

Conceptual dissonance, economic transition and the struggle for local control in ecotourism development : the case of the Kyrgyz Republic

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Published version

PALMER, Nicola (2005). Conceptual dissonance, economic transition and the struggle for local control in ecotourism development : the case of the Kyrgyz Republic. In: Workshop: The Politics of Mobilities: Ecotourism in North-South Relations, Lancaster University, 14-15 January 2005 Centre for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe), University of Lancaster, 14-15 January 2005. (Unpublished)

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Conceptual dissonance, economic transition and the struggle for local control in ecotourism development: the case of the Kyrgyz Republic

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Introduction

Ecotourism literature acknowledges the attractiveness of ecotourism as a development option for countries with developing (Campbell, 1999) and, to a lesser extent, transitional economies. In tourism studies generally, there has been a dearth of interest in the latter type of economy – ‘transitional’ - as opposed to the former type – ‘developing’. Developing countries appear to have been regarded as more ‘exotic’, interesting and worthy of analysis. However, former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Central Asian former USSR states (referred to as ‘the stans’ by journalist Simon Reeve, 2002) have recently started to generate increased tourism academic interest. It could be argued that these former ‘second world’ countries present an enigma in modern development literature with the removal of Cold War referents.

It would appear that Kyrgyzstan, like other post-soviet republics, sits uneasily amidst the development classifications currently employed in the academic literature. Lavigne (1995 as cited in Burns, 1998) identifies the hybrid nature of the political and social status of CIS countries with respect to traditional development classification systems.

In the past this author has argued that Kyrgyzstan may be described as a ‘re-developing country’ (Thompson and Foster, 2002) due to past Soviet investment and some existing characteristics of industrialization. But it is important to stress that the nation has not simply re-started or continued its progress along a development continuum since gaining independence in 1991. Many commentators and local citizens acknowledge that, post-independence, a regression rather than development has occurred in most aspects of socio-economic life.

Jaakson (1996) acknowledges the lack of conventional models to represent tourism development in the post-soviet republics such as Kyrgyzstan. He rejects the application of conventional economic development frameworks such as Rostow’s (1960) development stage theory due to the ‘unnatural’ conditions that determined the evolution

of post-soviet tourism destinations. Jaakson (1996) also argues that his own case study area, Estonia, does not fit a 'post-colonial' stage of development due to the geographically, politically and economically closely integrated federated state of the Soviet Union of which the country was a part. In the end, Jaakson does not fully tackle the development status of Estonia, settling on Hall's (1991) description of 'developmental transformation' – a concept that allows us to distinguish post-soviet countries from the 'developed North' yet fails to fully highlight some of the challenges that these post-soviet countries share with the 'developing South'.

According to the Swiss Development Co-operation's (SDC) project implementation agency, Helvetas, on the basis of level of per capita income, Kyrgyzstan ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world. It has been estimated that 55% of the 4.9 million population live below the poverty line, with 80% of the poorest people in the country living in rural areas (Helvetas, 2002; EarthTrends, 2003). In common with many post-communist countries, the divide between wealth and poverty has widened since independence and ethnic cleavages have developed due to nepotism (Omuralieyv, personal communication 2004) and political and economic corruption (Thompson and Foster, 2002).

Kyrgyzstan performs erratically across world development indicators (UN, 2000). For example, despite its severe poverty statistics and possessing maternal and infant mortality rates at more than twice the European average, Kyrgyzstan has an adult literacy rate of 99.6 percent (largely due to the strong education system and curriculum imposed by the Soviets). It has also received international praise for its democratic principles and is generally recognised to be the most democratic, albeit the poorest, of all CIS countries (Thompson and Foster, 2002). The combination of these factors make it difficult for some academics to view Kyrgyzstan as a developing country with a serious degree of development problems and challenges in comparison to designated 'third world nations' yet the vulnerability of Kyrgyzstan and the fragility of the country's resources should not be overlooked.

Political and economic challenges

Since 1991 Kyrgyzstan has been pursuing a re-development strategy focused on building an independent, democratic state through the formation of a free market economy. Some commentators have argued that Kyrgyzstan has a sustainable economic growth problem because of an incompatibility between its economic goals and political realities (Helvetas, 2002; Cummings and Nørgaard, 2004). The Kyrgyz President's vision of a democratic Kyrgyzstan operating in the mode of more developed western countries is challenged by the absence of democratic tradition¹ and legacies of the country's fairly recent and extreme political past. Ishiyama and Kennedy (2001) acknowledge how decades of totalitarian rule and an associated loss of civil society, restricts the development of political parties in all states of the former Soviet Union. With respect to Kyrgyzstan, Karavaeva (2004) reports that the country did achieve 'fairly vibrant' civil society development in the 1990s but the situation has deteriorated since 2000 with a waning commitment to civil freedoms from the Kyrgyz government.

The Comprehensive Development Framework of Kyrgyzstan until 2010 (CDF) has provided Kyrgyzstan with a strategy of long-term development for the first time in the country's history. According to the Kyrgyz government (Kyrgyz government, 2001) it has two 'vitaly important' objectives:

- to eliminate poverty;
- to build the reputation of the country in the international arena (for we will be seen as caring for our future).

The second objective has been cited as a means of explaining a seemingly indiscriminate interest of the Kyrgyz government in international donor assistance from a wide range of external partners. Between 1998-2000 total external debt in Kyrgyzstan was calculated to be US\$ 1,694 million (EarthTrends, 2003) and was reported to exceed 100% of the country's GDP (Helvetas, 2002). The heavy dependency on international assistance is demonstrated even further by facts such as '...60% of the country's 2001 budget was reserved for foreign debt repayments' (Helvetas, 2002:7).

Official development assistance to Kyrgyzstan between 1998-2000 was US\$ 241 million – 0.4% of world assistance (EarthTrends, 2003). A further US\$ 400 million of technical assistance was received by the country between 1993-1999 (Helvetas, 2002). Karavaeva (2004) reports that aid accounts for almost 17% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP. The country's main donors are: the USA; the European Community (EC); Germany; Switzerland; the Asian Development Bank (ADB); the World Bank (WB); the United Nations (UN); and Japan (Bruni, personal communication 2004). However, other collaborative relationships exist aligning Kyrgyzstan with countries such as Turkey, China, and Russia. Komissarov (personal communication, 2004) claims that many international development agencies are keen to offer assistance as Kyrgyzstan is perceived to have less barriers than other developing countries because 'the country is more democratic'. The country's geopolitical location in a 'New Great Game' has also been cited as a reason for an increasing international interest in this small republic (Kleveman, 2003).

However, despite this growing number of international relationships providing support for Kyrgyzstan's second CDF objective (cited earlier), Cummings and Nørgaard (2004:704) in their analysis of the state capacity of Kyrgyzstan assert that, '...Kyrgyzstan's political ambitions (as part of its strategic aim to attract foreign aid interest) did not match its social capacities...'. They claim that the political elite's choice to westernize the country lacks wider societal consensus, rendering Kyrgyzstan's state as poor and divorced from society (Cummings and Nørgaard, 2004).

Natural resources

The natural environment of Kyrgyzstan is one of the country's most outstanding features. The country is more mountainous (over 90% of the country lies above 1000 metre altitude), greener and less industrialised than its neighbouring counterparts such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. During her 5,000 mile trek across Central Asia, Alexandra Tolstoy described the country as 'the secret garden' and remarked how upon entering the country from Uzbekistan, '...suddenly I felt the enormity and power of nature' (Tolstoy, 2004:47). Other explorers-cum-travel

writers have also distinguished Kyrgyzstan in terms of its natural beauty, in particular, its 'heavenly mountains' (Thubron, 1995; Bealby, 2003). Aesthetically, the landscape has been compared to Switzerland (Akmoldoeva and Sommer, 2002) and, for tourism purposes, the promotional strapline 'Kyrgyzstan - The Switzerland of Central Asia' has been employed in recent years (Glavtour, 2000). However, the country is unique not just vis-à-vis its Central Asian neighbours but in a global context in terms of its fragile mountain ecosystems, history and culture. Remarkably, for a country that occupies just 0.13% of dry land area in the world, it has been estimated that Kyrgyzstan possesses 'about 2% of world flora and more than 3% of world fauna' (Shukurov and Sadykova, 2000:1). Much of the interest lies in the Issyk-Kul *oblast* (regional administrative area) in the north-east of the country, dominated by the Issyk-kul lake. Lake Issyk-Kul is acknowledged by LakeNetⁱⁱ to be the second-largest high-altitude lake in the world (after Lake Titicaca in South America) and one of less than twenty ancient lakes on earth, estimated at more than 25 million years old.

Other examples of Kyrgyzstan's natural resources include the largest walnut forests in the world situated in the central Sary-Chelek biosphere area, more than eighty species of mammals including the threatened and regionally endemic Menzbier's marmot and snow leopards in the Tien Shan mountains and in excess of 800 glaciers, making up more than 4% of the total land area of the country (UNESCO, 2000).

These natural resources exist both in spite of and because of the legacies of the country's Soviet past. During Soviet rule it has been claimed that the environment suffered from extensive overgrazing, degradation of fragile mountain pastures, and de-forestation (ICMM, 2000). Shukurov and Sadykova (2002:2) also claim that the country has lost fir, juniper, fruit, pistachio and almond forests at dramatic rates over the last fifty years or so, and although Kyrgyzstan possesses 'a great wealth of biodiversity resources' and twenty different classes of ecosystem may be recorded in the country, immediate protection and 'rational use' is required.

However, it has also been reported that, with respect to the USSR as a whole, the Soviets were avid stewards of environmental protection (Sievers, 1998). One of Kyrgyzstan's most celebrated national parks, Ala-Archa was actually founded in 1974 by the Soviets as a *zapovednik* (a permanent natural reserve) to protect the old Ala-Archa River and its environs for the sake of society and future generations (Turesbekova, personal communication 2004).

The cultural environment

Kyrgyzstan possesses a cultural history that can be traced back to 200BC and ancient tribal Turkic people (Bashiri, 1999). Despite this long history, the decades of Soviet control have made a relatively, strong social impact. This is hardly surprising in view of the extreme policies implemented by Joseph Stalin that resulted in the forced resettlement of six million people across the USSR (Polian, 2003). As a consequence of Stalin's extreme social experiment, it is now estimated that Kyrgyzstan comprises more than eighty nationalities (Akmatova, personal communication 2004; Omuralieyv, personal communication 2004). The Kyrgyz President, Askar Akayev, often speaks of 'our

common home' (Saipjanov, 2003), intimating that there exists multi-cultural harmony within the nation. However, the way in which the multiple nationalities interact and the extent to which there exists a harmonious multi-cultural Kyrgyzstan rather than simply a fragmented multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan is interesting, if not contentious.

The concepts of 'homeland', 'nationality' and 'citizenship' in Kyrgyzstan amongst the country's multi-ethnic population forms a separate analysis of this author's 2004 fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, focusing upon contested representations of the promotion of Kyrgyz cultural heritageⁱⁱⁱ. It is not possible to provide a detailed discussion of some of the anomalies of western- vis-à-vis Kyrgyz dogma associated with the consequences of Soviet forced migration here. However, it is important to highlight that the differences can have severe implications for any western assumptions of the term 'local' as used and understood in Kyrgyzstan. All of the residents of Kyrgyzstan are accepted as 'Kyrgyz citizens' but despite the existence of children and grandchildren born in Kyrgyzstan of Russian exiles (what western people would consider to be 'first generation' Kyrgyz), only Kyrgyz citizens with Kyrgyz fathers are accepted as Kyrgyz nationals (termed '*ethnic Kyrgyz*' from here on in). Further, some ethnic Kyrgyz claim that true Kyrgyz nationals have to be able to name seven generations of their father's bloodline, tracing their roots back to a time when nomadic culture dominated the country (Omuralieyv, personal communication 2004).

Recent statistics reveal that 60% of the population are ethnic Kyrgyz (Omuralieyv, personal communication 2004) and since 1991, it is the ethnic Kyrgyz that have received positive political, economic and social attention not solely by the Kyrgyz government but also through international development agencies and the focus of their assistance initiatives. A spokeswoman for UNESCO in Kyrgyzstan explained that '...during the Soviet period everything before that time was excluded, now people exclude the Soviet period. It was biased before and [is] now biased the opposite side...' (Okeyeva, personal communication 2004). Perhaps any positive discrimination is unsurprising following political and cultural repression. It certainly follows a pattern that we are witnessing in other parts of the world where repressed people and cultures often gain inflated status when the repressor is removed and the inflation of status vis-à-vis competing cultures is often accepted as somehow 'legitimate', such as in post-Franco Catalonia (Foster *et al*, 2003). Yet, in the context of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan it does pose an uncomfortable dilemma because it results in a displaced population (the forced migrants of Stalin and their descendants) being repeatedly and consciously marginalized.

The multi-ethnic situation in Kyrgyzstan is generally understood to be deteriorating (despite the rhetoric of President Akayev) and there are recent talks of a reversion to tribalism and clanship, especially in the public sector, that is threatening to politically destabilise the country (Karavaeva, 2004; Omuralieyv, personal communication 2004; Asel, personal communication 2004; Turesbekova, personal communication 2004).

What is of interest here in this paper in relation to the development of ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan is the way in which multi-ethnic culture is accommodated within ecotourism and the way in which 'local' becomes interpreted.

Ecotourism, nature and culture

Despite on-going debates regarding the definition of ecotourism and whether the concept exists as a component of alternative tourism, a distinct type of nature tourism or as a niche form of tourism in its own right, it is becoming clear that the term is being increasingly employed as an argument for nature preservation and community-based actions. In terms of the benefits sought and promised from ecotourism development, clear common expectations or assumptions can be identified. If we accept, at the very least, the third of Weaver's (2002:154) core criteria that '...ecotourism is expected to be environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable' then it is clear that natural and cultural environments are essential ecotourism resources. This paper does not aim to revisit the debate on ecotourism definitions and present a new definition of ecotourism but it is important to state that the paper does present an account of ecotourism implementation where the cultural environment, along with the natural environment, is assumed to form an integral part of the concept of ecotourism as promoted by governments, tour operators and other tourism and development actors.

Fennell (2001) talks about a 'spirit' or ethic of 'ecotourism' and a way of approaching the natural world. In this sense, it may be that ecotourism not only incorporates both culture and nature but also recognizes and promotes a link between the two variables or environments— particularly with respect to **local** culture and **local** landscape relationships (Garrod, 2003). This locates ecotourism as a key potential vehicle for promoting- and protecting diversity in globalisation debates.

With respect to the multi-ethnic population of Uzbekistan, the product of the same Stalinist strategic experiment to 'divide and rule' the USSR in the 1930s, Sievers (1998:13) claims that, amongst the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kazakhs in general, 'each of them has [their] own kind of traditional nature using'. If ecotourism might be recognized to promote a link between natural and cultural environments, particularly focusing upon **local** culture and **local** landscape relationships, then a dilemma occurs. The whole idea of a local culture becomes a messy and emotive subject because of the multi-ethnic issues and the unconventional roots of many Kyrgyz citizens as indicated earlier in this paper. Based on the political majority view of nationality and homeland within Kyrgyzstan rather than this author's own westernised views, ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan becomes a concept incorporating local culture based on the culture of the ethnic Kyrgyz.

The ethnic Kyrgyz were formerly Central Asian pastoralists – 'yurt-dwelling, nomadic herdsman, migrating seasonally with their animals' (Akmoldoeva and Sommer, 2002:xvii). Although many of their cultural traditions remain in the everyday lifestyles and practices of these members of the Kyrgyz population^{iv} some of the longer-term impacts of Stalin's attempts at collectivisation in Kyrgyzstan, whilst not 100% effective, did result in a more settled population. The travelling of the ethnic Kyrgyz population is now limited to the summer months (mainly July and August) when Kyrgyz families, accompanied by their horses and felt tents (*yurts*), retreat to summer pastures (*jailoos*) and adopt more primitive lifestyles akin to the permanent existence of their ancestors. In common with many tribal societies and, because of the nomadic roots of the ethnic

Kyrgyz, there appears to exist a strong, spiritual relationship between people and nature. During their summer migrations, the ethnic Kyrgyz demonstrate some clear examples of nature-based subsistence^v.

Tourism in a free market economy in Kyrgyzstan

Tourism within Kyrgyzstan is not new but, like economic development in the country, it has entered a transformational stage of development. Soviet rule created artificial tourism trading conditions within Kyrgyzstan and the tourism that did exist in the country pre-1991 was largely in response to CIS social tourism demand. It was dominated by trade union-sponsored health tourism aimed at spas and sanatoria around the Issyk-Kul region in the north-east of the country.

During Soviet times there existed a limited number of tourism companies in Kyrgyzstan and the Moscow-based soviet tourism operator “InTourist” dominated the tourism supply. However, some Kyrgyz tour operators believe that there are still soviet era tour operators in operation today such as Tien Shan Travel and Glavtour but it is difficult to identify the full range of these businesses (Sunchaleeva, personal communication 2004).

In view of the post-soviet development challenges facing Kyrgyzstan and the relatively limited resources vis-à-vis other Central Asian countries, it is not surprising that tourism has been identified as an economic development priority for Kyrgyzstan and is a named programme within the country’s CDF, mentioned earlier (Kyrgyz government, 2001). However, despite its ‘priority’ status, tourism receives just 4% of the state budget (Komissarov, personal communication 2004).

Within the country’s CDF, The Program of Measures on Tourism Development in the Kyrgyz Republic until 2010 (Kyrgyz Government, 2001) prioritises investment opportunities in the Kyrgyz tourism sector as:

- elite tourism;
- resort-recreational tourism;
- mountain adventure tourism and mountain climbing;
- historical sites along the Silk Route;
- ecological tourism;
- business tourism.

However, Claytor (personal communication, 2004) has reported that the Kyrgyz government has officially removed its interest in ecological tourism and re-stated its focus as being on four priority areas:

- recreational tourism, mainly around Lake Issyk-Kul aimed at the CIS market;
- adventure tourism, focusing on mountaineering, trekking, rafting etc., aimed at international markets;
- Silk Road tourism;
- business tourism.

Since the 1991 independence of the country, tourism within Kyrgyzstan has officially shifted under the jurisdiction of the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the

Kyrgyz Republic (formerly the Kyrgyz State Agency of Tourism and Sports – KSATS). It is reported that, despite accusations of negligence by the state with respect to tourism leadership (Birkov, personal communication 2004; Katanaev and Schetnikov, personal communication 2004; Asel, personal communication 2004), there is state influence on tourism and there are issues of attempted control particularly around licensing (Claytor, personal communication 2004). Attempts at regulation from the state are not well-received by the majority of the Kyrgyz tour operators because, after many years of a highly regulated Soviet system, there is a belief that regulation should come from businesses – ‘self-regulation’. The strength of feeling around this issue is such that one Kyrgyz tour operator argues that the country ‘...should not have to use western models and their mistakes...’ (Umetaliev, personal communication 2004). State involvement in terms of regulation is viewed as ‘anti-competitive’ because of the government’s reputation for corruption (Umetaliev, personal communication 2004).

It is estimated that there are currently thirty-nine private Kyrgyz tour operators, with the majority of these based in Bishkek, the capital of the country (BISNIS, 1998; Claytor, personal communication 2004; Pyshnenko, personal communication 2004; Umetaliev, personal communication 2004). Many modern Kyrgyz tour operators believe that tourism, as a market sector, started in 1990 in Kyrgyzstan. The end of Communism coincided with dramatically reduced wages across employment sectors in Kyrgyzstan and this forced many individuals to turn their hobbies into business (Katanaev and Schetnikov, personal communication 2004). Many of today’s Kyrgyz tour operators were originally sportsmen (mainly enthusiasts of trekking and climbing) who, faced with uncertain economic futures, decided to use their experience of the mountain terrain of Kyrgyzstan and develop commercial tours (Pyshnenko, personal communication 2004). Generally, Kyrgyz tour operators have focused on two main types of tourism – adventure tourism based on the physical mountain terrain of Kyrgyzstan and the operators’ technical expertise and, to a lesser extent, cultural tourism based on tours visiting sites of ethnic Kyrgyz built heritage. Tourism products have been spatially restricted due to geography and access (Claytor, personal communication 2004) and it is claimed that 99% of all tourism money is in Issyk-Kul (Pyshnenko, personal communication 2004).

Kyrgyz tour operators claim to have established good working relationships with local Kyrgyz citizens, particularly the ethnic Kyrgyz population who rent horses or act as herdsman in trekking tours and sometimes sell meat and milk to the tours (Birkov, personal communication 2004). The operators also claim to be starting to forge good working relationships between themselves, mainly via business associations (Polynsky, personal communication 2004; Umetaliev, personal communication 2004). There are currently three main tourism associations in Kyrgyzstan:

- the Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators (KATO);
- the Kyrgyz Association of Tourism Operator Services (KATOS);
- the Great Silk Road Tour Operators Association.

These associations combine resources, especially in terms of destination promotion, in the absence of state co-ordination from the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic (Umetaliev, personal communication 2004).

With respect to national tourism policies and consultation, it is claimed that local people have not been involved in the Kyrgyz government's vision of tourism. There has been no public, private, local discussion yet the Kyrgyz tour operators believe that, '...everybody needs to know the rules and not just plans but what is actually received from tourism' (Pyshnenko, personal communication 2004). Furthermore, the purpose and aims of the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic are perceived to be in complete contrast to those of the Kyrgyz tour operators (Katanaev and Schetnikov, personal communication 2004).

International development actors and tourism in Kyrgyzstan

The largest new tourism projects within Kyrgyzstan are being driven by the funding agendas of international development actors and the dependency of the Kyrgyz government on external technical assistance is highly evident in the sphere of tourism. There are currently proposals for tourism development projects centred around Lake Issyk-Kul from various international parties, including the Japanese development agency, JICA and the Chinese organisation, Jung Kung.

The exact relationship between these international development actors and the Kyrgyz Government is difficult to define and the locus of power within the relationships is complicated to identify. It was noted earlier that, reflecting the country's CDF objectives, the Kyrgyz government appears to indiscriminately court external assistance. Allen (personal communication, 2004) observes that the Kyrgyz government does appear to possess some bargaining leverage when it comes to international tourism developers. He notes that as part of Jung Kung's proposed tourism complex to the west of Djети-Oguz, the Kyrgyz government has secured 1000 jobs for local Kyrgyz citizens including a percentage of managerial positions, development of Karakol airport and the establishment of a seaplane base (Allen, personal communication 2004).

The extent to which there exists strategic and targeted tourism growth and development of the country is questionable and difficult to establish due to political censorship and a lack of access to representatives of the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic. It is, however, observable that the involvement and influence of development actors from more industrialised economies has resulted in a push towards sustainable forms of tourism development in keeping with western global agendas.

Ecotourism and the Community Based Tourism (CBT) project

The SDC started operating in Kyrgyzstan in 1993 and the Swiss NGO Helvetas is used as the main agency implementing projects in Kyrgyzstan on behalf of the SDC. Rayeva (personal communication, 2004) reports that the main focus of Helvetas is to help rural people and its guiding principle or mission is '...to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of economically and socially disadvantaged people, especially in rural areas...' (Helvetas, 2002).

In 1995, Helvetas started a Community Business Tourism support project in Kyrgyzstan as a means of helping rural women to start new businesses and expand existing

businesses. Resource limitations meant that the focus of the project became restricted to one economic sector, tourism. As part of the project, Helvetas recognized the need to provide rural women with the support of a tour operator willing to work with rural Kyrgyz people. Rayeva (personal communication, 2004) claims that, at the time most Kyrgyz tour operators were not willing to work with rural people due to perceived uncertainties in relation to quality and service provision. This resulted in the establishment of a new tour operator, Novinomad, in 1999. This Swiss-Kyrgyz joint venture tour operator based in Kyrgyzstan, was created with the technical assistance of Helvetas and was designed specifically to work with local people and facilitate the distribution of local tourism products to international markets. Novinomad is the only tour operator in Kyrgyzstan that explicitly describes itself as an ecotourism company in terms of its overall operating objectives and it is claimed that, ‘...few other Kyrgyz tour operators work with local individuals as is Novinomad policy’ (Asel, personal communication 2004).

In 2000, Helvetas officially launched its Community Based Tourism project. The project unites various tourism service providers from different regions of Kyrgyzstan and functions with the support of Helvetas, a Swiss Association for International Co-operation. According to Novinomad (2003) the main goals of the project are:

- to generate income to improve the living standards of CBT members;
- to conserve the environment, customs and traditions of the Kyrgyz people;
- to create a formal organization among tourism service providers all over the country;

The project has resulted in the establishment of a series of Community Business Tourism (CBT) groups spread regionally across Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 1). Although, the map only shows nine CBT groups, there currently exist ten CBT groups in five oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, with the exception of the Chui region (‘less rural’) and Batken (‘low demand due to conflicts and geography’) (Shabdanbekova, personal communication, 2004). Each CBT group is comprised of a range of local tourism service providers including: bed and breakfast providers; drivers; trekking guides; cooks; souvenir-makers; folklore show groups. The group collectively promotes its services to international tourists via tour operators, with tour operators acting as co-ordinators, ‘packagers’ and distributors of CBT services.

The CBT groups completed training from Helvetas and, in 2003, decided to form the Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association (KCBTA), a joint association linking the ten CBT groups across Kyrgyzstan and providing rural people with a stronger voice in Kyrgyz tourism. Membership of the CBT groups is defined as ‘local people’ although these people are predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz nationals (Shabdanbekova, personal communication, 2004).

Despite the initial difficulties in finding Kyrgyz tour operator partners for the CBT groups the KCBTA officially now has fourteen tour operator partners based on a voluntary co-operation agreement with no economic or contractual ties. The tour operators are asked to act as local co-ordinators for the CBT groups and to abide by the following conditions:

- promote CBT packages and services at regional, national and international levels;
- follow ecotourism principles laid down by Novinomad;
- help keep statistics and accounting systems.

In return, the tour operators are provided with discounts and commission payments from the CBT groups (Shabdanbekova, personal communication, 2004).

One particular CBT group based in Naryn promotes itself under the brand ‘Shepherd’s Life’. This is a small CBT group of five service providers offering jailoo tourism in an oblast where the largest jailoos are located. Shepherd’s Life allows for the identification of a specific ecotourism product promoted by one of the CBT groups. The product aimed at ‘independent travelers...’ is co-ordinated and provided by private families and shepherds who are residents of the Naryn region. A typical tour offers:

- overnight stay in a house or an apartment in the villages or in a Kyrgyz yurt on the jailoo;
- delicious traditional food for breakfast, lunch or dinner;
- exploring the mountains with a local guide;
- horseback riding with or without a guide;
- concert of Kyrgyz traditional songs;
- national horse games such as ‘Ulak tartysh’, ‘Kyz kumay’; or ‘Tylyn engmey’;
- felt-making display and our handicrafts shop;
- translation and transport services

(Shepherd’s Life, 2004).

The CBT groups are recognized to have separate objectives from the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic and Helvetas is keen to state that the groups receive no direct financial or technical support but ‘...the State Committee does recognise the CBT groups and does not make restrictions’ (Shabdanbekova, personal communication, 2004).

Kyrgyz tour operator responses to the CBT project

The original intention or vision was that the Kyrgyz tour operators would sign up to and collaborate with the CBT groups to support the development and marketing of rural community-based sustainable or ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan (KCBTA, 2003). To date, Shabdanbekova (personal communication, 2004) reports that fourteen of the thirty-nine tour operators (36%) have entered into voluntary co-operation agreements with the CBT groups. According to CBT co-operation results, most Kyrgyz tour operators are pleased with the KCBTA initiative as the product is ‘...convenient [for packaging] and not too expensive’ (Shabdanbekova (personal communication, 2004).

The general response of the Kyrgyz tour operators has actually been to establish alternative rural tourism products of their own (labelled as ‘ecotourism’) in direct competition to those supported by the Helvetas-funded CBTs. There is a feeling amongst the tour operators that, as tourism entrepreneurs since the early 1990s, they possess the tourism expertise to design and deliver the products rather than local communities. Furthermore, there is a feeling that the CBT groups distort the emerging free market

economy within which the Kyrgyz tour operators have been learning to operate. With reference to the CBT project and a belief that his private business has been negatively affected by the influence of Novinomad, one Russian-Kyrgyz tour operator argues, ‘...if [they] want to help [Novinomad] should consult and represent Kyrgyzsytan abroad...’ (Pyshnenko, personal communication 2004).

Allen, conducting field research on the outskirts of Karakol, a CBT location, reports that:

‘...there has been quite a bit of animosity directed toward Helvetas from local tourist firms in Karakol such as PSI Turkestan, Alp Tour Issyk-Kul, and Yak Tours. This stems mainly from early co-operation between these firms and Helvetas that eventually led to a falling out and Helvetas’ refusal to work with these firms because they were not ‘strict’ CBT operators...’ (Allen, personal communication 2004).

Katanaev and Schetinok (personal communication, 2004) claim that most Kyrgyz tour operators now possess their own yurt camps and their tour operating firm, Dostuck Trekking, has three that they own exclusively. In terms of a potential growing over-supply of yurt camps, Katanaev and Schetinok (personal communication, 2004) argue that market demand currently exists with tourists visiting the different camps on the Silk Road, sited along the main road near to popular tourist areas. However, they do concede that the yurt camps offered in big cities like Bishkek and Karakol are not ‘real’ as ‘...real camps are situated as jailoo in summer pastures’ (Katanaev and Schetinok, personal communication, 2004).

When deciding where to establish their new yurt camps, many tour operators will make sure that there are local people (ethnic Kyrgyz) close by because ‘...tourists like to meet and share cultures and would like horse games show, arrange lunch in a Kyrgyz yurt and get local Kyrgyz to prepare local dishes’ (Katanaev and Schetinok, personal communication, 2004).

The CBT acknowledges that there now exist Kyrgyz tour operators with their own yurt camps but it believes that these camps are functioning successfully and there are no competition conflicts with CBT members because the conditions of the camps are different. The private Kyrgyz tour operators offer camps with better or more westernized conditions and charge higher prices whereas the CBT is aimed more at individual tourists. Even where the Kyrgyz tour operators have decided to establish their own camps, the CBT is still willing to offer the tour operators use of local horses, guides etc.

In general the emphasis of the ecotourism initiatives appears to be on the cultural environment rather than the natural environment and there is certainly little attempt to promote a link between the two environments of nature and culture. The yurt accommodation experience, in particular, becomes a focal point of the tour operators’ ecotourism claims. Kyrgyz tour operator ‘ecotourism’ products do include local involvement and there are reports that local people receive money but the actual amounts received and the level of autonomy accorded to the ethnic Kyrgyz in the choice of the

traditional food prepared and the entertainment performed is unknown. Private tour operators charge between US\$17 and US\$26 per person for an overnight, half-board yurt stay and it is not uncommon for the guide's and the driver's stay and meals to be expected to be paid for by the tourist (AKC Kyrgyz Concept, 2003).

Local communities appear to have recognised the economic potential of interest in their traditional culture and have started to exploit this potential, displaying evidence of 'social disempowerment' (Scheyvens, 1999). Allen (personal communication 2004) notes how the nomadic herders who live in the hills during the summer no longer give *kymys* (a traditional local drink of fermented mare's milk), bread and tea for free, either to tourists or local guides even when the guides are alone in the hills training. He observes how, as a result of the CBT project, local herders now see tourism as a way for them to make money from even the simplest of offerings, despite it being a strong local Kyrgyz tradition to offer these things free of charge.

The actual success of the CBT project itself is drawn into question when one considers this report from Allen (personal communication, 2004) conducting field research on the outskirts of Karakol, a CBT location:

'...I interviewed a total of five CBT operators in Karakol, and the most tourist groups they think that they have received directly because of their participation in the program is six which, based on the total number of tourists they serve [independent tourists and clients of tour operators] does not seem too significant...'

Conclusions

The CBT project appears to have been implemented without consideration that the concept of 'ecotourism' in Kyrgyzstan might differ from the west and might actually be a concept that is alien to the local population. In 2000, as part of a TACIS curriculum reform project in Kyrgyzstan, the concept of ecotourism was discussed by this author with Kyrgyz educationalists wishing to implement a tourism curriculum at a local university. Discussions during this project were generally hampered by an inability to directly translate between the two languages of Kyrgyz and English (this is apparently linguistically impossible). All communication had to be mediated via translation into and out of the Russian language. This process revealed that the term 'ecotourism' does not exist in the Kyrgyz language and neither, apparently, does the actual concept of 'ecotourism' – even at its loosest definition. This implies a conceptual dissonance between western consultants and post-soviet communities. It is a finding that supports Simpson and Roberts' (2000:496) observations with respect to CEE that, '...if a word does not exist for a western concept then it is unlikely that the concept exists in the same form...'

Politically, the Kyrgyz tour operators are struggling to assert the power of their interest group with respect to Kyrgyz tourism development but their responses are producing at worst, unsustainable, meaningless tourism offerings to western tourists with experiences of more integrative models of cultural tourism and at best, 'ecotourism lite' (Honey, 1999). The extent to which the ethnic Kyrgyz population is being exploited rather than

protected by the cultural emphasis on ethnic Kyrgyz heritage is debatable as is the extent to which the livelihoods of Kyrgyz tour operators are being threatened by a distortion of the free market economy that Kyrgyzstan is striving to create.

The KCBTA believes that there is a need to strengthen contacts between private Kyrgyz tour operators, the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic and that all organizations need to work together in the rural tourism sector. This is perceived to be especially vital in view of the fact that Helvetas support is soon ending and the KCBTA and each of the CBT groups will have to be self-sufficient financially (Shabdanbekova (personal communication, 2004). The way in which the CBT project appears to have been implemented without consultation with or consideration of the Kyrgyz tour operators and the apathetic attitude of the State Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Kyrgyz Republic with respect to the sustainability of the country's tourism development suggests that future prospects for joint working between the three interest groups are not bright.

A second initiative focusing on the development of ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan and the involvement of the ethnic Kyrgyz population has recently been implemented by the Cultural Heritage Division of UNESCO (UNESCO, 2004). The project aims 'to promote community-based cultural and eco-tourism in selected mountain areas, with a specific focus on poverty eradication, reduction of rural-urban migration and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage in those areas'. Its declared beneficiaries are given as 'local communities of selected tourism areas' (UNESCO, 2004:2). Interestingly, the implementing agency of the project is the NoviNomad Tourism Development Company (the tour operator created through the technical assistance of Helvetas). As of March, 2004, the Kyrgyz tour operators were ignorant of this initiative.

It seems likely that this second locally-focused ecotourism initiative will further segregate interest groups in Kyrgyz tourism and, in particular, provide a further impetus for the Kyrgyz tour operators to continue, and perhaps extend, the eco-labelling of their tourism products and their 'eco-pirate' (Lew, 1996) activities.

In tourism development terms, the actions of international development actors in Kyrgyzstan appear to have generated socio-cultural impacts that are often associated with much later development stages of tourism supply. The relevance of the concepts of 'commodification' and 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1992) are especially apparent in Allen's field observations as are characteristics of the 'institutionalism' stage of destination development (Butler, 1980).

It would appear that international development actors such as the SDC, via its project implementing agency Helvetas, are creating some damaging effects on tourism operating and competitive environments. These effects are particularly conspicuous in view of the fact that Kyrgyzstan remains relatively unscathed by international consumerism. To date, there are only two transnational hotels in the whole of the country – the Turkish-owned Pinara Hotel and the US-owned Hyatt Regency hotel in Bishkek, the country's capital

city. There is also no sign of McDonalds or any other western food, drink, entertainment or retail chains.

In the field of development studies, questions are raised concerning the involvement of external assistance from international development actors, particularly with respect to technical assistance, and the consequences of implementing local projects without consultation with local businesses. There appear to be particular tensions in post-soviet economies where the concept of 'local' raises ethnic issues and challenges.

The wider implications of international development intervention in Kyrgyzstan via ecotourism should not be under-emphasised. In the same way in which Baron (1957 as cited in Khan, 1997:988) claimed that the growth in the Third World had been choked by western imperialism 'draining away the capital and killing the local industry through unequal competition' so too might the SDC, via its project implementation agents, be recognised as lethal to at least some Kyrgyz tour operators.

Limitations

The empirical field research upon which the tour operator responses are based in this paper was not specifically focused on ecotourism development. The examples emerged as part of a programme of interviews about the contested representation of cultural heritage in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, it is felt by this author that some important observations can be made from that research with respect to ecotourism development in Kyrgyzstan.

The reliance on anecdotal sources of information due to a lack of a wider accessible range of literature relating to Kyrgyzstan might be criticised. Although political censorship is a pertinent issue in Kyrgyzstan it is hoped that by drawing upon a wide range of views, including the perspectives of other field researchers and commentators in Kyrgyzstan, the paper provides a 'trustworthy' and valuable insight into the topics discussed.

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Figure 1: Location of Community Business Tourism (CBT) groups in Kyrgyzstan (KCBTA, 2003)

ⁱ Kyrgyzstan in common with other former Soviet republics in Central Asia did not become independent because of a popular or civic movement and thus, it has been argued, lacks democratic tradition and experience (Helvetas, 2002).

ⁱⁱ LakeNet describes itself as ‘a global network of more than 1000 people and organizations in 100+ countries working for the conservation and sustainable management of lakes’.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sponsored by a Sheffield Hallam University research bursary, 2003-2004.

^{iv} See Akmoldoeva and Sommer’s (2002) book about Klavdiya Antipina, the most celebrated ethnographer in Kyrgyzstan, for a fuller account of the cultural traditions of the ethnic Kyrgyz and also a further insight into some of the socio-cultural effects of Stalin’s actions. Klavdiya was politically exiled to Kyrgyzstan with her four-year old son in 1937. Her husband was a victim of Stalin’s purge trials in Moscow and imprisoned as ‘an enemy of the people’. The family were never re-united.

^v Examples: the ethnic-Kyrgyz yurts are constructed of felt hand-spun and dyed from their herds of goats, the fermented milk of their mares – *kymys* - is drunk as a health aid, and the Kyrgyz traditionally hunt on horseback using birds of prey.