

COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN GARGON AND TAJU

Located in Kham, Tibet

**Findings from Focus Groups
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by

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There are few economic alternatives to herding, growing fodder for animals to consume in the winter months, growing some subsistence crops, and caterpillar fungus collecting. Occasionally, those in Gargon have other jobs such as construction or driving trucks. Clearly, alternative income is needed so that community members have cash for health care and to improve their lives.

My personal assessment, having worked in the area of sustainable tourism and community-based ecotourism, is that the most viable alternative income source for both Gargon and Taju would be sustainable tourism. Tourism is the single fastest growing industry in the world. The Kham area of Tibet is wild, remote, and undeveloped, making it a perfect ecotourism destination, which could benefit the local people, without forcing them to completely give up their current lifestyles. In order to control their own resources, it's imperative that these communities create their own sustainable tourism project before outsiders snatch this resource from them.

The men in Taju expressed a strong interest in becoming involved in community-based ecotourism as an alternative cash income source. The men's focus group in Taju discussed how they might do this. They suggested that tourists could come and camp in the area and that local people could provide horses and guides to take them up into the mountains. A better water source would be needed than currently exists, which means improving the spring. Also, there would be a need to set up some sort of outhouses and, if possible, a bath house. Of course, if mining is allowed in Taju, the village will lose all of its ecotourism potential.

Although community-based ecotourism was not discussed in focus groups in Gargon, it would be interesting to hear if Gargon community members have the same level of interest as those in Taju. Generally, it's beneficial to link villages in ecotourism efforts so that tourists can visit more than one village. From my perspective, Gargon also would be a viable ecotourism destination

Because there aren't any horses in Gargon, it would be best if tourists went to Gargon to see the upper and lower monasteries and visit with villagers. They then could go from Gargon to Taju where they could camp and horseback ride in the mountains. Both areas offer beautiful hiking.

Given tourist interest in visiting monasteries in this area, it also would be worthwhile to talk with those at Gargon Monastery about their possible interest in sustainable tourism.