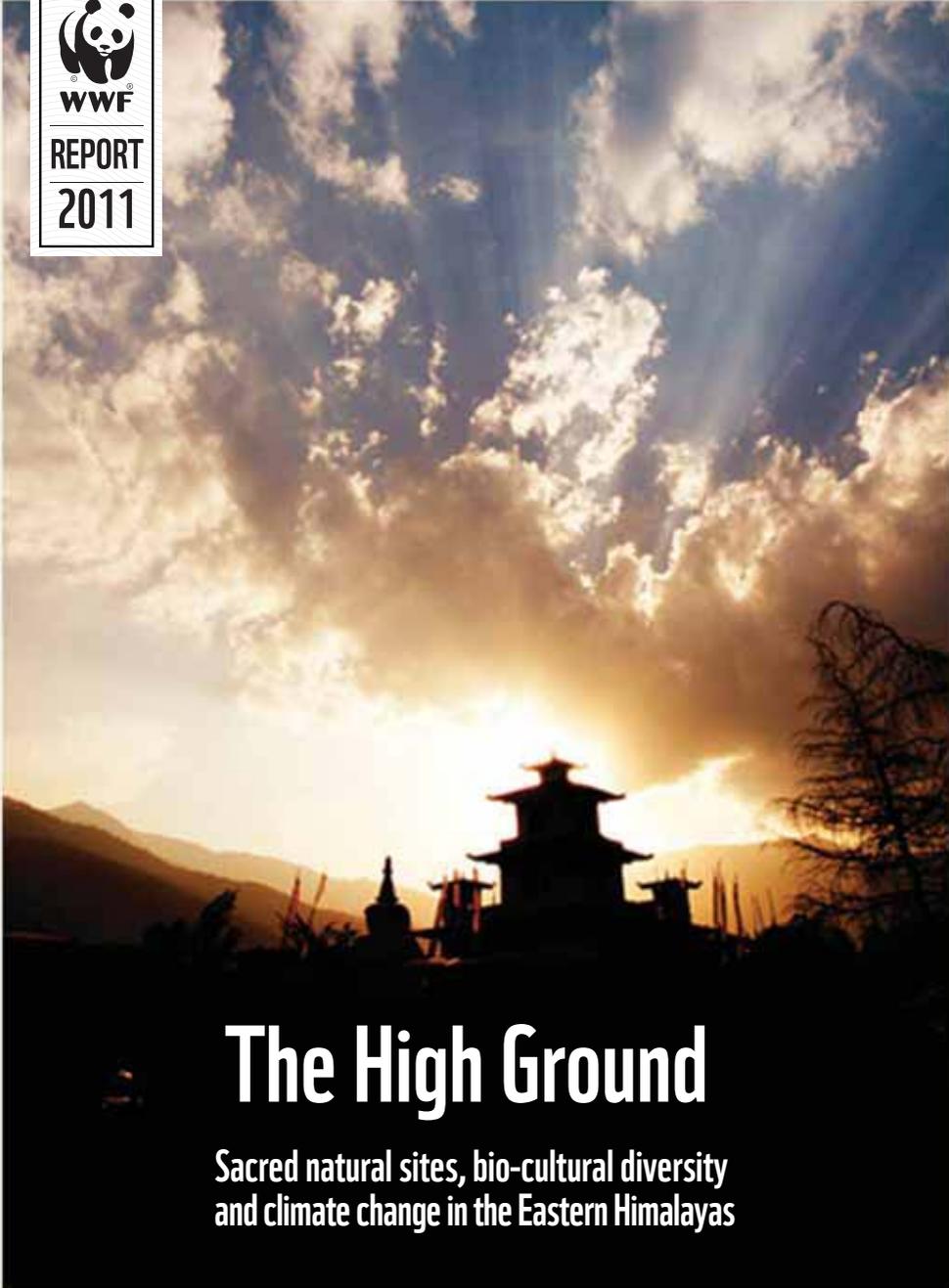




WWF

REPORT

2011



The High Ground

Sacred natural sites, bio-cultural diversity
and climate change in the Eastern Himalayas





The High Ground:

Sacred natural sites, bio-cultural diversity and
climate change in the Eastern Himalayas

Edited by Liza Higgins-Zogib, Nigel Dudley, Tariq Aziz and Savita Malla

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FOREWORD

The Eastern Himalayas is one of the most beautiful and fascinating places on our planet. Its biodiversity and its cultural richness are to be celebrated, and cherished. Nature and culture are intimately linked in the Himalayas – particularly through the deep reverence that the region's faiths hold for the natural world.

WWF has embraced the Eastern Himalayan region as one where we are determined to make a lasting difference because we realize just how critical it is for the world's natural and cultural heritage and for the future well-being of people across the region. We have long understood the linkage between nature and culture in its broadest sense, but we are just beginning to come to terms with the strong interdependence between the environment and spiritual practices, so prominent in this particular region. This report explores these linkages and we feel both honoured and encouraged that the custodians of the Sacred Natural Sites detailed in the following pages are coming forward as important partners for biodiversity conservation.

There are literally thousands of sacred places in the region, with the Himalayan mountain range itself a giant sacred natural feature. These are places that local people and religious bodies want to protect at all costs and, therefore, they are places where faith groups and conservationists naturally come together as strong partners. And we need strong partners to combat the imminent threats that are mounting here to achieve our long-term goal of a Living Himalayas.

Of all the threats to the region's nature and culture, perhaps the most pervasive and difficult to tackle is that of climate change. WWF is working in partnership with the governments in the region to highlight the immediate threats posed by a rapidly changing climate. We believe that the leaders of religious communities – many of whom are already engaged in combating climate change at a local level – could also do much to advance the discussions and action at a global scale.

Sacred natural sites have been identified over centuries by communities that deeply understand the importance of an intact environment. They are often high conservation value areas such as wetlands and forests which support both important biodiversity and human livelihoods, and play an important role in maintaining environmental integrity and buffering climate change impacts. Preserving these sites helps build public opinion in favour of nature conservation, and conveys an important message to decision makers on the need to secure key landscape features.

Collaboration between conservationists and religious leaders is essential if we are to preserve the Sacred Natural Sites and the vibrant ecosystem that is the Eastern Himalayas.

Jim Leape

Director General
WWF International



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SACRED LANDS AND CONSERVATION IN THE HIMALAYAS - AN INTRODUCTION

By Nigel Dudley and Liza Higgins-Zogib
Equilibrium Research and WWF International

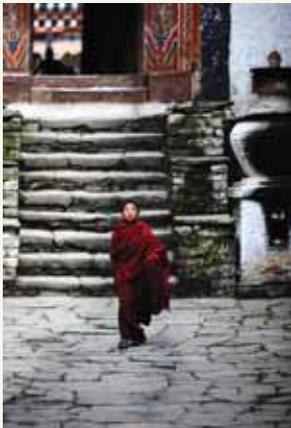
The Eastern Himalayas is a sacred landscape of priceless worth to people of many different faith groups, who regard the protection of its natural values as an essential requirement of their everyday spiritual practice. In part this duty of care helps explain why the region has retained unique and important biodiversity of global significance. All the faith groups of the Eastern Himalayas regard nature as sacred and identify particular natural sites and features as places of worship and reverence. There are hundreds, probably thousands, of sacred natural sites ranging from entire mountain ranges to hidden caves and these have a huge cultural, historical and social value in addition to their spiritual value.

This publication looks at how sacred places, beliefs and practices in the Himalayas can link to efforts by all the countries in the region to conserve irreplaceable natural values in the face of growing threats, including climate change.

The Eastern Himalayan region is no ordinary place. Its striking mountain landscapes command the respect of every inhabitant and every visitor. This report presents some different interpretations of nature – not just from a conservation perspective, but interpretations that are meaningful for the millions of people who live and worship in the Himalayas and for the millions more around the globe who are inspired by the teachings that have their roots there.

Sacred natural sites

IUCN defines sacred natural sites (SNS) as “areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities”¹. They vary enormously in size, form and history, but most SNS are notable either because of the presence of outstanding features, landforms or species, or because they are associated with particular cultural or spiritual events. Typical SNS might include mountains, rivers, groves, waterfalls, springs, large rocks and even particular ancient trees; they can also develop around the habitat of certain animal species (such as the over-wintering site of birds such as cranes) and



Young novice monk walks in the courtyard of Taksang.

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in places connected with revered religious figures. While many are ancient, new SNS are still developing as faiths mature, people move to new areas and fresh events or personalities are reflected within faith groups. Some SNS include religious buildings; for example a sacred cave and landscape stimulated the building of the famous Taksang monastery in Bhutan. In addition to what we might call strict SNS, there are also other sacred sites, such as temples or shrines, which though they are built structures also have important conservation values, because their grounds harbour valuable habitats and species or because the faith group helps in other ways to protect the natural environment.

The values of sacred natural sites to biodiversity conservation

We already know that many sacred natural sites have important biodiversity conservation values². The potential for them to play a role in protecting natural vegetation has been widely recognised and identified by researchers worldwide and many studies have been carried out specifically within the region³. For example the biodiversity values of sacred groves are well recognised by ecology researchers in Khumbu in Nepal^{4,5}, in part because such sites include areas where the cutting of trees is prohibited^{6,7}. Surveys show that some SNS are unusually rich in species. Research in sacred groves in northeast India found higher diversity there than in other forests⁸ including 54 endemic species⁹; one grove contained 82 tree species in just half a hectare¹⁰. A survey of 79 sacred groves in Meghalaya state found 133 plant species apparently now restricted to sacred forests¹¹ including 96 that are believed to be endemic to the state¹². Other surveys found over 500 rare and endangered species confined only to sacred groves in Meghalaya¹³; birds, butterflies and bats, primates and small mammals all being successfully conserved¹⁴. High levels of biodiversity were found in sacred groves in Uttarkhand Himalaya¹⁵ and in Sikkim¹⁶. Similarly, surveys in other predominantly Buddhist areas, such as sacred Tibetan sites in Yunnan, China, also showed high levels of species richness¹⁷.

Threats to sacred natural sites

Unfortunately, many of these sacred sites are now under threat both physically and spiritually. SNS are sometimes destroyed or degraded as a result of changing land uses, with threats from activities such as clearance for agriculture, logging, mineral extraction and pollution. Climate change has been identified as a major threat, both through abrupt changes such as glacial lake outbursts (see the case study on Punakha Dzong) and more subtly through deterioration of ecosystems and threats to species. Additionally, some SNS are being undermined by people's changing attitudes towards them, a growing lack of reverence and inappropriate behaviour. Participants at a workshop held in May 2010 in Thimphu, Bhutan on Sacred natural sites, bio-cultural diversity and climate change in the Eastern Himalayas, organised by WWF and supported by the government of Bhutan, identified a range of explicit threats to sacred natural sites in the region:

- Immediate spiritual and physical threats to sacred natural sites
- Increasing industrialisation around sacred sites
- Direct threats to the well-being of sites from land-use changes
- Inappropriate use of sacred sites themselves
- Build-up of garbage and pollution
- Increased migration and consequent erosion of local social structures
- Increased visitation by pilgrims and tourists and associated commercialisation
- Dilution of ceremonies as they become spectacles for tourists
- Hotels serving meat, alcohol and tobacco located near sacred sites

Underlying threats to sacred natural sites

- Climate change and associated impacts e.g. glacial lake outburst
- Aspects of modernisation including urbanisation, roads, quarrying and building
- Population pressures
- Change and transition occurring faster than ever, exacerbated by weak coping mechanisms
- Loss of pride in place of origin and of stories associated with that place
- Rejection of traditional belief systems, especially by young people, partly caused by current mainstream education approaches
- Poor financial incentives

Climate change and sacred natural sites

There is also a growing level of concern about the implications of climate change for the Himalayas. Workshop participants identified a range of ways in which climate change is affecting SNS and their environs. Changes in rainfall were identified as creating a reduction in stream-flow in some places and during particular times of year¹⁸: sacred springs are drying up, for example in Sikkim and above Tiger's Nest monastery in Paro, Bhutan (see Taksang case study). In some places traditional water-driven prayer wheels are no longer spinning because streams are dry. The breeding grounds of black-

glacier lake outburst floods, one example of which has already directly damaged the Punakha Dzong temple in Bhutan²¹. 24 out of 2,674 glacial lakes in Bhutan are judged to be potentially dangerous²².

Participants also believed that notably warmer temperatures are having impacts on agricultural production, with both increases and declines in productivity in places. Some farmers report being able to grow more crops at higher altitudes than before, but there are also additional stresses from water shortages and changes in temperature. An unprecedented rice blast epidemic occurred in Bhutan in 1995, caused by the fungus *Pyricularia grisea*, which has been blamed on unusually warm temperatures²³.

Climate change is causing a range of concerns about impacts on health. A decline in the availability of medicinal herbs has been noted although it is not clear whether this is due primarily to climatic changes²⁴ or over-collection. Finally, warmer temperatures may bring new disease threats^{25,26}; malarial mosquitoes have been spreading into new areas and there has been the emergence of a number of new insect pests, some of which damage religious buildings and artefacts directly.

As people seek to respond to climate change there have also been changes in migration patterns, including both increases and decreases. Some people have had to move to avoid climate problems but conversely the warmer winter temperatures in parts of the region have meant that there have been some positive impacts on health in the winter²⁷ and people are no longer, as before, always migrating south for the winter.

Working together

Faith groups are natural and willing partners to bring about both policy change and to better protect their sacred natural sites as a contribution to a wider conservation vision. During the workshop, a number of concrete suggestions were made about how the Buddhist Sangha in particular could contribute to a wider spiritual and conservation agenda aimed at protecting and where necessary restoring the ecology of the Eastern Himalayas. Engagement with other faith groups will be necessary in the near future.

It was recognised that responses need to include changes in mindset and attitudes and not just scientific or technical "fixes". Sacred sites and sacred natural sites provide good vehicles for encouraging new attitudes and actions – people are likely to be particularly receptive in holy places and SNS can thus become good places for teaching and demonstrating best practice. Indeed, many Buddhist practices could be used or adapted to introduce approaches that will help to address environmental challenges, e.g. setting aside places for particular periods to help restoration of ecology or limiting vehicle use to address pollution. More fundamentally, there was a strong feeling from the Buddhists present that over-use of mountains in the Himalayas by climbers and tourists, often unsympathetic with either holy or ecological values, is causing a spiritual and environmental crisis in the region and many deities are suffering in consequence, most acutely in and around Everest. There was therefore a proposal to all for a three-month moratorium on all climbing in the Greater Himalaya, coupled with cleansing ceremonies by monks, to restore the spiritual and ecological balance.

Participants at the meeting came from many different backgrounds, faiths and perspectives. It is significant that, while the philosophical frameworks and rationale may differ between the authors of the case studies that follow, the ethical and practical implications show a remarkable congruence.



© WWF Bhutan/Tsheering Yangchen

necked cranes (*Grus nigricollis*) are also reported to be drying out – they have for example been recorded as changing their over-wintering ground in China due to climate change¹⁹. Reduction in snowfall has apparently led to snow retreat on at least three sacred mountains within the region. Traditional ecological knowledge argues that lack of snow undermines crop productivity the following year – there is an old saying “no white, no green” – through lack of stored water for the spring growth. Some, though not all, of the glaciers in the region are receding²⁰. One result of warmer temperatures and changes in glaciers is an increase in the rate of

THE SACRED GARDEN OF LUMBINI: BIRTHPLACE OF LORD BUDDHA

By Ven. Acharya Karma Sangbo Sherpa,
Vice Chairman of Lumbini Development
Trust and Liza Higgins-Zogib



© WWF-Nepal / Ghana Gurung

Over 2500 years ago, in a beautiful garden, Queen Maya Devi gave birth to a little boy named Siddhartha. He would become Sakyamuni Buddha, otherwise known as Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Lost for centuries, the archaeological site was rediscovered just over one hundred years ago and today it is a major pilgrimage site.

Along with Bodhi Gaya (place of enlightenment), Sarnath (place of his first sermon) and Kushinagar (place of his passing away), Lumbini is one of the four holy sites and pilgrimage destinations of the Buddhist religion. Lumbini, being the holy birthplace of the Buddha is one of the most important shrines in Nepal, with the three others in India. It is situated in the Himalayan foothills of Nepal's central terai, in the district of Rupandehi. It was in 1896 that a stone pillar buried in the forest was rediscovered by Nepalese army general Khadga Shumsher and Dr. A. Fuhrer. This pillar had been erected as a memorial of the emperor Asoka's pilgrimage to the birthplace of Gautama Buddha in around 250 B.C. (Manandhar & Manandhar, 2002).

The Garden and its biodiversity

Stories about Lumbini and the birth of the Buddha are many. They all describe the place as being a wonderful forest park or garden, filled with Sal trees (*Shorea robusta*) and flowering plants. It is said that after bathing in the pond known as Pushkarni, Maya Devi walked twenty-five steps to the north where she felt labour pain, stood upright, grasped the drooping branch of a tree and gave birth to the infant Bodhisatva. The child was brought up in the Saky

palace in Kapilvastu, the present Tilaurakot, Nepal.

The garden is in a simple geometric shape of squares around the archaeological remains, enclosed by a pond circle that reflects simplicity and purity. The circular pond in the Sacred Garden serves a variety of purposes including enhancing the gaiety of the site and balancing the area's microclimate. Mayadevi herself bathed in Pushkarni, the sacred pond, before giving birth to the Bodhisatva and according to some early Buddhist literature, the infant baby was given the first purification bath in this sacred water.

"Disliking the clamorous ways of the world, (she (Maya Devi) remembered) the excellent garden of Lumbini, a pleasant spot, a quiet forest retreat, (with its) trickling fountains, and blooming flowers and fruits."
(*Buddhacarita, 1st Varga, 2nd century A.D.*)

The Sacred Garden houses many important monuments. They include the Mayadevi shrine, the Asoka pillar and ancient archaeological remains. The Mayadevi Temple is the central spiritual attraction as it houses important bas-reliefs depicting the nativity scene; the marker stone, which pinpoints the exact birth spot; and the ramparts of the ancient Mayadevi temple dating from the Mauryan period (321 to 185 B.C.).

The Asoka pillar stands behind the Mayadevi temple. It was erected by Emperor Asoka in 249 B.C., which epigraphically proves the authenticity of the birthplace of the Buddha in Lumbini. The inscription is engraved in 90 letters that resolve three important questions in Buddhist history. It clearly mentions that the Buddha was the sage of the Sakyas. He was born in Lumbini village (luminigame) and this is where the pillar stands today.

Besides these prominent monuments, there are also the remains of 29 votive stupas, 1 Dharma stupa and 1 relic stupa in the vicinity of the Mayadevi temple. Remains of the ancient temple complex is divided into two parts, one the residential block and the other is exposed in the south-eastern part of the temple. The remains are made up of ancient bricks dating from the 3rd century B.C. to the 8th century A.D.

Early Buddhist literary sources mention that Lumbini grove in around the 7th century B.C. was a serene and lush garden rich with flora and fauna. It is mentioned that more than five bee species hummed in the garden while the warbling of birds added much to the serenity and hundreds of butterfly species made the garden colourful.

In addition to its obvious gifts to the world community in terms of its spiritual value, the Sacred Garden of Lumbini is also important for the region's biodiversity. A recent study undertaken in collaboration with the Lumbini Development Trust has enumerated

the tree species of the grove. A total of 65 tree species were identified, of which 39 are indigenous to Nepal. Of those indigenous species, five fall into threatened, vulnerable and endangered categories (Bhattarai & Baral, 2008).

The Sacred Garden has a wide variety of flowers and hedge plants which add to the beauty and spirituality of the site. More than one hundred bird species are found in the garden including migratory species from Siberia in winter. The highly threatened Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) is one the major attractions in the Sacred Garden. The Blue bull, or Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), an endangered mammal species, enjoys good habitat in the southern part of the garden and the rare python is also an important attraction for nature lovers.

It has been judiciously decided that no buildings or other physical constructions will be allowed within the confines of the Sacred Garden. It should be maintained as a simple, naturally beautiful place, as it was at the time of Lord Buddha's birth.

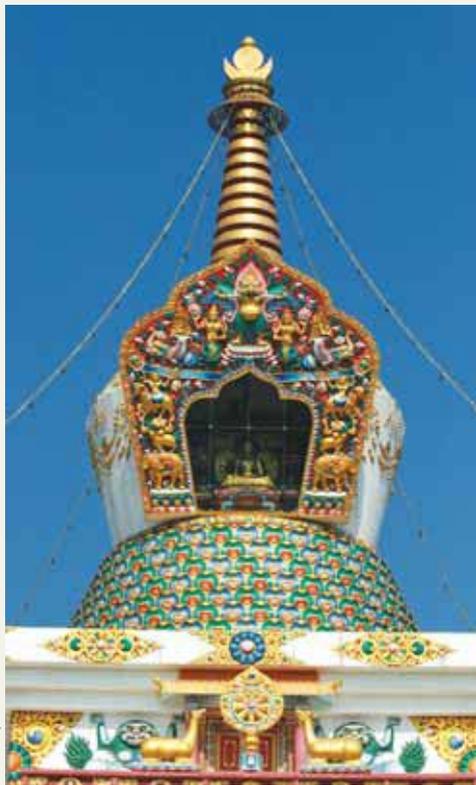
Development in Lumbini

The visit of the late U. Thant, the then Secretary General of the United Nations on April 13, 1967 was a milestone in Lumbini's development. It was he who proposed Lumbini as an international pilgrimage centre. Prof. Architect Kenjo Tange was entrusted with the responsibility of preparing the Lumbini master plan in 1972 by the government of Nepal and the UN. In 1985 the Lumbini Development Trust was established with the aim of implementing the master plan, and also to explore and develop other Buddhist sites in the periphery of Lumbini, including restoring the Sacred Garden within the context of a bigger development plan. The Sacred Garden, lying in the southern part of Tange's master plan is at the heart of the entire project area.

Different Buddhist countries have built magnificent monasteries in the monastic enclaves. These monasteries represent both Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism. The Lumbini monastic zone is being developed as a hub of different Buddhist cultures and variety of architectural styles. The cultural zone includes a large museum that houses the antiquities uncovered during the excavation of the Mayadevi complex. The Lumbini International Research Institute (LIRI) provides a study and research facility for scholars and it houses a huge collection of Buddhist literature including micro-films and rare research materials.

The new Lumbini village in the northern zone of the master plan area is being developed as a residential area. Deluxe, middle class and budget hotels are located in this zone to provide quality accommodation.

Lumbini was enrolled in World Heritage List in 1997 by UNESCO. Recent development activities and publicity have helped increase the number of pilgrims and visitors to the holy pilgrimage site. An increasing visitation rate will require careful management and planning, and the Lumbini Development Trust is dedicated to making it as sustainable as possible, and to maintaining the sacred, quiet nature of the Garden.



KAILASH SACRED LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

By Nakul Chettri, Robert Zomer,
Eklabya Sharma and Krishna Prasad Oli
International Centre for Integrated Mountain
Development (ICIMOD)

Towards an 'Ecosystem Approach' in Transboundary Biodiversity Conservation in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

People have revered mountains as places of sacred power and spiritual attainment since time immemorial. Sinai and Zion in the Middle East, Olympus in Greece, Kailash in Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, T'ai Shan in China, Fuji in Japan, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona – all have acquired a special stature as natural objects of religious devotion²⁸. In these examples, the sacred landscape is the most outward manifestation of the intangible values inherent to mountains and their cultural heritage. Unlike other values, such as agrobiodiversity or ecosystem services, which are relevant to many protected landscapes, cultural and spiritual values are fundamental in the very strictest sense of the word²⁹. Thus, the worship of nature, or 'Mother Nature', has been a key force in determining human attitudes towards conservation and sustainable utilization of biodiversity.

"There are no mountains like the Himalaya, for in them are Kailash and Mansarovar. As the dew is dried up by the morning Sun, so are the sins of mankind dried up by the sight of the Himalaya" – SkandaPurana.

The whole Himalayan chain is sacred to many local inhabitants as well as for outsiders. Faiths originating in Central and South Asia,

China, and Japan (Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism) regard nature as a critical aspect of the divinity that should be treated with reverence³⁰. The concept of Sacred Landscape, Sacred Groves, Sacred Lakes and Sacred Species has been instrumental in conserving Himalayan biodiversity and in enhancing goods and services since time immemorial³¹. Tibetan Buddhists reverentially address Mount Everest as Chomolungma, the Mother Goddess of the Earth, while for Hindus it is the 'Mother of the Universe' and Mount Kanchendzonga, the second tallest peak in the Himalayas, is part of the Demojong. The Demojong possesses hidden spiritual treasures (ter) embedded within the land and water bodies that will be discovered by the enlightened sages of the future. There are yet other mountains such as Nanda Devi, encompassing a peak in the central Himalayas and the entire basin below including the sacred Hemkund Lake, is a sacred site for both Sikh and Hindu communities³². In this article, we present the importance of Mount Kailash and its surrounding landscape in terms of its conservation values as embedded within the reverence of local practices, and describe how transboundary initiatives currently being developed aim to provide for both the conservation of cultural and biological diversity, and sustainable development with livelihood improvement for mountain communities within the region. We outline the process involved in developing a Regional Cooperation Framework whose aim is to maintain the environmental and cultural integrity of this sacred landscape for the next generations.



Mount Kailash and the surrounding cultural site

The significance of Mount Kailash

Mt. Kailash (6714m), situated in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, is the most sacred mountain in Asia. It is believed to be the physical embodiment of the mythical Mt. Meruor Sumeru, the 'Mandala' of the Buddhists (the cosmic axis around which the axis of the Universe is organized for both Buddhists and Hindus) and said to be the centre of the universe or 'navel of the world'. To Hindus, Kailash is the abode of Shiva and nearby Manasarovar Lake is the means or soul of Brahma. Tibetans call this especially sacred mountain Kang Rimpoche, meaning 'Precious Jewel'. Jains worship it as Mt Ashtapada, the peak from which the religion's founder, Rishabhanatha, achieved spiritual liberation. Followers of Bon-Po, the ancient pre-Buddhist shamanistic religion of Tibet, revere Kailash as the soul of Tibet. Another factor that contributes

to the mystical aspect of Kailash is that the nearby area is headwaters of four major rivers of the Indian subcontinent, the Sutlej, Karnali (a major tributary of the Ganges), Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and Indus. The mouths of these rivers are more than 2,000 km apart, yet they all have their source within 100 km of Mt Kailash. Ancient seers regard the rivers originating from here as sacred and view all these rivers as spokes of an eternal wheel with Kailash as the abode of divine wisdom³³. In ecological and biodiversity perspectives, the greater Mt. Kailash region contains a broad range of bioclimatic zones with rich natural and cultural resources, and a wide variety of globally significant biodiversity. It provides an essential habitat for

large numbers of endemic and endangered species, including large mammals like the snow leopard and the wild ass. This highly diverse and environmentally fragile landscape is home to a range of endemic flora and fauna important in maintaining local livelihoods. The four rivers originating from the region support diverse ecosystems and local communities and provide ecosystem services for millions of people within the vast downstream basins.

Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative (KSLCI)

The Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL), a transboundary conservation initiative facilitated by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in collaboration with UNEP and national partners in China, India and Nepal, addresses the cultural and ecological significance of the region, focusing on the need for ecological integrity and resilience, notably including at a transboundary level, and taking into consideration the perceived challenges brought by various drivers of change such as increasing population, developmental pressure and climate change. The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative (KSLCI) promotes an 'Ecosystem Approach' for biodiversity management and sustainable development, through integrated approaches developed within the context of addressing evolving threats. These integrated ecosystem management and community-based approaches, as described in

the CBD³⁴ and the Millennium Assessment³⁵, are being developed through participatory and consultative processes, informed by an improved knowledge-base and environmental monitoring. This process will develop environmentally and culturally sustainable development strategies that will lead to the development of a Regional Cooperation Framework (RCF) for implementation of the CBD. ICIMOD has been instrumental in conceptualizing this 'Ecosystem Approach' of biodiversity management in seven transboundary landscapes across the Hindu Kush Himalayas³⁶.

The outcomes of this first phase of the project will enhance the regional capacity for application of ecosystem management and transboundary landscape approaches, community-based ecosystem management, co-management of natural resources, and adaptation to climate change. The KSLCI is envisioned as a long-term conservation initiative, lasting until the year 2023. It has been



Mount Kailash in the distance

© Robert Zomer

designed according to a project cycle of phased implementation of a long-term strategy, based on participatory approaches and an improved regional knowledge base.

Conclusion

The KSLCI provides a unique opportunity to develop a framework for cooperation and common understanding on transboundary landscape issues in the region, including climate change, and represents an important and timely opportunity to conserve this irreplaceable cultural and natural landscape. This initiative supports the broad objectives of the international community (as reflected in the CBD and other relevant international conventions) and the KSL member countries, to sustainably manage cultural and ecological diversity in the region through participatory processes, and to promote landscape level ecosystem management approaches addressing transboundary conservation and sustainable development in the KSL, and throughout the Hindu Kush Himalayas.

Further information is available at: <http://www.icimod.org/ksl>, and in the KSLCI Brochure which can be downloaded at: <http://books.icimod.org/index.php/search/publication/688>.

The authors would like to acknowledge funding and support from ICIMOD, UNEP, the Govt. of Norway and German Technical Cooperation, as well as the active and enthusiastic participation and support of the partners and lead institutions in each of the KSL member countries.

IN THE LAIR OF THE TIGER: TAKSANG - BHUTAN'S MOST ICONIC SACRED NATURAL SITE

By Matteo Pistono and Liza Higgins-Zogib
Nekorpa and WWF



© Liza Higgins

Taksang (Tiger's Lair) is Bhutan's national icon and is one of the most significant Buddhist pilgrimage sites in all of the Himalayas. Taksang's dramatic cliff-side hermitage and caves are set above a dense mountainside forest littered with springs and waterfalls. Today, pilgrims and tourists alike journey to Taksang, which is believed to be imbued with powerful blessing by past and current saints; and a host of local deities and spirits are constantly protecting the grotto-shrine and its natural surroundings.

The pilgrimage to Taksang begins at a traditional whitewashed stupa-reliquary at the base of the mountain. Climbing through dense forests, pilgrims pass water-powered prayer-wheels, under five-coloured prayer flags, and by rocks, caves, and springs believed to have been consecrated with blessing that induce a state of peace. Such an outer environment leads the pilgrim through a sacred topography, and is believed to assist his or her inward journey. Ascending the mountain, the path passes hermitages and small meditators' abodes, which serves to deepen the pilgrims' appreciation for the spiritual path. Finally, arriving at the caves where Padmasambhava and his disciples meditated, and where the local deities vowed to assist spiritual practitioners, the exhausted pilgrim arrives at the heart of Taksang...

Buddhism was firmly established in Bhutan, Tibet and across the Himalayas in the 8th century by the Indian Buddhist saint Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava is devotedly referred to as 'The

Second Buddha' for without him it is believed that the Buddha's teachings would not have spread in the region. Padmasambhava's biography tells us of eight manifestations in which he appeared to the locals as he travelled from India to Nepal and throughout the Tibetan plateau into Bhutan, Sikkim, and elsewhere. Depending on the dispositions of the disciples he met and the local deities who welcomed or opposed him, Padmasambhava manifested different forms, some peaceful while others were more wrathfully compassionate. Because of the wildness of the spirits he encountered at Taksang, namely Sengé Samdup who was the 'land-lord' of the area, the Indian saint took the form of a powerful yogi riding upon a tigress. Padmasambhava then subdued Sengé Samdup, it is believed, and bound him to protect the villages nearby and also the environment around Taksang for future meditators and hermits. Some of Padmasambhava's Tibetan disciples returned to Taksang to meditate, and many other saints followed, including Milarepa (1055-1145), Padampa Sangye (d. 1117) Tangtong Gyalpo (1385-1464), Machik Labdrong (1055-1153), as well as modern day Buddhist teachers such as Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche (1910-1991). All of these Buddhist practitioners have maintained a cordial relationship with Sengé Samdup and other local deities and spirits whose 'residence' include the trees and water, regularly making ceremonial offerings such as incense and tea, forbidding hunting or taking of any life, while respectfully keeping the mountain free of refuse. It is believed that Sengé Samdup has continued to appear in visions and dreams

to Buddhist practitioners at Taksang throughout the centuries because of this mutually respectful relationship.

The natural environment

Bhutan's quasi pristine natural environment requires little introduction. With a stated commitment to keep at least 60 per cent of the territory forested, and with 51.44 per cent of its land already under the protected areas system (national parks including the Biological Corridors) Bhutan has an impressive environmental protection record.

The Sacred Natural Site of Taksang is situated in the forested area contiguous to Jigme Dorji National Park, one of the largest protected areas in the country. Although a comprehensive biological study has not been undertaken in the forests of Taksang, they are known to be home to many charismatic species such as the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), common leopard (*Panthera pardus*), musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*), Himalayan black bear (*Ursus tibetanus*), pika (*Ochotona*), wild dog and possibly Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*) in its upper ridges. And the large expanse of land over which Senge Samdup presides is part of a critical biological corridor outside the National Park, and thus important for the transmigration of many species.

Some locals say that Taksang, the tiger's lair, was so named because Bengali tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) used to pass through the forests there – at least in the time of Padmasambhava. Indeed it is said that they were spotted by pilgrims until relatively recently. Today, although there are still tigers in neighbouring Jigme Dorji National Park, they no longer venture to the forests of Taksang.

Both ecologically and aesthetically the forests are spectacular with a wide variety of trees, including blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*) and cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*), and mixed with a multitude of

flowering plants and trees such as the rhododendron (*Rhododendron arboreum*) and viburnum (*Viburnum cotinifolium*). It is also prime habitat for hundreds of alpine aromatic and medicinal plants. As you ascend into the cloud forest the lichen begins to string itself between pine and flowering bush creating a magical atmosphere fitting for the many sacred spots that are found along the way.

Management of the site

Taksang is under the direct purview of the Dratshang Lhentshog (Monastic Body) which manages its overall operation. The Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs is responsible for its upkeep including repairs, maintenance and security. The forests nearby are under the direct supervision of the Regional Forest Division of Paro.

Threats

Bhutanese and Tibetan pilgrims have journeyed to Taksang for more than a thousand years to pay homage to past saints who have consecrated and imbued the site with blessing. The regular visits by Bhutanese royal family members over the last five generations have ensured that the shrines, temples and surroundings were kept in fine shape. Until 2005, Taksang was strictly off-limits to all foreign tourists. Today, things are changing.

“For more than 1,200 years, Taksang has been a container of profound blessing,” Khenpo Phuntso Tashi, Director of the Bhutanese National Museum, says. “Now with the tourists, there is a danger to the sanctity. Especially if the sightseers come to Taksang carrying the “three poisons”—desire, anger, ignorance.”

Though blessed, there are serious challenges.

“Even though a site can be imbued with blessing, those blessings can easily be eroded when individuals bring their mental and physical garbage,” Khenpo continued. The recent drying up of a sacred spring associated with Taksang's principal protector deity, Senge Samdup, is believed to have occurred because plastic water bottles have polluted the stream.

“Plastic is but a manifestation of greed. Senge Samdup is sending us a warning not to throw plastic into the water,” one monk at Taksang said.

Despite Bhutan's fairly restrictive tourism policy, which requires a special license and to be accompanied by a licensed Bhutanese tour guide, the effects of tourism are being felt on both the environment and on the sanctity of the place. Naturally, Taksang is high on the ‘list of things to do when in Bhutan’ and in 2008



around 8000 tourists climbed the mountain to take a closer look at the Tiger's nest. In 2009 the number decreased slightly, but it is set to rise in 2010 and beyond as tour operators actively target higher tourist numbers. At the foot of the mountain, particularly across the river, there are major development projects planned and underway to satisfy the needs of an increasing number of tourists in the Paro Valley. Most will climb Taksang.

While the government, tour agencies, hoteliers, and some of the local community, who supply limited services such as horse-back rides and small sales of traditional handicrafts, benefit from the revenue the tourists generate, a number of challenges have emerged which are of increased concern. Principal among these is pollution of three sorts.

Physical pollution: In the early 1980s, when plastic-wrapped food items found their way into the markets of Bhutan, increasing amounts of plastics and polythene began to be discarded in Taksang's pristine forests by local pilgrims. The Bhutanese government took action to address waste management on the mountain by installing metal bins, digging pits, and erecting signs to encourage pilgrims to use them. The Tshento community, who live at the base of the monastery, were also involved in taking care of the trails. While the programme has had positive results for collecting the rubbish, littering and waste management, due to increased visitation, remain problematic.



The Sushumna Waterfall, Taksang

Noise pollution: An additional disturbance of the non-mindful tourist is noise pollution. Taksang is not a historical site – it is a hermitage and a living place of retreat for meditators. At any one time there are around 20 monks in residence at the temple plus a number of hermit monks, nuns, and lay yogis in retreat. One nun has been in retreat there for over 35 years. Another nun informed us that between 8 am and 4 pm every day they are disturbed by the noise of passing tourists and unwitting trekkers who mistake their retreat hut for a toilet.

Internal pollution: More detrimental than garbage, disruptive yelling, and tourists banging on the door of meditators' huts, is the increasing amount of the "three poisons" that are carried to Taksang. Local lamas and monks tell us that the physical and noise pollution are but a manifestation of the internal pollution. Thus, the most effective manner of maintaining the "existence of blessing" and to

keep Taksang garbage free is to educate pilgrims and tourists alike about the harmful effect of mindless behaviour and destructive actions, such as polluting water sources. While the local lamas regularly conduct purification rituals, where Taksang, the mountain environment, and deities are reflected into a mirror and the mirror has consecrated water poured over it in symbolic cleansing. Still, as one lama told us, "the mirror can't pick up plastic water bottles."

Finally, perhaps the most pervasive threat of all to Taksang is climate change. Villagers in the Paro Valley are noticing significant changes in weather and precipitation patterns and migration of animals which affects their daily lives. And up at Taksang the flow of the waterfall, which casts rainbows around the hermitage, has had reduced amounts in recent years.

"The sushumna waterfall contains the life-force of Taksang and has flowed since time immemorial," Khenpo Tashi said, referring to the thousand foot waterfall next to the hermitage. "For downstream uses there will be no water and this is terrible. But even more so, we are dealing with the notion that our blessed Buddhist sites and their blessing could be drying up."

Some recommendations

The following recommendations would be relatively easy to implement if all stakeholders reach agreement, given that the permit system is already in place:

- Educate tour operators and guides on right conduct and practice at sacred natural sites, including "Pilgrims Intent" (an information brochure developed by Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi)
- A short 30-minute obligatory information session (at hotel the day before going to Taksang) on "Pilgrim's Intent", which educates tourists about traditional pilgrimage motivation (antidote to internal pollution), "Carry Out What You Carry In" (antidote to physical pollution), and to encourage silence in and around the hermitage site (antidote to noise pollution). Such a session could also give safety advice and information about the sacred and natural values of the site.
- Provide better guidelines to all pilgrims and tourists (these could easily be issued with permits)
- Establish clearer on-site guidance starting with the very simple notion to all visitors that they are entering a holy place where certain rules have to be respected (this would be self-regulating, with guides held to account)
- Develop more interpretation on the fauna & flora of the forests – and the legends related to them, etc.
- More generally, and based on the above, develop a clear protocol for adoption at all sacred natural sites in the country

A more comprehensive set of recommendations is being submitted to the Bhutanese government for consideration.





Kabi sacred grove, Sikkim
© Liza Zogib

KABI - LUNGCHOK, SIKKIM'S MOST CELEBRATED SACRED GROVE

By Priyadarshinee Shrestha and Tashi D. Bhutia
WWF-India

The Sacred Grove at Kabi, located in northern Sikkim and stretching over 3 km from the highway towards Mangan to the River Bakcha below, is a wondrous place where history, nature and culture meet. It is hugely significant in the history of Sikkim, a symbol of reverence to the guardian deity Mt. Khangchendzonga and a witness to the Blood Brotherhood Treaty between the Lepchas and Bhutias.

There are many interesting stories behind the Sacred Grove at Kabi. Folktales have been passed down through generations that speak of a remarkable Lepcha couple who resided at Kabi. They went by the name of Thekong Thek and Nyekyong Nyel and were regarded as chieftains of the Lepcha tribe and believed to possess great supernatural powers.

Some believe that they were also the guardians of Mount Khangchendzonga and her five treasures which were hidden there by Guru Padmasambhava. The treasures are believed to come of use when the world ends and thus the couple are also regarded as the guardians of crops, seasons and all wildlife. The people of Kabi till this day believe that the change of seasons, cultivation of crops and almost all things in nature take place according to the mighty grace of Thekong Thek and Nyekyong Nyel.

Thekong Thek and his wife had paddy fields in Kabi and this is known as Byachung Thang in Ringsom. It still exists today below the Sacred Grove, conserved by the local people in fond memory of their extraordinary lives. It lies encircled by the rivers Rateychu and Bakchachu that meet below the grove area and is called Chuzom. Their home was the cave of Nampheyang Nay. This can now be found located above the highway to the North, and is still revered by the people as a wish fulfilling pilgrimage site. Above this cave is another site called Rong Poh which was the site of the couple's meditation and is a holy place for the locals.

Every year on the 15th day of the 9th month according to the present Bhutia calendar, the villagers bring the first harvest of their fields

to the grove and offer them to the guardian deity of the place, Mount Khangchendzonga. Lepcha priests, Bongthings offer prayers and thank the deity for the good crop harvest and for peace and unity.

Thekong Thek and Nyekyong Nyel lived and roamed around the forests of Kabi for many years and legend has it that one day the couple miraculously disappeared. People have strong beliefs that they went back to their homeland, Mayel Lyang and still guard the mountain they dearly loved – Khangchendzonga.

People also believe that every year they send special envoys in the form of birds who visit in different seasons from Mayel Lyang. The arrival of the birds brings different weather and has great significance for the local people as their crop cycles are based on it.

With the singing of a certain bird they ready the fields and sow the seeds; with the coming of another bird they harvest the crops, and then dry the seeds, etc. This is practised by some villagers until this day, and all of these birds are treated with respect knowing that they are sent from Mayel Lyang to guide them. The birds are known in the local language as Nye Phur, Gna Kangkathang, Chuk Thunn, Aak Khu and Phek Phiya (Phenjung Gyapen).

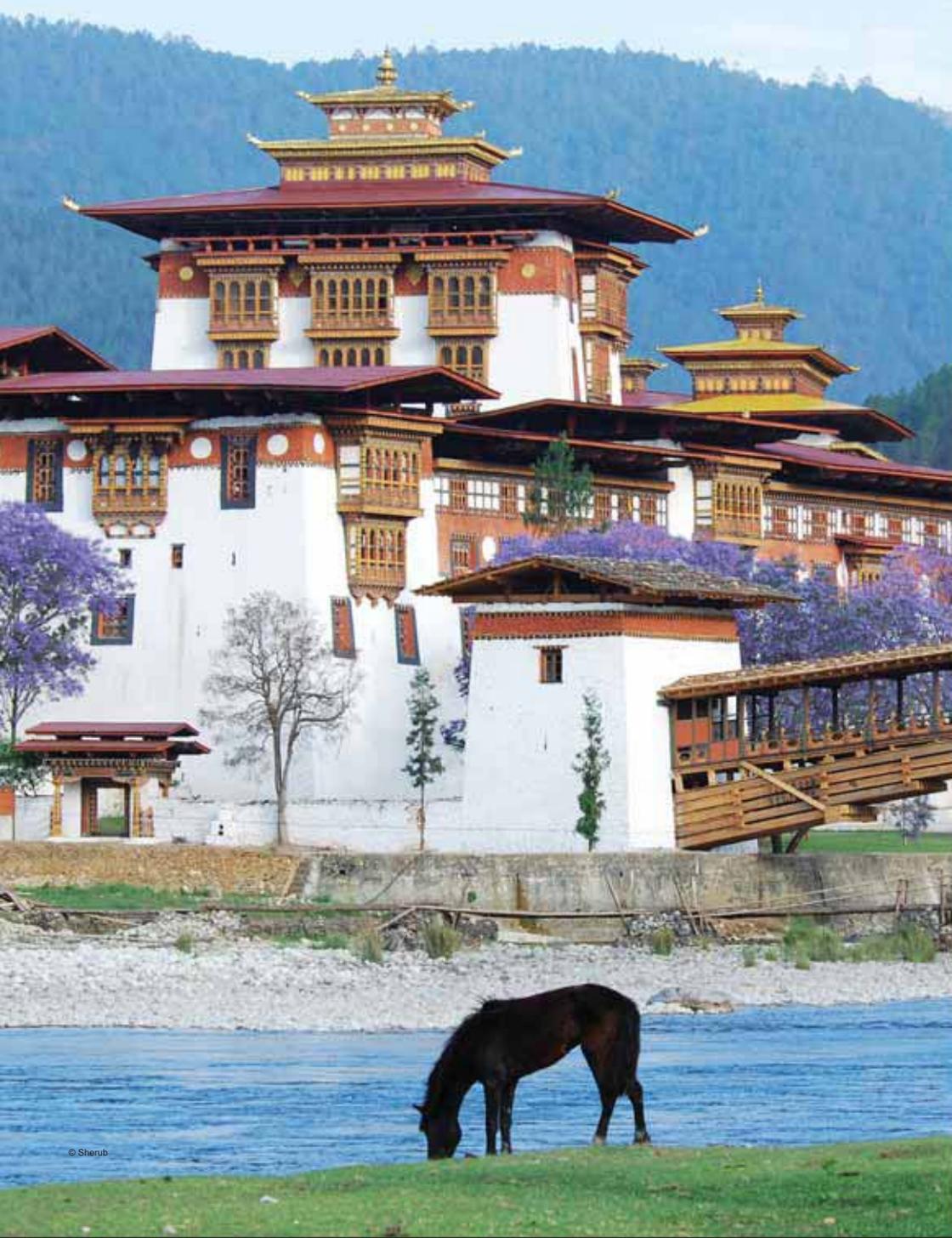
Around Kabi Sacred Grove, a community based tourism initiative for the village of Kabi was initiated by WWF India, Khangchendzonga Landscape Programme in close collaboration with the Endeavours Organisation, a local NGO based in Kabi, with the objective of linking conservation with tourism. Apart from the grove, ancient caves of the Lepcha Chief Thekyong Thek are also located within the vicinity of the village, which are sites of reverence and religious significance. Trails leading from Kabi to the Zekthang Valley are also being explored to form a part of the tourism circuit. Under this project, 6 houses were identified to offer homestay accommodation to tourists. These homestays are named after birds that find mention in popular Lepcha and Bhutia folktales.



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PUNAKHA DZONG

By WWF-Bhutan

Lying at the confluence of Pho and Mo Chu is the majestic building of Pungtang Dechenphotrang Dzong, more commonly known as Punakha Dzong. Also referred to as the place of great happiness, Punakha Dzong is the second oldest and the second largest Dzong in Bhutan.

Dzong literally means fortress and in Bhutan Dzongs are used as apex seats for political and religious jurisdiction. It is here where the current Wangchuk dynasty was first cemented with the coronation of King Ugyen Wangchuck as the first monarch of Bhutan in 1907. It was constructed by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1637-38. This architectural grandeur also forms the winter home of the head of Bhutan's Central Monastic Body. The Dzong hosts the illustrious 5-day annual festival called Demoche in February/March. Scores of tourists from all over the world flock the valley to partake its rich historical and cultural outlay.

With an elevation of 1,200 to 4800 meters the Punakha valley boasts the two main rivers of Bhutan, the Pho Chu (father) and the Mo Chu (mother). Originating from the northern hills of Bhutan and Tibet, these rivers join to form Punatsangchu or Sunkoshi River before flowing into the expanse of the mighty Brahmaputra. The country's capital until 1955, Punakha is one of the twenty districts in Bhutan and covers an area of 1095.99 sq. km. It still continues to play a major constitutional role in Bhutan's organizational structure.

Following a line of pine forests and glimpses of picturesque alpine mountains, the journey to the valley of Punakha is striking with profusion of red, pink, white, yellow and purple rhododendron blossoms. Being the least elevated among all of Bhutan's central

valleys, the valley is blessed with a benign climate that nurtures a variety of plantations. Two hot springs, namely Koma Tshachu and the Chhubu Tshachu adds extra galore to the list.

In terms of biodiversity, about 87,978 hectares of the Dzongkhag is covered with forest out of which 30 per cent is coniferous, 42 per cent broad-leaved, scrub forest is 2 per cent and pasture is 3 per cent. 22 per cent of the total area is cultivable land, out of which 5314.77 acres is wetland and 721.54 acres is dry land. Parts of the district also form a crucial piece of the Jigme Dorji National Park, the second national park in Bhutan known to host key species like the snow leopard, takin (national animal of Bhutan), red panda etc.

Though the valley can boast of its captivating beauty due to its strategic location, the very confluence of the Pho Chu and Mo Chu rivers in the Punakha valley has witnessed threats of flash floods not just to the Dzong, but to the settlements and forests. Previous flash floods in 1957, 1960 and 1994 caused by upstream mishaps have proliferated irreplaceable losses to human lives. The Dzong itself was very much damaged in the last glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF). The GLOF phenomenon is a worrying one brought on by the rapidly changing climatic conditions. Work is already underway to protect this entire stretch from such future damage by deepening river channels and raising the embankments of glacial lakes at the towers of the mountains.



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NAMO BUDDHA AND ITS ENVIRONS: A LEGACY OF GREAT COMPASSION

By Min Bahadur Shakya
Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, Nepal

On a mountain 30 kilometres east of Kathmandu lies the most sacred site of Namobuddha stupa. It is considered to be one of the holiest in Nepal and commemorates the Buddha's sacrifice of his own body to a starving tigress in a previous life. For this reason it is also known as the Tagmo Lüjin (literally "the place where the future Buddha sacrificed his body to a tigress). It is a very sacred place where the supreme Buddha – at that time still on the path of learning – without hesitation offered his own body to a tigress suffering from great hunger.

The inspirational history of Namobuddha stupa is one of many Buddhist stories centred around nature and charismatic species such as the tiger. What follows is a brief history of this sacred site, whose location is unmistakable based on the clear identification given in the holy texts.

At Namobuddha mountain, one nowadays sees a traditional Newar-style chaitya (stupa) together with number of other smaller ones. We cannot at present give a date for its foundation as there are no inscriptions to corroborate the very old date suggested in the legends and chronicles.

There is a railing embedded with prayer wheels around the chaityas to facilitate the devotions of visitors. A stone sculpture dedicated to Prince Mahasattva's mother is installed on the bottom level of the chaitya in the main shrine, along with her two sons. A caretaker performs daily ritual worship to this small shrine. If you go further up the hill, you will approach a small shrine dedicated to Prince Mahasattva who, out of great compassion, sacrificed his own flesh and blood to a hungry tigress. Near this shrine lies a small cave where one can find stone sculptures of a hungry tigress and her five cubs in front of Prince Mahasattva. On the top of the hill, a series of eight chaityas are installed. It appears that Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, a great Master, took the initiative to build these eight chaityas on top of the hill together with a tall Buddha image richly decorated with ornamental designs and motifs. Looking down from the hilltop one has a majestic view of the nearby village and a range of hills in the distance. A short distance down the hill one can find Namobuddha Retreat Center founded by Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche himself.

The religious edifices alert us to the significance of Prince Mahasattva's sacrifice of his own body, demonstrating his perfection of generosity and the importance of nature to this inspiring story.

Legends

According to 'Wright's chronicle', the Buddha, having visited Swoyambhu Chaitya and Mañjushri Chaitya, set up his abode at Puchagra. He then visited Guhyesvari, and after that Namobuddha mountain, about twelve miles east of Bhaktapur. There he discovered, buried under a chaitya, certain ornaments belonging to himself, which he showed to his disciples. In his former existence as a prince named Mahasattva, these ornaments had been buried after he offered his flesh to the tigress. He put them back where he found them, and repaired the chaitya.

According to a local legend, Sakyamuni Buddha, in the course of his visit to various places went to Kathmandu with his 1350 disciples. He went to pay homage to Swoyambhu Mahachaitya, and gave a teaching on the origin of this stupa on Gopuchagra hill. From there

he moved on and arrived at Gandhamadana mountain just before the full moon. Lord Buddha arrived there in the year 587 B.C. at this place. He stayed in the forest called Kusumavana with his entourage, enjoying the bliss of the natural surroundings.

While exploring this forest he arrived at the mound resembling a chaitya surrounded by flowers of many colours, a place where the fragrance of sweat permeated the forest. When Buddha saw this mound shining brilliantly, he paid homage to it and gazed at it for a long time. Since the Buddha himself paid homage to this chaitya, it was later widely known as Namobuddha chaitya.

At that time the venerable Ananda (one of the Buddha's closest disciples) was watching this event very carefully and was surprised to see this. He circumambulated the Buddha three times and prostrated to him respectfully with folded hands, and asked: "O Bhagavan, O my teacher, why did you pay homage to this earthly mound gazing at it for so long? What mysteries are hidden inside this mound? We, your disciples, could not understand it. Would you please explain the underlying cause out of compassion for us?"

Hearing Ananda's request, Buddha looked at his disciples and said: "O my disciples, please listen to me carefully. The earthly mound to which I paid homage is nothing but the remains of an ancient chaitya. It was built with the bone relics of a Prince Mahasattva, born to benefit sentient beings, who sacrificed himself by offering his own flesh and blood to a hungry tigress and her five cubs. This Bodhisattva saved the lives of the tigress and her cubs. This chaitya contains the relics of this Bodhisattva, so I paid homage to it. That is why it is called 'Namobuddha'. O my disciples, this chaitya is worthy of veneration, so please prostrate to this chaitya."

Conclusion

The Namobuddha Mountain is considered a sacred and holy place because it was blessed by the Buddha Sakyamuni. The main stupa on the mountain is a symbol of the great compassion of a Great Being (Mahasattva) – a symbol with the potential to pacify the turmoil of the world and at the very least to inspire the mind of whoever hears this story. When the Mahasattva gave his body to the tigress he expressed this altruistic wish: "Through the merit of completely giving my body, may I, in future times for aeons utterly beyond thought, perform the deeds of Buddhas for sentient beings." It is said that when this wish was made, countless beings, including gods and humans, generated the altruistic intention for supreme and perfect enlightenment. And this is the reason for revealing this stupa here.

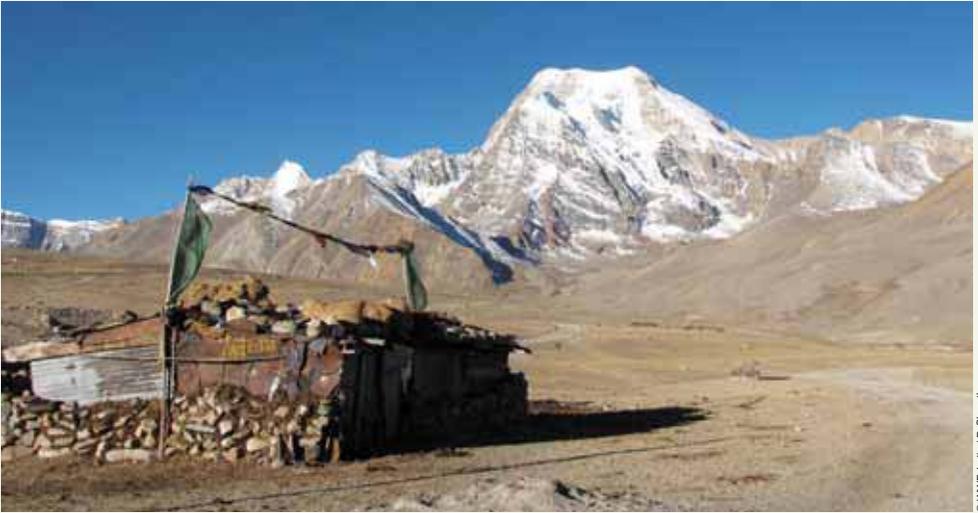


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GURUDONGMAR LAKE, SIKKIM

Edited from Sacred Waters of the Himalaya, WWF-India³⁷



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Gurudongmar Lake (5183 m) is located high in the cold desert area of North Sikkim. The lake is very important from religious point of view and is considered sacred by Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. It is considered to be the most sacred lake of the state, believed to be blessed by Guru Padmasambhava himself.

The name of the lake has a special meaning in the Bhutia language - Guru which refers to Guru Padmasambhava and 'Dongmar' meaning 'red face', (one of the eight forms of the Guru). Thus the lake is believed to show the red faced form of the Guru, which is the angry and uglier form that scares away all evils. It is believed that Guru Padmasambhava touched and blessed the lake, and a portion of the lake does not freeze even during peak winter.

According to the Sikh community, Guru Nanak visited this lake during his third journey through the Himalayas. Many legends are told about its significance. Because the lake remained frozen for most of the year it was useless a source of water. So some local people approached Guru Nanak, appealing for help. The Guru touched the lake and where he touched it has never frozen since.

Another story tells of graziers who, because of the altitude, were having problems with their virility. Again they went to Guru Nanak to ask for his intervention. The Guru blessed the lake, saying: "whosoever takes the water of this lake will gain virility and strength and will be blessed with children". The people of the area have full faith in the Guru's words and consider the water as a source of nectar.

In the 1980s a Gurudwara (place of worship for Sikhs) was constructed near the lake. Some other high altitude wetlands are also sacred for the Sikh religion - as well as for Buddhists, Hindus, and other faiths. These high altitude lakes are also very important for conservation and are facing increasing pressures from anthropogenic sources, as well as from climate change.

The High Altitude Wetlands of the Himalayas are of great importance

both for biodiversity and for people. They have been identified as the home of several rare and endemic species of birds, mammals and plants (including many medicinal plants). Wetlands such as this also play a critical role in the hydrological regime of rivers like the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus (also of huge sacred value), as well as acting as buffers between glacial melt waters and outflows to smaller rivers and streams.

Changes to the dynamics of these wetlands can have serious knock-on effects downstream and therefore their conservation is vital to secure the water supply of the region, as well as the biodiversity and communities that depend on them.

Various livelihood opportunities are provided to the communities residing in the villages en route to the lake as Gurudongmar is a popular destination for tourists.

The lake is situated near the northern most border of the state at a distance of 165 kms from Gangtok and can be reached only after a halt at the villages of Lachen or Thangu. The lake receives around fifteen thousand visitors yearly, who are both locals from the state as well as domestic tourists during the tourist seasons that begin around March.

Two glaciers located towards the southern side flow into two water bodies that are found adjacent to each other behind the main Gurudongmar Lake. These two wetlands then feed through separate channels into the main body of Gurudongmar Lake, which is at a slightly lower elevation. The outlet from Gurudongmar Lake flows into a small stream, that runs down the valley to meet Chhombu Chu flowing from Tso Lamu Lake which is located further upstream, and on coming together they mark the beginning of the river Teesta, the lifeline of the state of Sikkim.





THE GREAT NATURAL PILGRIMAGE SITE OF MARATIKA

By Ngawang Jigdral Chokyi Wangchuk (Maratika Rinpoche)
Abbot of Maratika Cave, Nepal

Located in the Eastern direction of our world (Jambudwipa), at an altitude of approximately 3000-4000 feet above sea level, in the district of Khotang, Sagarmatha Zone, in Eastern Nepal, is the Cave known as Maratika, which has been blessed by the three family Lords; Manjushri, Vajrapani and Avalokiteshvara. It is the place where the great tantric master Padmasambhava (considered the second Buddha) and wisdom Dakini Mandarava achieved immortality.

Maratika translates as "the cave of making an end to, or destroying, death". Because Padmasambhava achieved a level of power beyond birth and death the name of this place became known as "Maratika". The history of Maratika is found in Tibetan literature from the 12th century onwards, the Kathang Zanglingma - a biography of Padmasambhava discovered by Nyang-rel Nyima Özer, and the Kathang Serthrengma by Sangye-lingpa.

The three Hills of Maratika represent the three family Lords: Manjushri Hill, Vajrapani Hill and Avalokiteswara Hill. The Avalokiteswara Hill is the most important pilgrimage place at Maratika because it is where Padmasambhava and Mandarava achieved immortality. There are two main caves at Avalokiteswara Hill: the Long Life Cave and the Eight Heruka Cave.

The Long Life Cave, located 67 feet below earth level, is the place where Padmasambhava and Mandarava achieved immortality and contains the body print and long life vase of Buddha Amitayus. The East facing entrance of this Cave is shaped like a half moon, an auspicious sign, symbolizing long life. This Cave is enormous, having the capacity to hold a thousand people. Entering down stairs deeper into the wide and open cave reveals a number of smaller areas with an astonishing array of naturally formed stalagmites. White or variously coloured, smooth and shining as if polished, they appear naturally in the forms of self arisen statues of deities, protectors, Naga Kings, guardians, a Long Life Vase, auspicious symbols, a wish fulfilling treasure box and various other images.

There are a number of special places and features in the cave such as the four secret paths. The first secret path differentiates between virtue and sin and is the great path of the hot and cold hell realms.

The second shows the narrow path of the intermediate 'bardo' state between death and rebirth. The third path is the great path purifying defilements of being born in the human realm and collecting the two accumulations of merit and wisdom. The fourth is the great path purifying the sins of those who have broken commitments.

The Eight Heruka Cave is located at the bottom of Avalokiteswara hill. Here Padmasambhava tamed the demons. Padmasambhava opened a sky door in this Cave leaving huge right and left foot imprints that are still visible to this day. This cave holds many hidden Treasures and more than five hundred practitioners can practice together in this Cave.

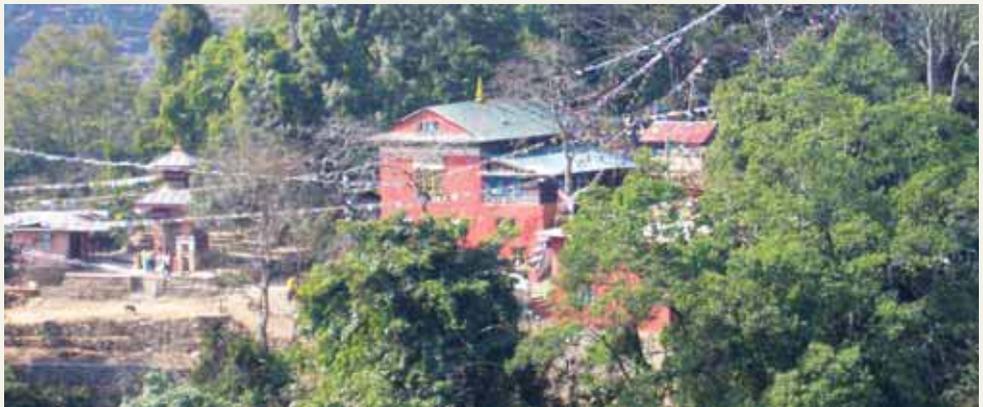
Just inside the entrance natural rock formations of a demon's head and body lie on the floor of the cave. A self-arisen conch shell appears on the left side of the wall of the entrance. This smooth turquoise conch complete with a small hole can be blown by pilgrims, making a sound that reverberates throughout the cave. The cave is also a source of holy nectar. Seeping from within the rock the nectar appears like a soft mist of rain upon the surface of the rock.

Chimey Takten Choling Monastery

The present Chimey Takten Choling monastery was founded by Venerable Lama Ngawang Chopel Gyatso (1922-1996) under the direction of His Holiness Trulshik Rinpoche, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa in 1982. His Holiness Trulshik Rinpoche consecrated the monastery and its three main statues; Buddha Amitayus, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Padmasambhava .

Chimey Takten Choling is the first Buddhist monastery built in Maratika. This pilgrimage site has been visited by numerous Tibetan Buddhist masters who have completed short or long-term retreats and often spontaneously written Vajra poems describing their experiences. Great lengths are being taken to ensure the sanctity of this important natural pilgrimage site for generations to come.

More details about the natural site Maratika can be found in the soon to be published book: (Pilgrims' Guide to Rocky Cave of Maratika the Supreme Holy Place of Immortality)



COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM, ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL CONSERVATION, AND THE REDISTRIBUTION OF CAPITAL TO ISOLATED COMMUNITIES IN THE KHUMBU REGION

By Brian J. Peniston and Ang Rita Sherpa
The Mountain Institute, Nepal

© Ang Rita Sherpa



Pangboche Monastery, 600 years old, towards Everest base camp trail



Everest and Lhotse with Sherpa Mani Wall

© Ang Rita Sherpa

The Khumbu region of Nepal attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. Trekking, more than any other type of tourism in Nepal, benefits local communities by injecting money directly into rural areas. Properly handled, trekking can play an important role in poverty alleviation through jobs for guides and porters, and business for lodges and restaurants along the trails.

However, tourism is now having an alarming impact on the environment and culture of the region. Sagarmatha National Park, gazetted in 1976, is one of Nepal's two most visited national parks and is of global cultural and environmental importance. A rapid increase from 3,600 annual trekkers to nearly 30,000 has strained the region's centuries-old ecological equilibrium. Many holy groves, trees, water sources and caves are neglected. Monasteries and other significant heritage sites often lack resources for maintenance.

There is unmanaged tourism and some lack of awareness amongst the local community about preservation of natural and cultural resources. Although it is hard to isolate tourism from other factors, visible social impacts include growing economic disparity, inflation of basic commodities and friction between those who do and do not benefit from tourism.

Tourism depends on the natural and cultural qualities of the destination areas, even while tourists endanger these qualities. This is where community-based ecotourism comes in: motivating local people to tackle the challenges associated with tourism, livelihoods and conservation, while retaining their cultural assets and protecting their environment.

In 2003, The Mountain Institute initiated "Sacred Sites Trail in Khumbu Region" in Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone. The nearly homogenous community of Sherpas in Khumbu follows the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Monasteries are the

centres of religious practice where festivals are performed. There are also many religious sites, shrines, caves and hermitages in and around villages. The project therefore created a new circular tourism trail, joining sacred sites at different settlements, starting at Namche Gumpa, continuing to Thamo, Thame, Kerok, Khunde, Khumjung, Phortse, Pangboche, Deboche, Tengboche Gumpa, and ending at Namche. Tourism's economic benefits and environmental impacts have not been distributed evenly throughout the Everest region, so in this project tourists are encouraged to visit lesser-known sites. The aim is to reduce the ecological and cultural footprint of trekking while maximizing its benefits for marginalized communities. The project builds on the notion of sustainability, by promoting livelihood opportunities and involving local communities in management and protection of natural resources.

As the project's implementing agency, The Mountain Institute provides assistance for the documentation, restoration, renovation and maintenance of cultural and natural features of significant sites within Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone. Activities include maintenance of cultural landscapes, restoration of religious structures, extension of Gumpa courtyards, encouraging use of cloth bags during festivals to reduce waste, and documentation of Sherpa songs and sacred sites:

- The Circular Sacred Trail has been designed with special attention to natural resources and significant heritage/cultural sites.
- Financial and technical support has been provided to managing and renovating monasteries in village development districts within Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone.
- A Community Conservation and Restoration Committee (CCRC) in Khunde village was formed to monitor cultural heritage conservation and restoration and maintenance of monasteries cultural sites within villages.



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- A grant was provided to the CCRC to restore the village's chorten and Mani walls with traditional mud and clay materials.
 - Gompa Management Committees have been strengthened by training in book and record keeping.
 - Monastery profiles have been developed for visitors and tourists.
 - Educational programmes and interpretative materials have been developed for both local residents and visiting trekkers, to highlight the cultural and sacred significance of natural features and human structures.
 - Cloth bags have been distributed to the gompa to reduce waste during festivals like dumji (a large festival celebrated in the Khumbu area in June or July and involving the whole Sherpa community). Environmental conditions during the festivals have significantly improved and awareness of waste minimization has been raised among local people.
 - Roofs have been re-painted with colours that suit the natural surroundings, helping to preserve the aesthetic beauty of the area, encouraging more trekkers and thus providing extra income to local people.

Inspired by the project, numerous self-initiated community projects have taken place in other villages within the region. More tourists are exploring the trail, expanding benefits to poor areas of Khumbu.

The Sacred Sites project roots practical environmental ethics in religious and cultural traditions. By involving communities directly in planning and implementation, it creates a true sense of ownership and a locally driven imperative to preserve local environments and cultures, while reaping economic benefits from sustainably managed tourism.



SACRED MOUNTAINS AND DEITIES OF BHUTAN

By Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi
National Museum, Paro, Bhutan

According to Buddhism, all phenomena come into existence as a result of dependently arising causes and conditions. Thus mountains and their patron deities are manifestations of outer, seemingly objective “earth element” phenomena while local spirits, who are the patron deities of mountains, fall into the category of migratory beings which inhabit the six realms of cyclic existence. When mountains are used as abodes by local gods, goddesses and enlightened masters, the mountains themselves are then considered very powerful and sacred deities. In these cases, even a fresh spring running down from the summit of the mountain, rock formations, or the various trees growing on its slopes are considered sacred. This is why when lamas undertake pilgrimages to these mountains they often collect items, such as rocks, trees, leaves etc, as these are believed to confer blessings from the mountains and their affiliated gods or goddesses.

By virtue of being in a pure mountain environment, spiritual beings, trees, and rocks are free from the contamination associated with mundane human activity. It is because of this lack of contact with impurities that mountains are considered a source of inspiration, and the ideal environs in which one can develop positive spiritual qualities. Another reason why mountains are viewed as sacred come from several Himalayan mountains having been blessed with the three attributes of enlightened masters, namely wisdom, compassion and spiritual power; one can witness these pure energies and blessings of the masters when viewing sacred imprints of their feet and hands displayed in solid rock.

Respect towards mountains is sometimes exemplified by forbidding the climbing of certain sacred peaks. For example, nobody is allowed to summit Mt. Kailash. The summiting of this pristine sacred peak would cause deep spiritual distress for the religious followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Bon.

It is believed that from the beginning of time, there have been many deities and spiritual beings residing in the Himalayas. Later, when enlightened Buddhist masters like Guru Rinpoche journeyed to the Himalayas to share Buddhist teachings, initially the mountain deities and local spirits tried to disrupt his mission. However, using the device of a changed appearance, he was able to counteract and transform the aggression of the spirits into peaceful support for the Buddhist dharma path.

Many environmental mistakes are made due to our temporary blindness; climbing the sacred mountains, building intrusive roads

to carry large polluting trucks and vehicles, mindlessly dumping garbage, massive deforestation and so on. These are extremely disrespectful and indeed harmful to mountains and their resident deities. The best strategy for the conservation of mountains is to keep the mountain in a natural and pristine state, as the local deities are then able to give vital support to the local people who live in that area. The local residents in turn conduct purification prayers and do other necessary pujas (rituals) for the benefit of their mountain deities. This important cycle of reciprocity stresses the need for the interconnection between mountains, their deities and local people to be supported and encouraged to maintain both the spiritual and environmental balance.

There is a danger, however, that “modern” and “educated” people may look upon these traditional spiritual and environmental reciprocations as mere superstition; they may fail to see that these spiritual-environmental narratives have been a positive protective force. If the environment is threatened, then important local forms of Buddhist practice are also threatened, threatening religion and culture as a whole. It is thus crucial to think about the impact that deforestation and pollution have on Bhutan’s indigenous Buddhist culture – these cannot be separated. To pollute the sacred spaces is to pollute sacred culture! That is why even if conservation work is done to preserve holy pilgrimage sites, the sacred nature of the sites can still get contaminated. It is necessary to include the participation of qualified spiritual specialists such as Buddhist teachers or mediators in activities at the sites. Their inclusion ensures that the necessary purification prayers will be performed, enhancing the blessings derived from the sacred sites. This is a vital component of “spiritual environmentalism”.

While the enthusiasm of pilgrims is very encouraging, there must be more education regarding the need to be aware of the environment and to inculcate practices of spiritual environmentalism at the sites while visiting. Anger, jealousy or greed are forms of psychological-environmental pollution and should be particularly discouraged at the pilgrimage sites to maintain pure environs. According to some spiritual teachers, this type of behaviour can also cause a holy site to be defiled and as a result holy water can even become dried up. So a traditional Buddhist approach involving mutual respect, reciprocity and compassion is the best way to ensure that no harm is done to any of the facets of our environment. The practice of spiritual environmentalism in particular is a Buddhist approach that guarantees a “win-win” solution for both supporters of the environment and for those who need to be supported by it.



GOSAIKUNDA, A SACRED NATURAL SITE IN NEPAL

By Bhawani S. Dongol
WWF-Nepal



© Bhawani S. Dongol

View of Gosaikunda lake

Gosaikunda, an alpine freshwater lake series, is one of Nepal's famous sacred natural sites. It has a great religious, cultural and spiritual significance to both Hindus and Buddhists. It is a high altitude Ramsar site (a site of international importance for wetlands) located at 28°5.00' E and 85°24.96' N with an area of about 13.8 ha inside the Langtang National Park, Rasuwa district (in Tamang language 'Ra' means sheep and 'suwa' means grazing land). Langtang National Park is within the Sacred Himalayan Landscape (SHL) programme of WWF-Nepal. The Rasuwa district is endowed with fifteen types of forests, around 3000 species of flowering plants and 250 species of birds and animals such as the snow leopard, panda, musk deer and mountain sheep. It has no less than seventy different glaciers. Native Tamangs are the majority in terms of population; other communities include Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar, Danuwar, Rai, Dalit and Sherpa. The elevation range of the Gosaikunda and associated wetlands is from 4000-4700 meters,

meaning that it is a high Himalayan lake, rich in biodiversity values.

According to legend Lord Shiva swallowed poison called Kalkut. He went looking for water in order to soothe the burning sensation and when he struck a Himalayan mountain with his trident (Trishul) pure water spouted out. As he went on drinking the pure water, the huge Gosaikunda lake was formed. The tradition of the thousands of devotees coming to the lake twice a year, on Rishitarpani-Janipoomina festival (full moon day Jul/Aug) and Dashahara (religious holy bath festival), for a darshan (sight, glimpse) of Lord Shiva resting in the pond, is still strong.

Perpetuating this tradition Hindus bathe in Gosaikunda, throwing the coconuts brought along by them into the pond, and lighting oil lamps in leaf cups to offer agni (fire) to the pond, and praying to Lord Shiva to grant salvation (moksha) or, if sins have been committed, to grant deliverance. They also recite Roodree (hymns in praise of Lord Shiva); it is believed that this contributes to the spread of worldly wellbeing and peace, to the creation of a cheerful atmosphere for living beings, and to a healthy human society.

The devotees, young and old, healthy and disabled, have been coming to the lake to pray for health and wealth, most of them travelling for days. Expressing their wishes, longings, anxieties and pains to the Lord's envoy Gosaikunda, returning with the pond's water as holy water clearly shows the steadfast religious and cultural affinity of the masses with Gosaikunda.

The religious customs and traditions that pre-date the Buddhist culture are still practiced in the Tamang community. Donning a religious cap decorated with feathers, a dhami-jhankri (spiritual healer) speaks about their religious tradition and cultural custom handed down by their ancestors.

The ability to speak with air, water, stones, earth, trees, rivers and rivulets, wind, ponds and lakes is the strength of dhami-jhankri. They have very strong religious, cultural and spiritual links with Gosaikunda.



© Bhawani S. Dongol

Thousands of pilgrims during Gosaikunda Festival (Jana Poomina)

SACRED GROVES IN BHUTAN: A CASE STUDY FROM URA GEOG

By Sonam Phuntscho
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Since time immemorial Bhutan and its people, by virtue of being predominantly Buddhist, have strongly inherited the practice of protecting patches of forests as sacred groves. This has been a continuous practice in their religion, culture and local resource management systems. However, studies on this issue are rare in Bhutan. Looking at the current scenario in terms of use of natural resources, particularly forest products in Bhutan due to economic development, population growth, and many other changes taking place, it is thought worthy to conduct some comprehensive studies to understand the true values of sacred groves to ensure sustainability for future generations in Bhutan.

This case study is based on research undertaken by the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment (UWICE) located in Bumthang, central Bhutan, on two sacred groves

(Shingneer and Doshey) in the Ura geog district. It was conducted based on semi-structured interviews and open ended individual and group discussions with local leaders, elders and community people of the studied areas. Younger generations (between 14 to 20 years old) were also interviewed to understand their reflections on the sacred groves.

Sacred Groves in Ura Geog

Ura is one of the four geogs in the Bumthang district, located in the South Eastern part of Jakar Dzong. Ura geog has six major villages with 229 households and a population about 2000³⁸. Like many other rural Bhutanese, the people of Ura depend on subsistence farming for their livelihoods.



Sacred groves at Shingneer

Shingneer village of Ura has two main hamlets – Trong and Shongar – with 30 households and a population about 300 people. The sacred grove, located above the village, is called Dorji Dradhue, named after the local deity that is believed to reside there. The grove is about 7-10 ha with matured and thick undisturbed stands lying prominently right above the current east-west national highway. The main forest type is mixed conifer dominated by spruce (*Picea spinulosa*), followed by blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), rhododendrons, scrubs (*Tser*), and fir (*Abies densa*) on top. It is home to diverse wildlife such as pheasants, barking deer, sambar, wild pigs, and many other bird species. Thick, dark, and healthy stands in the sacred grove corroborate that this grove is not only spiritually sacred to the Shingneer community, but also sacred from the richness in biodiversity and from a conservation point of view.

The Shingneer community has a strong sense of sacredness for this grove and has protected it as their Pholha/Yulha – the birth deity/village deity – since time immemorial. The villagers consider this grove as sacred for their wellbeing. It fulfils wishes and helps with successful ventures, to avoid Rimitshey (influenza) and natural calamities (e.g. crop damage by wild animals) in the village. And, importantly, it is the watershed for Shingneer village.

The protection of the sacred grove in Shingneer is done in different ways. The community tries to restrict themselves or outsiders from the collection of any forest produce, and monitors this regularly. Further, various ceremonial events are being conducted in the village to delight the deity as follows:

1. Offerings ritual “Soekha” on 15th day of 5th Bhutanese month;
2. Special offerings during the community “Lochoe” (annual religious ceremony) in the 9th or 10th Bhutanese month; and
3. Rituals and offerings by individual household as and when required.

The Shingneer community feels that it is of utmost importance for them to keep their sacred grove fully protected from any type of undesirable interventions. If defiled (pollution associated with newborn child, death etc.) the consequences will be severe damage of crops by wild animals, hailstorm, windstorm and heavy rainfall. Of course the taboo on getting inside the grove to search for lost cattle is accepted if the particular person is not defiled. The people say that consequences of any disturbance made in the sacred groves have to be faced by the community and they are unavoidable and unimaginable.



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East-west national highway passes below the sacred groves in Shingneer

Sacred groves at Doshey

The Doshey village in Ura is about 50 km away from Jakar Dzong. It consists of 62 households. This study focused on the sacred grove called Thinley Taktshen. As with the case of Shingneer, Thinley Taktshen is the name of the local deity of the Doshey community. It has an approximate area of about 15-20 ha. The current east-west national highway passes right in the middle of the grove. The forest type is mixed conifer with main tree species including spruce (*Picea spinulosa*), blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), and fir (*Abies densa*). There are also rich bamboo, rhododendrons and scrub (Bumzing, Khem etc). Wild animals found in this grove are barking deer, fox, wild pigs, and waterbirds. People believe that there are about five small lakes inside the grove and they are regularly being cleaned by waterbirds. This grove also contains thick and pristine stands that seem to offer high ecological and conservation values.

People say that the deity Thinley Taktshen of Indian origin had come to Bhutan as a disciple of the great Guru Rinpoche in 8th century. People consider Thinley Taktshen as very powerful and the deity of everything –his spiritual power is said to be like the sun’s rays. He protects the Ura people from outside intruders, natural calamities (storms, frosts, and epidemic) and interestingly Thinley Taktshen is considered as the weather deity –he brings/stops rains and sun.

The practices here to protect the sacred grove are not dissimilar to those of Shingneer. There is a strong understanding within the village community about the consequences of not protecting their sacred grove. The Doshey people firmly restrict any collection of forest produce from the sacred grove. They also get full support from the Thrumshingla National Park. Offerings of prayers and foods are also made through various religious ceremonies as follows:

1. Monthly offering ceremony (Soekha) on every 8th day starting

from 4th - 9th month of the Bhutanese calendar (carry out until harvesting of crops);

2. Offerings during the annual Ura Tshechu on 3rd Bhutanese month; and
3. Rituals and offerings by individual household as and when required.

If people collect any forest products from or make any disturbances to the sacred grove, they get sick and become disabled, and it also causes heavy frost damaging agricultural crops. However, people say that for the purpose of community utilisation such as the repair of the monastery, they may collect some forest resources with the special permission from the deity through rituals and offerings. Otherwise, it is believed that even if people quarrel with each other in the village, negative impacts, particularly frost, occur not only to Ura village, but also beyond.



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East-west national highway passes from the sacred groves in Doshey

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Threats and Risks to the Sacred Groves

This study revealed that there are some threats and risks that will gradually lead to degradation of the sacred groves if adequate attention is not provided. Two main threats and risks foreseen by the people in their sacred groves are identified and discussed.

1. Lack of legal rights for protection of sacred groves

Many issues and constraints related to lack of legal rights of the community for the effective protection of sacred groves were raised by people. Currently, there is not any clear legal provision enshrined in any laws of Bhutan regarding the rights of community for protection of sacred groves. It has been reported in both the studied sites that developmental activities, particularly road construction had brought many additional threats to sacred groves. The east-west national highway that passes right below the sacred grove – Dorji Dradhue – at Shingneer had displaced the traditional boundary of the grove. Nevertheless, this road tempts and eases for outsiders such as neighbouring villagers and travellers to collect forest products from the grove.

Similarly, the same east-west national highway bypasses right in the middle of the sacred grove – Thinley Taktshen – of Ura Doshey. People report that during road construction many trees were felled and inflicted other disturbances in the grove. Since the communities do not have legal rights, even now people have to literally beg and request restraint from whosoever tries to intrude and disturb in their sacred grove. The threat from outsiders was a major concern of the Shingneer community. Compared to Doshey, about 42% of the respondents have an opinion that their sacred grove is at risk from outsiders.

In Doshey village, people feel comparatively more confident with regards to the destruction of the sacred grove by outsiders. About 64% of the respondents mention that they do not foresee much risk from outsiders on their sacred grove. The reason being that people consider Thinley Taktshen to be such a powerful deity that people are scared of causing any disturbance in the grove. Besides, the Thrumshingla National Park Office provides full support to the people for protecting their sacred grove.

Views of Doshey community on the future of their sacred grove

In contrary to the belief of Doshey people on low risk from outsiders on their sacred groves, I am on the opinion that due to rapid changes taking place in terms of population, social and religion all over the

country, risk from outsiders would unquestionably increase in the future. Similar cases have been reported by many scientists in other neighbouring countries^{39,40,41,42,43}.

2. Deterioration of knowledge and faith on sacred groves

There are huge knowledge gaps on sacred groves between younger and older people in both the communities. Most of the younger generation interviewees do not have adequate knowledge and are unable to tell about activities practiced in the villages to protect their sacred groves. Further, in both the studied villages, there are high numbers of family members living outside the villages either working or studying. About 84% and 39% of the interviewees of Doshey and Shingneer have their family members living away from the villages indicating that the gap in knowledge of, and reverence for, sacred groves is a serious concern.

Recommendations and Conclusions

This case study revealed that the communities of Shingneer and Doshey have a strong spiritual connection to their sacred groves. Though the conservation of biodiversity may not necessarily be important for the communities, directly or indirectly the sacred groves play invaluable roles in harbouring a range of floral and faunal diversity. "Each sacred grove is maintaining a microclimate with rich biodiversity"⁴⁴.

There are several constraints faced by the communities to effectively protect their sacred groves. Outsiders' interference in the sacred groves is a strong concern, particularly to the Shingneer people. Recognizing the significance and empowering the communities by the Government to protect their respective sacred groves would immensely help in the effectiveness of management and protection of sacred groves in these two areas and beyond. Besides the legal backing, physical and financial support to coordinate an awareness programme on sacred groves within communities is another important area of attention to be given by the Government. The vast differences in forest quality between the sacred groves and surrounding forests shows that sacred groves are strongly contributing to Bhutan's current conservation ethics and vision. Thus, more scientific research on sacred groves is needed to understand in-depth ecological and conservation values that would guide the Government to develop policy and strategies for effective management and protection of sacred groves. Further, it is also truly worthy to carryout a nationwide study on sacred groves in Bhutan to understand their status and to build up baseline information.



EXPERIENCING A BEYUL IN BHUTAN

By Vita de Waal
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I was entranced by what I saw when all of a sudden I sensed something special related to the water in the stream on our left, it was as if the water talked! The sensation was so strong that I was happy when we stopped. Samten explained that Guru Padmasambhava had meditated here, that the valley had been blessed by the Precious Guru himself and that it was considered to be one of the main sacred places associated with him. After only a few minutes we stopped again, this time at the Dakini Cave, a sacred space underneath a circle of trees. Coming out of the cave it felt as if I had blended with another dimension, a 'space' whereby each element contributed to the sustenance of the other; the human being deeply intertwined with all that surrounded it, permaculture at its best. All was so alive, so tangible and the resulting and healthy biological diversity was stunning.



© Vita de Waal

Secret beyul, Bhutan

Further down the road was a rock with two pairs of Dakini footprints. The next stop was a visit to a most powerful Weeping Cypress in which Guru Rinpoche had hidden a treasure. Not far from here I could feel the atmosphere changing, a more ancient and elemental strata was coming to the fore. Maybe a good example is that of a sunny day, when dawn feels different to sunset, though the sun itself has never changed. After a short walk we saw this powerful rock on which Padmasambhava had spent time teaching. It was as if the air was becoming denser, more loaded. Walking through an open area, we stopped at what looked like just another rock, when Samten pointed to lines; watching closer we saw that text was written on it: one line with text in one language and underneath a

translation into another language. Because of the sacredness of the place, there were times when many pilgrims would gather and receive teachings and empowerments when within minutes discovered such a teaching area, with a throne made of stone slabs and from where, not unlike prayer-flags, the teacher's words and blessings would be transported by the wind into the valley beneath; blessing all on their way.

A blowing stone nearby must have been used for rituals or to alert the people in the valley of times for prayer, of teachings or of festivals. Higher up the mountain Terton Pema Lingpa spent time in a cave and found a terma here.

Beyuls are not only treasure-troves of great biodiversity but they are also extremely important because of the sacred sites they contain, in this case, because of Padmasambhava's presence, so deeply linked to the culture of the Bhutanese and sense of nationhood. The hidden aspect is that of the intangible qualities that not everybody will perceive but that are clearly present and available to the practitioner. These beyuls are sacred landscapes, certainly rich in biodiversity, but especially important because of their great cultural and spiritual significance and do not only deserve to be protected but need preserving for future generations. What is also important is that human intrusion in such special areas should be kept at a minimum because it interferes not only with the existing biological harmony but it disturbs those beings that live inter-dimensionally, it disturbs the guardian and protector spirits/entities of such places.

Under the supervision of the government of Bhutan, forests are being harvested for timber. A side-product of this is that timber



© Vita de Waal

Dakini footprints

companies create roads where there were none before, giving local residents the possibility to travel further afield and get important supplies, access to education and health-care. Such access also halts immigration to urban areas thereby maintaining the countryside population. A more negative side-effect is that falling trees rip through all they encounter; the bigger the tree the bigger the destruction.

We should not forget that these areas were strongly shamanic and for millennia shamans bound beings to a certain area and/or duty and rituals were performed at regular intervals to remind these entities of their job and to thank them. Padmasambhava was able to communicate with and subdue these by giving them a new

IN SUMMARY...

The natural environment in this region is hugely value-laden for the people who live here. It is their protector; it is their teacher; it is the wrathful deity who brings trouble when displeased; it carries the message and the power of masters who have become enlightened on its soils. The economic value of the sacred forests cannot compare to what they are worth culturally and spiritually. The trade value of the charismatic species is nothing compared to what they symbolise when teachings are attached to them. So, yes, this is a place of great biodiversity – but its greatness lies in its connection with the beliefs and practices of all the traditions that pay homage to the Himalayas.

There are many pressing threats to the bio-cultural and spiritual values of the region and there is a growing recognition that some serious work needs to be done to ensure that it maintains its 'bio-sanctity' for generations to come.

The time is surely ripe for a different approach - a 'spiritual environmentalism' perhaps - in this region, and beyond. Conservation organizations, faith communities, governments, academia and private sector must now come together and work towards a common goal of a healthy, sacred, Living Himalayas.

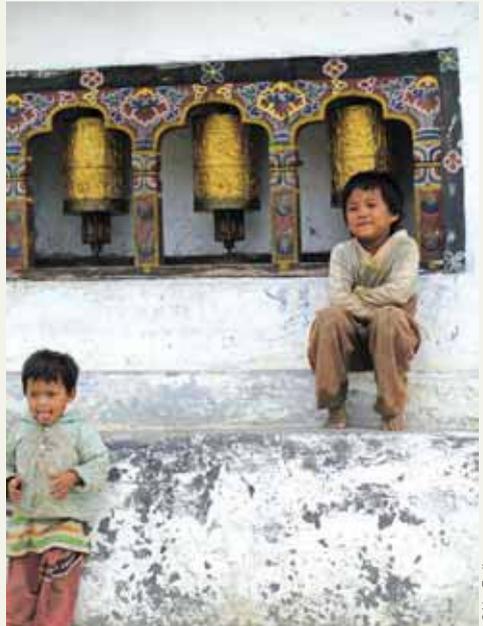


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Sacred tree in the Beyul

occupation, one related to Vajrayana Buddhism. To disturb such a valley or such sacred landscapes is to disturb these beings. This will have an effect on the area under their jurisdiction and have an effect on the health of people, of animals or on the balance of elemental forces. While some will consider this as a bunch of gobbledygook, for many cultures the world over this is real.

Experienced masters like Guru Rinpoche are very rare indeed and there is therefore a need to safeguard the traditions and know-how that have been passed on through generations of serious and experienced practitioners. It is also important to make these intangible realities related to nature known so that a new generation of practitioners can be trained by those who still hold the lineage of transmission; a training that takes many years and requires real dedication. That UNESCO has called in 2010 an international seminar on the role of religious communities in the management of world heritage properties is therefore not only timely but indeed important, especially as UNESCO emphasises the intangible aspects of culture, the ... living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants, in most cases orally. It also states that living heritage is very fragile. It is also to be welcomed that the Human Rights Council with Resolution A/HRC/RES/14/9 has created a mandate for an Independent Expert for the promotion of the enjoyment of cultural rights of everyone and respect for cultural diversity. There is more to biodiversity than just conservation measures related to the environment. It is important to link the cultural dimension to all our efforts to preserve our natural spaces.



Tomorrow's guardians of Himalayan biodiversity

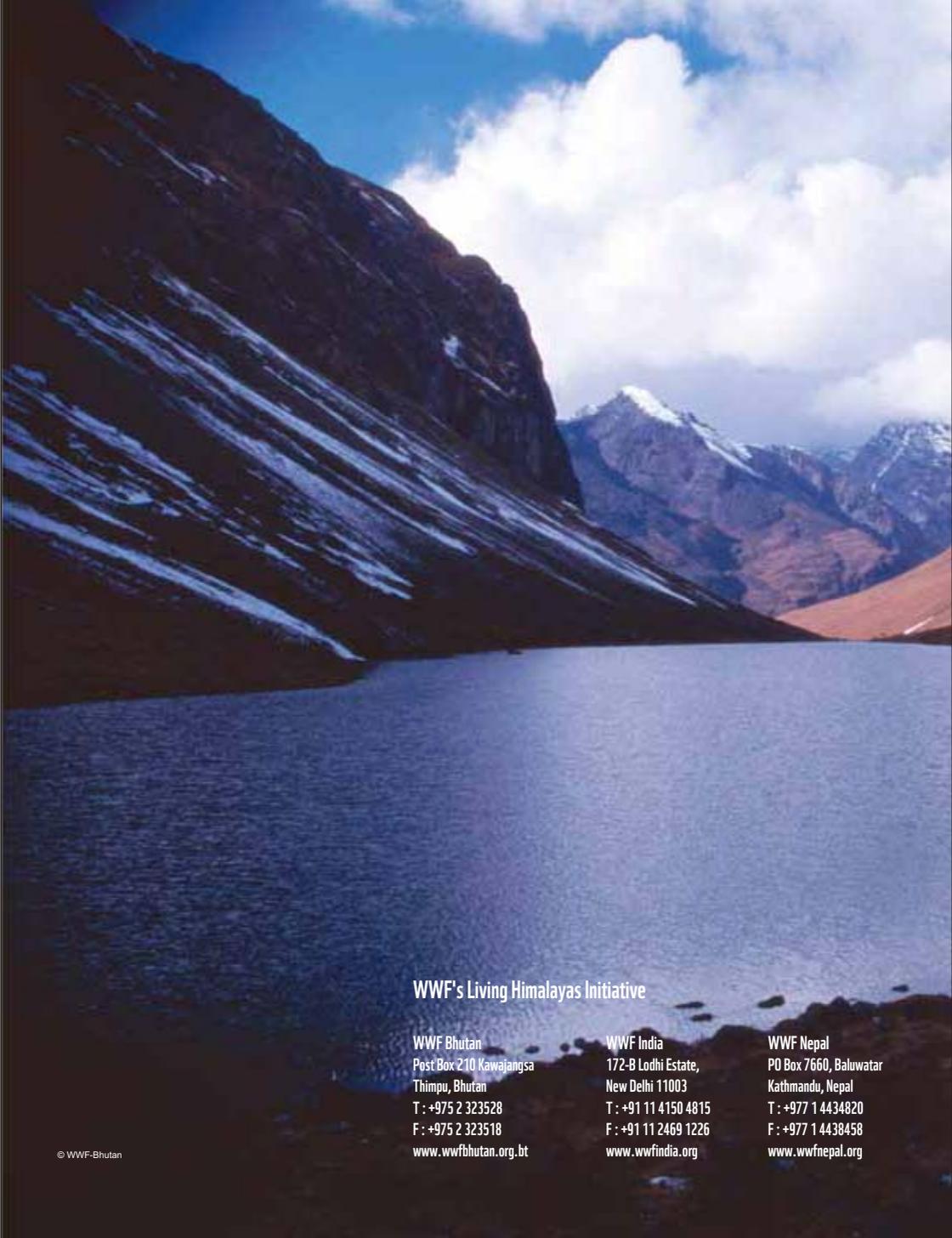
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Sacred lands and conservation in the Living Himalayas

The Himalayas are the water towers of Asia.

The eastern Himalayas is the source of water – from sacred rivers such as the Ganges and Brahmaputra – for millions of people.



Sacred Natural Sites in the Eastern Himalayas are critical for nature conservation, water sources as well as for the diverse cultures and traditions of the region – but they face many threats, particularly from rapidly changing climatic conditions.

WWF encourages faith leaders from all traditions to promote their followers to combat climate change and protect natural sources of water.



WWF Mission:

WWF's Mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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