections of trail have been rerouted and built to allow trekkers the option to avoid the road as much as possible. Yambahadur Gurung is pleased with the progress that has been made, but is worried that this is not enough. In the past, trekkers did not need to walk on the road at all, so Yambahadur worries that even a few hours on the road "is not good and trekkers will still not like this."¹³⁷ For the route between Besi Sahar and

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Alex Jacobs.

¹³⁷ Yambahadur Gurung.

Manang, the current state of trails is a good start, but the alternative trekking trail from Muktinath to Tatopani has set an example to which other developing trails should aspire.

According to Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, who is somewhat of a specialist on Mustang's New Alternative Trekking Trail, construction work on this portion of trail began in 2008. By utilizing sections of previously existing local walking paths connected by newly constructed trails that complete the network,¹³⁸ trekkers can now travel from Jomsom to Tatopani while completely avoiding the road, "except for the last 400 m :-)," notes Andrees de Ruiter.¹³⁹ A large map on the wall of the tourist check post in Jomsom advertises the route between Muktinath and Pairothapla, the Southernmost Mustangi town on the circuit. This map provides excellent information regarding trekking options, facilities, sights, and side trips, yet it goes largely unnoticed by the majority of trekkers, who only enter the building to check in at the desk. Hector, who spent three days walking on this trail from Marpha to Tatopani, thoroughly enjoyed what it had to offer. Not only was he able to avoid the constant flow of traffic along the Kali Gandaki Highway, but he had the chance to visit new sights such as Dhumba Lake and the town of Chimang, neither of which he was aware of during his first trek along the circuit.¹⁴⁰ This is exactly what Yungdrung is proud of: the alternative route addresses the problem of the road, and it even improves upon the old route. Yungdrung repeatedly emphasized the importance of bringing as many trekkers as possible to the region because of what it means economically for the locals.¹⁴¹ This is exactly what ACAP hopes that the new trail in Mustang and Myagdi will do. By allowing trekkers to walk along a footpath rather than a road and enhancing access to new tourist attractions, the trail has resuscitated the Lower Kali Gandaki Valley as one of Nepal's premier trekking destinations.

Problems with NATT

Despite how much the new trail developments have helped to improve the Annapurna Circuit, there are still problems that they cause, and issues obstructing further implementation. One of the biggest problems, falling under both of these categories, is the fact that a new trekking trail, in order to avoid the road, must take a new route. This means that each new trail that is built will redirect the flow of

¹³⁸ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

¹³⁹ Andrees de Ruiter, "Project about NATT."

¹⁴⁰ Hector.

¹⁴¹ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung even encouraged me to publish information regarding Mustang's New Alternative Trekking Trail, hoping to spread publicity in any way possible.

trekkers through new towns, or lack thereof. This creates a polarizing effect on locals; towns along the new route are experiencing unprecedented financial opportunity, while those along the road may begin to notice a further decrease in business from trekkers. Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung admits that his can present a problem for those living in villages like Marpha or Tukuche whose income depends on trekkers along the road, but he believes that the benefits of restoring the valley as a popular trekking option are more important.

In order to help locals living in towns along the East side of the river, where the new route was built, ACAP provides training for them to cook, clean, and run safe and sanitary guest houses that trekkers will want to stay in.¹⁴² Since half of the roughly twelve villages along the new route do not have adequate facilities for trekkers, ACAP is also encouraging the homestay program, which helps local homeowners rent out rooms to let trekkers stay with them. This program has been very successful in other regions of Nepal, so ACAP hopes that by training local villagers to properly host trekkers in their own homes, the NATT will receive more traffic, consequentially stimulating the local economy.

In the districts of Lamjung and Manang, geographical concerns have been a major obstruction in the successful development of an alternative trekking trail. Because the majority of towns lie on the same side of the Marsyangdi River as the road, determining how to build a new trail has been difficult. Trekkers want to avoid the road, yet they need places to eat and sleep. Yambahadur Gurung, a strong proponent of alternative trails, explained that ACAP has struggled to find a good route to build, because if the NATT is built on the opposite side of the river, there are no settlements, and therefore no facilities for trekkers.¹⁴³ Beyond this, the landscape of the Marsyangdi Valley has made the process even more difficult. Lined by steep, rocky cliffs, the valley has no natural walking route. In many places, the road was blasted out of the cliff by dynamite. This means that building a new trail would be extremely expensive and labor-intensive. Yambahadur complained that "everyone says we should make the trail, but no one says how."¹⁴⁴ Especially concerning is that if trekkers don't choose to take the new trail, perhaps because it is too close to the road or rejoins the road too soon, then it would be a complete waste of money and effort by ACAP. Because of this, Babu Lal Tiruwa says deciding where and how to build new trails been a slow process, and there is no end in sight.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

¹⁴³ Yambahadur Gurung.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Babu Lal Tiruwa.

Even in Mustang, where the trail is fully functional, the new route has only had moderate success in motivating trekkers to hike out from Jomsom rather than flying or driving. Yungdrung estimates that only one out of every ten trekkers will opt to continue past Jomsom along the new trail. De Ruiter attributes this statistic to a lack of publicity regarding the new alternative trails. In a recent meeting at ACAP headquarters, he proposed the mass distribution of a pamphlet entitled “Trekking on Natural Trails in the Annapurna Region,” which provides background on the NATT, information about trail markers, optional side trips, and recommendations for specific locations where the alternative trails are available.¹⁴⁶ De Ruiter recommends that this document be translated to Spanish, French, and especially Nepali, since “more and more Nepali people are starting to trek and we should help them to find the best natural trails.”¹⁴⁷ He is waiting to hear back from ACAP about whether or not they will invest in publishing this brochure, but he also suggested that they coordinate with TAAN and other agencies that can promote the NATT.¹⁴⁸

De Ruiter’s hope is that by disseminating information regarding the new trails, more people will trek along the Annapurna Circuit. This means that both more people would choose the region as their destination, and that more trekkers would actually hike the whole route. Yungdrung is confident that over time, people will slowly learn more about the NATT, and this will accomplish both these things. He is also concerned about the current lack of awareness by the trekking community, but believes that this change will come with time. When asked about what changes he hopes the NATT would bring to Mustang, Yungdrung’s immediate, wholehearted response was “development for those who currently don’t benefit from tourism,” followed by the ability of locals to improve their English and learn about foreign culture.¹⁴⁹ His biggest concern is the uplifting of the Mustangi population, and these are perhaps the most important achievements he can imagine.

Motivated by the desires of trekkers, ACAP has a strong interest in continuing to develop and promote these trails. Compared to the roads, it is strikingly more pleasant to walk along the alternative trails. Despite difficulties and dilemmas, there is a long-term goal to connect the NATT along the entire circuit. This would ideally undermine the stereotype that roads have “ruined” the Annapurna Circuit, in turn revitalizing the number of trekkers visiting the region, and bringing benefit to locals living within ACAP.

¹⁴⁶ De Ruiter, Andrees, “Trekking on Natural Trails in the Annapurna Region.”

¹⁴⁷ Andrees de Ruiter, “draft for a possible leaflet about natural Annapurna trails (NATT),” e-mail message to author, April 25, 2016.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung.

Conclusion

In the past decade, the Annapurna Conservation Area has experienced unprecedented development. Nepal's national effort to improve road connectivity has meant major lifestyle changes for many locals. Yet, ACAP has struggled to successfully integrate this progress with an obligation to sustainably conserve the region's natural resources. A general sense of approval surrounds the beneficial effects that roads have had for the quality of life within ACAP. Cheaper goods, increased ease of transportation, and facilitation of mass exports have resulted in a significantly increased economic status for locals. Still, there are those who feel that these successes are eclipsed by the harmful nature of roads in regards to the trekking industry.

Motorbike, jeep, and bus traffic has noticeably decreased the thrill of hiking the Annapurna Circuit. The construction of roads in both the Kali Gandaki and Marsyangdi Valleys, notably the recent extension of the road between Chame and Manang, is becoming a problem for many trekkers and the locals who depend on them for income. Between dust, pollution, noise, and general inconvenience for trekkers, this famous route is suffering the consequences that come with road development. Reviews from trekkers have become increasingly negative, with many speculating that the circuit is on the decline as a world-class trekking route. Alex Jacobs poignantly noted that these pessimistic opinions that most trekkers harbor about roads fail to be respectful to the locals for whom the roads have brought important benefits.¹⁵⁰

Still, more and more often, tourists are shortening the duration of their treks by electing to travel by jeep. This has meant a sharp drop in the number of visitors passing through villages at the beginning and end of the circuit. For those whose income derives mostly from trekkers, more traffic means more revenue, meaning this is an immediate problem from which they are financially suffering. Another concern is the long-term deterioration of the Annapurna Circuit's popularity. ACAP has a responsibility not only to develop the region, but also to promote sustainable tourism. The roads have succeeded in the first of these two goals, but unfortunately, have failed in the second. Despite facilitating tourism in certain areas, such as Jomsom and Muktinath, there is a deep concern for the negative impacts along the majority of the circuit. ACAP's obligation to mitigate these detriments has meant the exploration of new ways to promote the area to tourists. This search has culminated in the concept of alternative trekking trails.

¹⁵⁰ Alex Jacobs.

ACAP's plan to implement these trails, the NATT, has resulted in beautiful trails that provide trekkers the option of walking on peaceful, pristine footpaths. While it has not yet been linked to create an alternative trail along the entire Annapurna Circuit, many portions of the trail now offer this option, including the recently opened uninterrupted trail between Muktinath and Tatopani. This lengthy segment of trail has successfully established a high standard for future alternative trails by visiting stunning new locations in addition to avoiding the road. This region's alternative trail was prioritized due to the increasing number of trekkers deciding not to continue past Jomsom. Hoping to discourage this tendency, the new trail aims to help restore the suffering tourism economy in the lower Kali Gandaki Valley.

Between the NATT and an increased publicity of side trips such as Tilicho Lake and Poon Hill, ACAP is successfully attempting to mitigate the negative side effects that roads entail for the trekking industry. Although geographical and social obstacles are currently impeding further implementation of alternative trails in Lamjung and Manang, there is hope that the Annapurna Circuit will once again possess the magic of its early days. With road networks flourishing in many regions of Nepal, the formation of alternative trekking trails presents a perfect complimentary development that maximizes the social and economic advancement of locals as well as the sustainable and beneficial promotion of tourism.



View of Dhaulagiri from Poon Hill
Photo by Ben Skach

Research Methodology

During the independent study project (ISP) period, my primary location of research was along the Annapurna Circuit in the Annapurna Conservation Area. During my time there, I trekked from Bhulbhule to Nayapul, walking on the road in some areas, and utilizing alternative trails in other areas. By traveling on the circuit, I obtained a better understanding of the current state of road and trail development in the region.

In order to learn about the trail, I attempted to talk to locals, although this was often difficult. I scheduled formal interviews with several ACAP officials in order to find out more about the construction and implementation of these projects. I was able to question these officials regarding dates, methods, and motivations of ACAP, as well as future intentions and problems they have faced.

A vast amount of my understanding about the Annapurna Circuit came from my interactions with trekkers. Whether a brief conversation in passing on the trail, or a lengthy discussion over a meal, I was able to learn much from the diverse and fascinating people I encountered.

For written sources, I was able access a many academic or professional documents regarding roads and trails. In addition, the opinions and facts shared by websites and personal articles about roads along the circuit were fascinating. There is a sizeable online presence of pieces written solely about the way that the roads are impacting the trek, and these were invaluable to me in understanding why roads pose such a problem to the tourism industry.

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Suggestions for Future Research

While I learned an astounding amount during my project, it was impossible to study every topic I would have liked. For those considering researching a similar topic in the future, here are some ideas to consider:

- I would highly recommend hiring or bringing someone to translate. While I had success communicating with trekkers and ACAP officials, I severely struggled in surveying the opinions of locals due the language barrier. With a translator, I would have been able to learn much more about their opinions of roads and trails. Further, I would have been able to better understand the direct impacts being felt by changing number of trekkers, as well as the effects of the new routes taken by the NATT.
- Another potential topic would be to choose two villages, or another small number, in which to spend time. By doing this, one could conduct an in depth study of the impacts felt in these specific towns. Perhaps if one village on the road and one on the new alternative trail were chosen, these contrasting locations could be utilized to gain a greater understanding of what effect the NATT is having.

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Me, Enjoying my Time on the NATT near the town of Tal
Photo by Alex Jacobs