

Transboundary Landscape Conservation in the Eastern Himalaya: Interview with Dr. Nakul Chettri

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Dr Nakul Chettri is Transboundary Landscape Management and Biodiversity Conservation Specialist with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). He has been overseeing the implementation of the MacArthur Foundation-funded landscape approach to biodiversity conservation through development of

conservation corridors in the Kangchenjunga Landscape (western Bhutan, Darjeeling and Sikkim in India and eastern Nepal), and the Namdhapa-Hkakaborazi-Gaoligongshan Landscape (Arunachal Pradesh, India, Kachin state, Myanmar and Yunnan Province, China) since 2002.

Q: *The Transboundary Biodiversity Management programme of ICIMOD, begun in 2003 in the Kangchenjunga Landscape, is now in its third phase. What milestones were achieved in Phase I and II, and what is your outlook for Phase III?*

Nakul: Though the actual field based activities on transboundary cooperation in the Kangchenjunga landscape started in 2003, the concept was discussed amongst the representatives from Nepal, India and China as early as 1997. ICIMOD facilitated discussion on the importance of the Kangchenjunga complex for biodiversity conservation in a workshop held in Kathmandu and made recommendations for addressing conservation issues. This was followed by a review of biodiversity of the complex that recommended the potential role of connectivity for better management of biodiversity in 2000. Then in 2003, ICIMOD initiated ground level activities for transboundary cooperation and now we are in the third phase of the initiative.

Phase 1 (2003-2005) was an inception phase when confidence building measures were taken. As milestones, we devised the strategy for reaching regional cooperation and initiated applied research to understand the value of biodiversity, conservation needs and livelihood options along with delineation of potential conservation corridors that are needed to make the landscape more resilient to all stresses and challenges. In addition, community-based participatory planning tools were used to address the socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects of conservation as well as to come up with comprehensive participatory corridor plans for each of the six identified conservation corridors in three countries (Nepal, India and Bhutan).

During the second phase (2005-2007), emphasis was placed on making the initiatives concrete and bringing policy dimensions to the forefront. Stronger partnership was developed with WWF-Nepal, The Mountain Institute and IUCN Nepal. A new dimension was added when the Kangchenjunga landscape was extended to a greater geographical coverage in the form of the Sacred Himalayan Landscape. This initiative resulted in development of a Sacred Himalayan Strategic Plan for Nepal for the period of 2006-2012. The most important milestone in this phase was the

formulation of Regional Cooperation Framework to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in the Kangchenjunga landscape. The national corridor development plans address the individual corridor management issues whereas the regional framework brings together the common elements of the national conservation policies with reference to the Implementation Goal 2.3 of Mountain Biodiversity (COP VII/27) along with the other goals stipulated in the CBD. In addition, a draft "Regional Framework Strategy for Biodiversity Management in the Kangchenjunga Landscape" was prepared and discussed during a Regional Consolidation Workshop organized by ICIMOD and Nature Conservation Division (NCD) in Thimpu, Bhutan. This document, which is under review, emphasises cooperation for management of the Kangchenjunga landscape and development of corridors through national initiatives.

The ongoing third phase (2008-2011) is more of a consolidating phase for the landscape with a few new dimensions added to the Kangchenjunga landscape initiative such as climate change; perspectives on biodiversity conservation; valuation of biodiversity services; effectiveness of protected area in terms of governance and agro-biodiversity assessment. In addition, the experience from the Kangchenjunga landscape is being applied in the Bramhaputra-Salween Landscape considering three important protected areas of south west China (Gaoligongshan Nature Preserve), north east India (Namdapha National Park) and Kachin state of Myanmar (Hkakaborazi National Park) for biodiversity management.

Q: *While the Kangchenjunga Complex gets a lot of mainstream conservation attention, the Namdapha-Hkakaborazi-Gaoligongshan Landscape hardly gets any, although it is the largest contiguous expanse of natural forest in the Eastern Himalaya. How do the trans-boundary issues in this landscape compare with the K-complex? And what has been the level of cooperation (scientific and management) between the countries (China, Myanmar and India)?*

Nakul: The Kangchenjunga complex has received more attention mainly due to its strategic location and the proactive roles of the countries sharing this complex and the active involvement of national and international organisations. The support from government agencies of these countries has added a new paradigm in that conservation initiatives have advanced from species-focussed to landscape level efforts.

The proposed Namdapha - Hkakaborazi - Gaoligongshan conservation complex was identified as an important transboundary complex in 1999 when ICIMOD organised a conservation dialogue between the representatives from China and Myanmar in Putao, Kachin state of Myanmar. The dialogue had underscored the need for regional cooperation in managing this complex.

The broad transboundary challenges in both complexes are similar. Weak enforcements and policing due to remoteness and inaccessibility, unregulated cross-border trade in high value medicinal and aromatic plants, poaching and illegal trading of animal parts are common. Poaching, illegal trading of animal parts, intensive slash and burn agriculture with decreased fallow periods and extensive commercial logging in parts of the Namdapha-Hkakaborazi-Gaoligongshan conservation complex have jeopardised this last frontier of biodiversity. People's dependency on the natural resources has been convoluted with higher level of poverty manifested by inaccessibility and insufficient developmental opportunities.

Interview

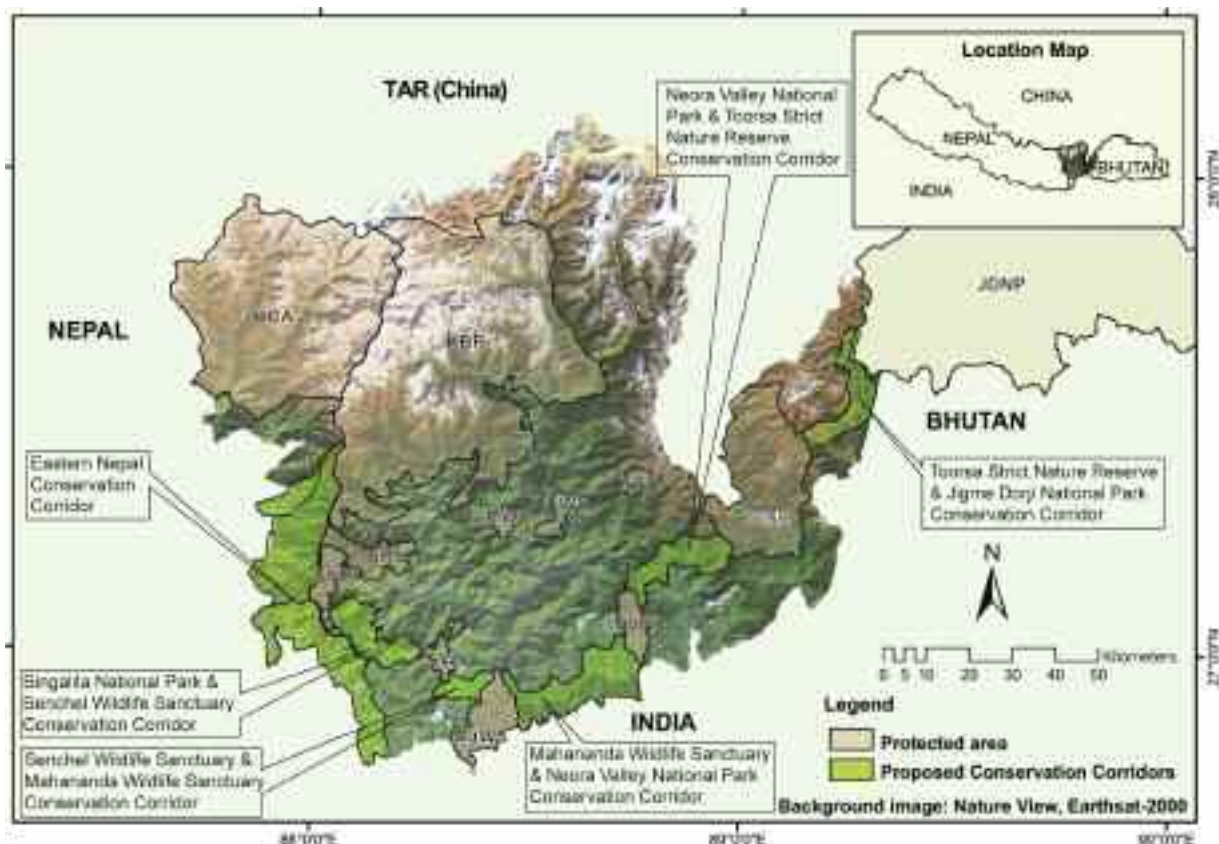


Figure of landscape approach in mapping biodiversity (source: ICIMOD).

Immediately after the 1999 dialogue, ICIMOD could not do much for the Namdapha-Hkakaborazi-Gaoligongshan conservation complex due to various reasons. However, after garnering experience in transboundary initiatives in the Kangchenjunga landscape, ICIMOD, in its present Medium Term Action Plan (MTAP 2008-2012), has envisaged expanding the landscape approach here. The dialogue with China and Myanmar and some preliminary work have already been initiated. To facilitate this process, ICIMOD, in collaboration with Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, has organised a 'Regional Experience Sharing Consultation on Landscape Approach to Biodiversity Conservation and Management in the Eastern Himalayas' during 24-28 May, 2009 in Tengchong County of Yunnan Province in China. The main purpose of the consultation is to impart understanding of the various landscape approaches piloted in the Hunder-Kush Himalayas (Bhutan, India and Nepal) and draw attention towards strengthening the Brahmaputra-Salween Conservation Landscape covering parts of India, Myanmar and China. As we are still in the process of taking things forward, commenting on the level of cooperation at this point of time may be too early.

Q: The eastern Himalayas is in some ways the last frontier for the rapidly growing economies of the region. So, there are huge plans for tapping the natural resources: dams, mines, logging, commercial cropping and so on. These plans have huge implications for conservation and sustainable growth of the region. How has the Programme been engaging with some of these issues?

Nakul: Balancing conservation with development is one of the biggest challenges of this era. However, as signatories to the CBD, the Hindu-Kush Himalayan countries are committed to its three broad goals. The Conference of the Parties (COP) to the CBD adopted 'Mountain Biodiversity' as decision VII/27 at its 7th COP meeting in Kuala Lumpur in February 2004 where 14 overarching goals and 98 actions were prescribed as components of programme of work on mountain biodiversity. These goals and actions are guidelines for minimizing the adverse impacts of developmental activities. So far, the eastern Himalayan countries have set aside 15 percent of its geographical area under a protected areas network covering mostly wilderness areas of the region. This figure itself is significantly higher than the 2010 target (10 percent) of CBD. In addition, many of the eastern Himalayan countries and states have taken strides towards eco-friendly developmental activities. For instance, Sikkim has been declared as an eco-tourism destination and organic state. Bhutan has declared 60 percent of its territory to remain under forest cover at all times and continues to practice high value low volume tourism. Rigorous Environmental Impact Assessment for developmental activities and special development packages for mountainous states of India and Grain for Green initiatives in Yunnan, China are both examples of striking a balance between conservation and development.

Q: Doesn't what you say in a way just reinforce old stereotypes: technocratic solutions (or 'current' labels like 'organic') are good, traditional use is bad. For instance you mention slash and burn and people's dependence on forests

as challenges while remaining silent on mega projects like dam building or commercial agriculture in the region. The same state that claims to be 'organic' and an 'ecotourism destination' also made plans for 40 hydropower projects, many in biodiversity significant and sacred places. It has mass tourism in ecologically fragile areas. Similarly, Arunachal has plans for close to 100 small to large projects, all being built to feed the hunger of the heartland for power. There are plans to plant half a million hectares of rubber in NE India. Aren't these the real challenges?

Nakul: Let me reiterate here that conservation does not mean protection of resources only but also their sustainable utilisation. Nature has blessed us with diverse resources which are parts of the ecosystem, ecological processes and more importantly the food web that all organisms depend on. The century old principle of life such as 'struggle for existence' and 'the survival of the fittest' is still valid and can't be changed. In the modern era, there are more competitions among organisms for resources and unfortunately humans take the lion's share of them. Global communities are heading towards 'Sustainable Development' and 'Human Well-Being' but these will have to be realised with the resources we have on this planet. We can't borrow them from another planet. It is a fact that development and well-being can't be achieved by protection of resources only. We have to use the resources sustainably to fulfill demands.

Q: Climate change will likely change the floristic and vegetation composition of the K-complex and impact on the dynamics of wildlife movement, perhaps making the proposed conservation corridors redundant in the long term. Is this a concern? How does the programme mainstream climate change into its TBM strategy?

Nakul: The 4th Assessment Report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 made a strong science-based appeal for actions to mitigate global climate change. It concluded that our planet is warming up. The eastern Himalayas will no doubt be hit hard by the changing climate. The K-complex has already witnessed changes in phenology, birds' migratory patterns and movement of some plant and insect species to higher altitudes.

Our recently completed report on 'Assessment of Climate Change Vulnerability of the Mountain Ecosystems of the Eastern Himalayas' revealed that the people living in the region are highly dependent on natural resources such as agriculture, forest, grassland and snow-capped mountains. Problems associated with modernisation like air pollution, land-use conversion, fragmentation, deforestation and land degradation have already crept into the region. The stress is exacerbated by an ever rising population and erosion of traditional knowledge and practices. The fragile ecosystems of the eastern Himalayas are, therefore, very vulnerable to emerging threats such as climate change.

Global communities are advocating protected areas, corridors and transboundary landscapes as a promising adaptive strategy to address emerging climate change challenges as they are the bastions of natural resources. The corridors also provide options for altitudinal and latitudinal migration for climate sensitive wildlife and vegetations. In addition, a well managed landscape also provides valuable environmental services for human well-being and enhances the resilience of ecosystems that are under various environmental stresses induced by climate change. ICIMOD has been advocating regional cooperation for developing transboundary landscapes with

connectivity between the protected areas as adaptation strategies to climate change. So far, seven critical transboundary landscapes have been identified in terms of their conservation value and vulnerability to climate change. In addition, as a long term strategy, ICIMOD has embarked on introducing a "Transect Approach" for better understanding climate change science and its implications on mountain biodiversity. Interested readers can have more detailed information on this from the International Mountain Biodiversity Conference (<http://www.icimod.org/imbc>) held in Kathmandu in November 2008.

Q: 2010 is an International Year of Biological Diversity, when CBD-COP 10 and 2010 Biodiversity Targets will get heightened global attention. Considering that TBM programme has implemented CBD in the K-complex, what kind of message do you like to take to CBD-COP10 in Nagoya Japan in 2010 and what kind of outcomes would you like to see come out of this high-profile meeting?

Nakul: The CBD Secretariat and many global conservation organisations are engaged in reviewing the progress made so far on meeting the 2010 targets. To do so, CBD has devised indicators and has come up with a new format for 4th Report to be filled in by the Parties to get better understanding of the progress made. However, the Parties to CBD are facing numerous challenges in achieving the 2010 targets, mainly due to complexities in using the set indicators. Some of the indicators are inadequate and need further discussion. A majority of the Parties didn't comply with these indicators when reporting to the Secretariat of CBD and many of the developing countries have limitations in terms of human and financial resources to apply them. Even the simplest indicator of protected area coverage set by CBD COP VII (10 percent of terrestrial area under protected area network) has been contentious because the existing system of protected areas has not always been effectively managed, nor does it adequately represent all ecosystems, habitats and species important for conservation. Though the 'protected area coverage' and 'important land area protected' have been used as indicators which are essential and straightforward, they are not adequate to tell us whether we are 'achieving' the conservation objectives. This is true, as measuring the number and extent of protected areas provides only a one-dimensional indicator of political commitment to biodiversity conservation. It doesn't provide information on a key determinant for meeting global biodiversity targets: 'effectiveness' in conserving biodiversity. Though the COP 7 meeting in 2004 tried to address some of these challenges by devising time-bound targets for the Programme of Work on Protected Areas, we have yet to see its results in the forthcoming reports.

I am curious about the review work and its results, specially the effectiveness of the existing protected areas network that covers 12.5 percent of global terrestrial area in global conservation targets. In addition, I expect a rigorous discussion on the present indicators, their applicability and utility for future course of action.

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