

KAILASH SACRED LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

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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

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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>.

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