

INNOVATION is increasingly necessary in tourism development because so many diverse attractions are available that tourists are becoming very selective in what they will pay to see and do. **ACTION** as well as **ATTRACTION** is necessary to provide a **QUALITY EXPERIENCE** that tourists will be willing to pay for. The application of principles of Ecotourism as advocated by the EcoClub provides the opportunity for both innovation and action to be combined as attraction for sustainable eco- and cultural tourism.

In many countries there are tall “skywalks” (boardwalks erected on 50+ meters high posts) that allow people to experience the forest canopy (treetops) instead of boardwalks and trails along the ground. And there are perhaps thousands of cable cars that have been constructed in the past 30 years to take people through forests and up steep mountains. Both of these types of construction are:

- expensive to build;
- are often environmentally damaging;
- limited in how much money can be charged for people to use them; and
- they have no relationship to the local culture.



9. One of our proposals for a form of ecotourism activity new to Tibet is based on a traditional form of transport – their use of ropes and pulleys to transport goods and people across the deep narrow gorges of rivers and streams. For example, since 700A.D. the *cha-ma*-trail (tea-horse trail) which runs for 2,500 kms from Lijiang in northern Yunnan Province to Lhasa has used ropes and pulleys to transport tea across the Yangtze and Mekong River gorges en route to Lhasa, with horses being transported across the rivers on the return journey.

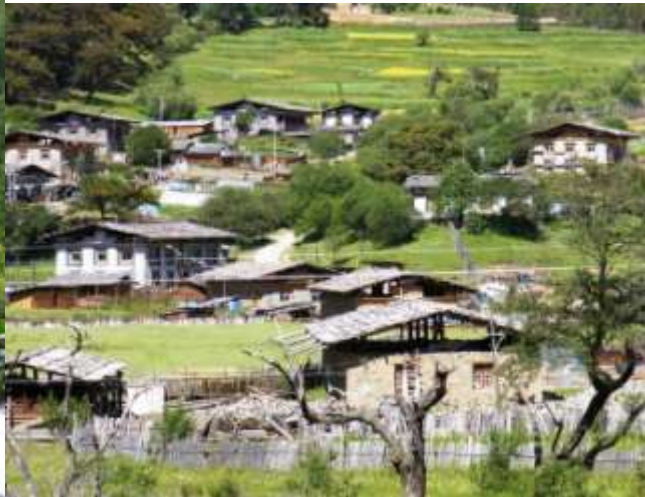


In 1930 the biologist, Joseph Rock, made an historic mounted exploration of the mountainous regions running between China and Tibet. Because he travelled with a large guard, Rock was able to have his mules and horses winched across the raging rivers of Tibet.

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This proposal builds on that tradition to introduce a new way of 'travelling' through a forest - a high wire harness ride through the treetops. Locations for such an adventure ride could be the Tsebark Valley National Nature Preserve near Dyazul, the Mel-dway Glacier, and the Five Cultures Villages. Such a development would be innovative (in terms of tourism), active, culturally derived and environmentally sensitive.



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In Australia, an example is the Hollybanks Treetops Adventure in the Tasmanian forests. The US\$700,000 project takes thrill-seekers on a 730m elevated tour in the longest continuous treetop cable ride in Australia.

Participants are strapped into harnesses clipped to cables 50m above the ground, stopping at seven special platforms known as 'cloud stations' along the way.



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This cable wire harness ride is environmentally sound. Unlike cable cars for example which must travel in a straight line, not a single tree was cut down to make the Hollybanks cable harness ride. It uses the giant trees in the forest for its 'sky platforms', it has no steel posts or other man-made structures to support it, and it uses gravity rather than a form of generated power to transport 'riders' along the cables. Its carbon footprint is thus negligible. The fee is \$100 per person to take the ride, groups are restricted to ten at a time and are accompanied by a trained guide who provides interpretation of the forest canopy habitat. Forestry Tasmania supports the Hollybank Treetops Adventure with an international mountain bike park, walking trails, signage, car parking, toilets, picnic facilities and a café, and this model has been suggested for a range of sites in Tibet.



One such site for an innovative access experience incorporates the Five Cultures Villages, Lunang Valley.



Diagram illustrating how the cable harness ride could provide an exciting access for adventurous tourists to the Five Cultures Villages. Instead of just driving along the road, they could stop at the top of the hill, and slide down the cable across the river and down the valley to the village of their choice. Their bus would take the road.

Five Cultures Villages, Lunang Valley.





Mount Namchak Barwo in the background

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Some Final Thoughts on Planning for Tourism in Tibet.

As with all tourism planning for development in China, much of it is top-down and driven by government as the key stakeholder. Increasingly, however, authorities accept and invite additional stakeholders to participate in the formulation of planning, and slowly community based tourism among the Minorities* is reaching out to those most directly affected, and their views and proposals taken into account. Many Chinese planners have trained in western countries and mixed teams (i.e. of both Chinese and international experts) provide a strong combination to bring global best practice into an informed socio-cultural synthesis with Chinese values and priorities that may be difficult for a non-Chinese to fully appreciate. In the case of Tibet this has proved especially important where the environment and the culture require sound, sensible and sensitive management.

In Tibet, one advantage of planning for tourism is that often one is dealing with a 'greenfields' situation (i.e. no prior development); and since the authorities are not only open to global best practice but keen to pursue innovation as part of China's Western Development Project (involving all western provinces) they are receptive to soundly based proposals. Action invariably follows quickly once proposals have been accepted, a refreshing change from decision-making in many western countries.

In posting this brief outline of recent tourism planning activities in Tibet my hope is to better inform an often uninformed world of aspects of Tibet that I have been privileged to see.

Trevor Sofield, 20 August 2008

[China has 55 officially recognised ethnic Minorities – minzu – who collectively number more than 110 million, almost 10% of the total population. There are about 3 million Tibetans resident in the TAR and another 5 million living in neighbouring provinces such as Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan.]*