

Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative

Developing a transboundary cooperation framework for conservation and sustainable development in the Mt Kailash region of China, India, and Nepal

The Kailash Sacred Landscape

Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) is the name proposed for the larger region around Mt Kailash encompassing its cultural geography. It includes the remote southwestern portion of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in China, and adjacent parts of northwestern Nepal, and northern India. This high altitude mountainous region is among the most culturally and ecologically diverse and fragile areas in the world. Famous from ancient times, it represents a sacred landscape significant to hundreds of millions of people in Asia, and around the globe. It is an important cultural and religious landscape with significance for Hindu, Buddhist, Bon Po, Jain, Sikh, and other related religious traditions. Mt. Kailash is also the source of four of Asia's great rivers: the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Karnali and the Sutlej, which irrigate much of Asia and the Indian sub-continent and provide essential transboundary ecosystem goods and services vitally important within the greater Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, and beyond.

Globally and locally important biodiversity

The Kailash Sacred Landscape contains a broad range of bioclimatic zones and landscapes, rich natural and cultural resources, and a wide variety of globally significant biodiversity. This highly diverse and environmentally fragile landscape provides essential habitat for large numbers of endemic and endangered species that are under acute pressure from environmental change and human activities, including large mammals like snow leopard and wild ass, and is home to a range of endemic flora and fauna important in maintaining both global biodiversity and local livelihoods, and including a rich traditional knowledge and a high diversity of medicinal plant resources.



Mt. Kailash, seen here at sunrise, has inspired pilgrims and travellers for thousands of years.



The proposed Kailash Sacred Landscape is rich in biodiversity, including many rare, threatened and/or endemic high altitude species such as this *Saussurea gossypiphora*, found at 5000 m above the trans-Himalayan Limi Valley in remote northwestern Nepal.

A sacred landscape for millions

Mt. Kailash, rising above one of the world's highest plateaus, is revered by Tibetan Buddhists, who call it Precious Snow Jewel, as the Central Pillar of the World. Hindus refer to it as Mount Meru; the celestial abode of Lord Shiva. Every year, thousands of religious and spiritual pilgrims journey to this sacred mountain to circumambulate the 6,714 metre high peak. Pilgrims arriving from India, Nepal, China, the central Asian region, and elsewhere in the world, create a transboundary cultural landscape, and produce transboundary impacts on ecosystems and local cultures.

Future challenges

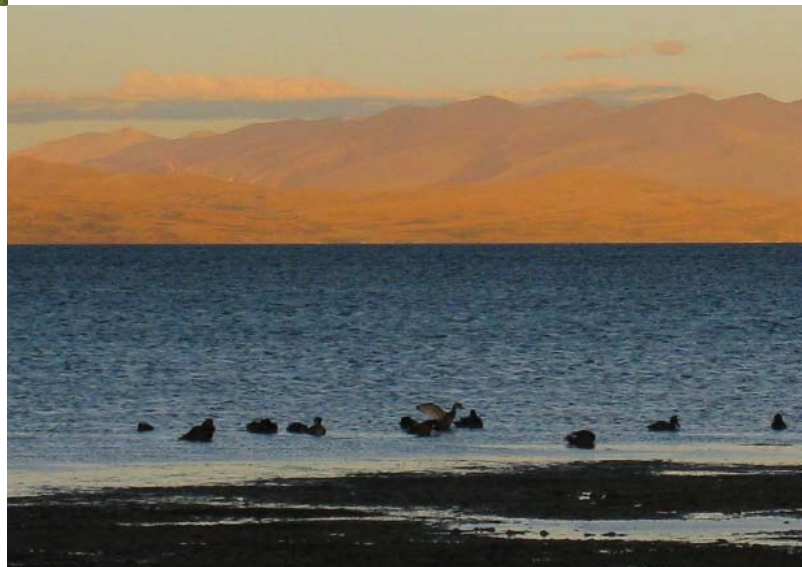
Population growth, increasing urbanisation, tourism development, subsistence activities, and improved accessibility all contribute to the stresses on the environment and cultural landscape. These pressures threaten the irreplaceable natural environment, biodiversity, and cultural heritage of this vast mountain region of unparalleled beauty, and ecological, cultural and religious significance. As change within this area accelerates, poverty and limited livelihood opportunities are exerting increasing pressure on the fragile natural resource base, and the vital



for poor communities throughout the region feed a cycle of resource degradation and widespread poverty, and will likewise limit climate change adaptation options, imperilling biodiversity resources.

Kailash landscape: religious artefacts like chortens are common (above); villages depend heavily on available natural resources and diminishing forests (Karnali Gorge, Nepal) (right); Lake Masarovar, a Ramsar Site, is home to migratory birds and other wildlife (below); biodiversity – Himalayan columbines and a Eurasian cuckoo at high altitude in Nepal (right); large areas of grasslands on the Tibetan plateau provide habitat for Tibetan wild ass (*Equus kiang*) and other wildlife (far right)

ecosystem goods and services essential for the region. In particular, global climate change is expected to have a high impact. Accelerated warming has been reported, with significant loss of permafrost predicted for the Tibetan Plateau. Warming and changes in weather patterns are likely to adversely affect human populations and the natural resources they rely on. Biodiversity conservation efforts may be affected as species' ranges shift or disappear, and nomadic herders are forced to move to new locations due to changing precipitation patterns. Limited livelihood options



Transboundary landscape approaches in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

Transboundary landscape management promotes an integrated approach for management of extended landscapes, defined by ecosystems rather than administrative boundaries, in which both the conservation and sustainable use of the components of biological diversity are considered, and in which people and their socio-cultural resources are placed at the centre of the conservation framework. This approach has been strongly recommended for linking conservation with sustainability, involving communities in decision-making processes, and using biodiversity judiciously to secure effective management. Transboundary landscape management was endorsed within the context of the 'ecosystem approach' adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2004, which highlighted the significance of regional cooperation in critical transboundary landscapes. Understanding the socioeconomic, socio-political, and socio-cultural aspects of biodiversity and cultural conservation is essential if biological conservation efforts in the region are to be successful, and translated into sustainable and equitable development of these fragile mountain areas. Mechanisms are needed for maintaining and enhancing both ecosystem goods and services (regional, local, and international) and the cultural integrity of the sacred landscapes. Only then can livelihood strategies and tourism growth be balanced with environmental conservation and sustainable development goals, especially in the light of ongoing and accelerated global climate and environmental change processes.

The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative

The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative is a collaborative effort of ICIMOD, the United Nations Environment Programme, and partners in the three countries. It was initiated through an extensive consultative process, and launched with an Inception Workshop and Consultation held in Kathmandu in July 2009. The Conservation Initiative will engage regional, national, and local partners, and other stakeholders in a consultative process aimed at facilitating a transboundary, integrated approach to sustainable development and conservation. Landscape and ecosystem management approaches will be promoted to address threats to the cultural and environmental integrity of the area, to analyse change processes, and to develop a knowledge base, including a baseline, upon which to build a regional conservation framework and implementation



strategy. Participatory conservation measures based on co-management and community-based institutions and approaches relevant to the region will be encouraged as a basis for improved environmental governance and local resource conservation. Community-based conservation measures, at both the landscape and ecosystem level, will seek to strengthen the role of communities in conservation efforts and sustainable development. The approaches will be designed through a stakeholder consultation with the aim of developing environmentally and culturally sustainable development and adaptation strategies, leading to the development of a regional cooperation framework for conservation and sustainable development in the Kailash region. This process will build a solid knowledge base to facilitate regional transboundary dialogue. It is the first pilot activity under ICIMOD's trans-Himalayan transect approach, which aims to focus and increase the effectiveness of research and development activities.

Regional Cooperation Framework

The Regional Cooperation Framework will support cooperation and common understanding on transboundary landscape issues in the region, and will provide a basis for conservation, adaptation, and sustainable development, within the context of a rapidly changing climate and other drivers of change. The framework will be developed through information sharing among international, regional, national, and local stakeholders and actors during the initial phases of the programme. It is conceived as a tool to help address the root causes of biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and adverse impacts on the cultural integrity in the region; to encourage fast-track planning and implementation of programmes; and to enhance complementarities and coordination among the diverse actors involved in biodiversity and cultural conservation. There are four main elements:

- Transboundary biodiversity, and environmental and cultural conservation
- Scientific and technical cooperation
- Information exchange and sharing
- Regional guidelines, policy mechanisms, and soft legal instruments

The Framework is based on the principles of

- **participatory management** – ensuring participation of indigenous and local communities, as well as disadvantaged and socially marginalised groups, for biodiversity and cultural conservation and management;
- **equitability** – ensuring fair and equitable access and benefit sharing;
- **sustainability** – aiming for economic, social, and environmental sustainability;
- **partnerships** – building partnerships among local communities, government/non-government institutions, the private/corporate sector, and financial institutions;

- **ecosystem approach** – taking an integrated approach into consideration for socioeconomic, socio-ecological, cultural, and environmental security;
- **lessons-learned approach** – applying lessons learned from other transboundary mountain programmes, including the Alpine Convention, the Carpathian Convention, and the Mount Everest and Kangchenjunga Transboundary Frameworks; and
- **transboundary cooperation** – promoting and strengthening transboundary cooperation.

Implementing partners

Partners for Phase I (to January 2011) include ministries from the respective governments, scientific institutions, and community-based organisations in the three countries.

Ministries

- Chinese Academy of Sciences, PR China
- Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India
- Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MoFSC), Government of Nepal

Lead institutions

- Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, PR China
- G B Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, India
- Central Department of Botany, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Supported by



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