

# Sacred pact

**China, India and Nepal are considering a plan for the coordinated management of the proposed Kailash Sacred Landscape**

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**The source:** The region gives rise to four of Asia's great rivers; Mount Kailash can be seen in the background. *Photo: R. Zomer*

The proposed Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) is shared by three countries—China, India and Nepal—and comprises the remote southwestern portion of the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China and adjacent parts of northwestern Nepal and northern India (see map). The highly diverse and environmentally fragile landscape contains a broad array of bioclimatic zones, rich natural and cultural resources, and a wide range of forest types. It provides essential habitat for large numbers of endemic and endangered species, including large charismatic mammals such as the snow leopard, which are under acute pressure from environmental change and human activities.

## The importance of the KSL

The KSL has huge cultural importance: tens of thousands of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims journey to Mount Kailash every year from India, Nepal and the Tibetan Plateau and other parts of China. It is also increasingly important for tourism: by the end of the decade, for example, Tibet is expecting about 3 million visitors per year.

The KSL has a highly diverse array of endemic species and biomes, including many rare and endangered species, medicinal plants and important bird-breeding areas. It is the source of four of Asia's great rivers—the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Karnali and the Sutlej.

## Sacred territory

Transboundary complexes in the Himalaya, including the proposed Kailash Sacred Landscape



## The benefits of transboundary

There is a clear rationale for increased transboundary cooperation in the management of the area. Under predicted climate change, melting glaciers and drying wetlands could have significant impacts on the hydrological and climatic regimes, the ranges of native species and livestock, the cropping cycle, and the incidence of pests, pathogens and invasive species. Transboundary cooperation could help to alleviate at least some of these impacts.

There is also a risk that the over-extraction of medicinal plants and other timber and non-timber forest products, partly to feed an illegal cross-border trade, could lead to the loss of entire forest ecosystems as well as wild genetic resources important for agrobiodiversity. Transboundary cooperation could help to ensure that the harvesting of such products, and their trade, is done on a sustainable basis. The development of the tourism sector would also benefit from transboundary cooperation—to minimize the unnecessary duplication of infrastructure and to increase the attractiveness of the border region as a tourism destination.



**Part of the landscape:** Villages and households depend heavily on the area's natural resources. *Photo: R. Zomer*

## The KSL Conservation Initiative

The KSL Conservation Initiative was launched in August 2009 to facilitate transboundary ecosystem management approaches for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development through regional cooperation. It is a collaborative effort led by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the United Nations Environment Programme, and regional partners in China, India, and Nepal—ministries and/or government agencies, universities and research institutes, and local NGOs and community-based organizations.

The ambitious aim of the initiative is to promote transboundary biodiversity and cultural conservation, ecosystem management, sustainable development and climate-change adaptation through a regional cooperation



**A hard life:** Rocky terrain, prayer flags and threatened biodiversity are all integral parts of the Kailash landscape. *Photo: R. Zomer*

framework. The basic principles of the framework, which will be signed by the three countries in 2011, are participatory management, equitability, sustainability, partnerships, ecosystem management, a lessons-learned approach and transboundary cooperation.

## A phased approach

The KSL Conservation Initiative is a long-term project, with four phases planned to 2023. The specific objectives of the first, preparatory phase are to enhance cooperation among the regional member countries and to facilitate coordination among the actors and stakeholders.

The first step in bringing the three countries together was a feasibility assessment. It began with a tentative outline of the area. Using common data sets and georeferencing tools, each country then delineated the boundary of the landscape within its territory. The three boundaries were merged to produce a contiguous landscape boundary for the KSL. Delineated in this way, the KSL covers 3.1 million hectares, 42% in Nepal, 23% in India and 35% in China. The feasibility assessment also included a socioeconomic assessment, a policy review and the identification of conservation needs and gaps. We are now starting work on a conservation strategy, which will form the basis of future activities in the landscape aimed at biodiversity conservation. A comprehensive, long-term environmental monitoring plan will also be developed.