

## — Promoting a community-based approach to ecotourism —

**A**s the largest business sector in the world economy, the tourism industry is responsible for over 230 million jobs and more than 10% of GDP worldwide. According to the International Ecotourism Society, tourism is a principal foreign exchange earner for 83% of developing countries, and the leading export for one-third of the poorest. However, influxes of tourists and uncontrolled tourism infrastructure development, especially near fragile ecosystems, result in pollution and destruction of natural habitats.

Recognizing its dichotomous impacts, the APO is promoting a community-based approach to tourism development for sustainability and equitable sharing of benefits. An observational study mission on Community-based Ecotourism Development and Management was therefore held in Nepal, 25–29 May 2009. “There is a need to educate various stakeholders on the real meaning of ecotourism, as the term has been attached loosely to any nature-oriented activities regardless of their impacts on the environment and the culture of local communities,” explained Secretariat Agriculture Senior Program Officer Joselito Bernardo.

Expert Dr. Mina Gabor, former Secretary of Tourism and currently Chair of the Ecotourism Society of the Philippines, emphasized that if ecotourism is properly managed, developing countries in Asia can generate substantial, sustainable income, particularly in rural areas. She cited the case of Donsol, where municipal revenues increased substantially five years after the community was educated on how to manage its coastal area, now a whale shark-watching venue. Director of EcoSustainAbility of Australia Guy Chester, described case studies in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand of successful ecotourism programs and enterprises and pointed out tremendous opportunities for Asian countries to develop ecotourism.



*Observing a food-cooling cache developed for upland villages*

Nepal, although economically less developed, has abundant experience in managing famed national parks and wildlife areas including Mt. Everest. According to Vice President of the KGH Group of Hotels and Resorts Rajendra Narsingh Suwal, the government in partnership with NGOs and local communities collects users' fees for visits to these sites. The revenues are used to strengthen regulatory and other support services to the area including waste collection. Some of the revenues go to communities for development and welfare.

The participants agreed that ecotourism could be a catalyst for job creation and the conservation of endangered biological resources. It could also stimulate development of satellite activities such as handicrafts, transportation, and food services, increasing benefits to communities. Thus, participants recommended that the APO continue supporting ecotourism development by training consultants in this area in member countries. When managed appropriately, ecotourism can contribute substantially to environmental preservation, local communities, national economies, and transborder understanding. 🌐