

Eco-Tourism for Sustainable Development in the Kailash Sacred Landscape

The Kailash Sacred Landscape

The Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) includes the remote southwestern part of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, together with adjacent parts of northwestern Nepal and India. It is a global 'cultural hotspot', with a deep and rich cultural diversity that is now threatened by the impacts of poverty, globalisation, environmental change, and unregulated development. The greater Mt Kailash area represents a sacred landscape significant to over a billion people in Asia and around the globe, and considered holy by at least five religions – Hindu, Buddhist, Bon Po, Jain, and Sikh. Tens of thousands of religious and spiritual pilgrims and tourists from around the world undertake the arduous journey to this sacred mountain each year, travelling primarily through India, Nepal, and the Tibetan Plateau.

Limited livelihood options for poor communities throughout the region feed a cycle of resource degradation and widespread poverty. Population growth, increasing urbanisation, unregulated tourism development, extensive poorly managed subsistence activities, as well as climate change, all contribute to the stresses on the natural environment and the cultural landscape of the greater Mt Kailash region. The pressures on the resource base threaten the irreplaceable cultural heritage of this vast mountain region of unparalleled beauty, and ecological, cultural, and religious significance. Mechanisms are urgently required for maintaining and enhancing essential ecosystem goods and services, and the cultural integrity of the sacred geography of this region, if local livelihood subsistence strategies and tourism growth are to be balanced with environmental conservation.



Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative Project

The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative (KSLCI) is a collaborative effort among ICIMOD, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and partners in China, India, and Nepal the three countries. It was initiated through an extensive consultative process which started in July 2009. The Conservation Initiative is engaging regional, national, and local partners and other stakeholders in a consultative process aimed at facilitating a transboundary, integrated approach to sustainable development and conservation. Integrated eco-system 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 upon which to build a regional conservation framework and implementation strategy, leading to the development of a Regional Cooperation Framework (RCF) for conservation and sustainable development in the Kailash region. This 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.

Strengthening Initiative for the KSLCI

In 2010, ICIMOD received a grant from German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) to strengthen the overall KSLCI initiative, to run concurrently with the preparatory phase of the KSLCI. The overall objective of the Strengthening Project is to improve understanding of environmental change within the Kailash Landscape, and to identify and develop alternative livelihood strategies with enhanced socio-ecological resilience for mountain communities for climate change adaptation. One of the key outcomes envisioned is an analysis of the potential of inclusive eco-tourism as a strategy for adapting to climate change in the Landscape. This strategy will be integrated and mainstreamed into the regional cooperation framework, and serve as a guideline for further developing and supporting inclusive eco-tourism for sustainable development, poverty reduction, and heritage conservation in the Landscape.



Lead Institutions

- **China:** Institute of Geographical Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences
 - **India:** G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development
 - **Nepal:** Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, Government of Nepal
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Tourism Development in the Mt. Kailash Region

The Kailash Sacred Landscape already attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists annually; now various infrastructure developments are expected to result in a rapid increase in tourism in the coming years. A new airport, Ali Kunsha, is under construction near Mt Kailash and is planned to be operational from late 2010. In 2004, 4 million tourists visited the thinly populated Tibet Autonomous region, greatly outnumbering its 2.8 million people, and a 60% increase compared to the previous year. The opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006 has brought an additional 1.5 million tourists annually into Tibet AR and this is likely to increase. The construction of the Qinghai-Tibet highway, and an associated network of roads (e.g., Sichuan-Tibet, Xinjiang-Tibet, Yunnan-Tibet and China-Nepal roads), is expected to further contribute to the substantial increase in visitor numbers, increasing the strain on the fragile environment. This rapid increase in visitor numbers further underlines the necessity for developing mechanisms that maintain and enhance essential ecosystem services and the cultural integrity of the sacred geography of the region.

At present the region offers few alternative livelihood options to complement the current subsistence-based practices. Thus there is a real potential to promote eco-tourism as a strategy for adaptation to climate and other types of change, while encouraging tourists, communities, industry, and policy makers to conserve the fragile environment and the cultural integrity of the Landscape. Tapping the growth in the tourism market by supporting responsible eco-tourism development could be an effective mechanism to simultaneously enhance livelihood development, sustainable development, and heritage conservation in the region. Promotion of tourism must be attuned to the fragilities of the environmental and cultural landscape, and deliberately linked to the development needs of the mountain communities, to minimise adverse impacts on the integrity of the Landscape region. The ultimate success of ecotourism development as an adaptation strategy depends on the prioritisation of strategies that minimise the risks of potentially negative impacts, while maximising the potential benefits in terms of heritage conservation and sustainable mountain development.



collaboration with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)

- **Photo monitoring:** documenting the most important visual changes in the landscape that affect the tourism potential and opportunities

The studies are being conducted simultaneously in the three participating countries – China, India, and Nepal. A synthesis study will be prepared and disseminated among partners in the three countries, to highlight

Tourism as an Adaptation Strategy for Climate Change in the Kailash Sacred Landscape

There is only limited information available about tourism in the Kailash Sacred Landscape region. The tourism component of the KSLCI Strengthening Initiative aims to assess and document the potential of eco-tourism as a strategy for livelihood improvement, heritage conservation, and adaptation to climate change. The project is currently focusing on building up a database on eco-tourism in the Landscape region through the collection of primary and secondary data, supplemented or verified by field observations, related to the following components:

- **Strategic tourism planning:** planning and assessing the most dominant tourism development issues and constraints, and identifying strategies to address these
- **Himalayan heritage routes:** identifying and assessing the main heritage sites and routes that would need to be conserved to maintain the integrity of the sacred landscape (in collaboration with ViaStoria)
- **Tourism and climate change:** assessing and documenting the opportunities and risks of eco-tourism development as an adaptation strategy to climate change and other types of change (in



the regional issues and further stimulate regional collaboration. Together, the outcomes of these interrelated studies will form a knowledge base for informed decision making, and prioritisation of responsible eco-tourism strategies that address the environmental, cultural, and economic concerns of the region in an integrated way. These responsible eco-tourism strategies will be integrated and mainstreamed into the overall conservation strategy document, leading to the development of the Regional Cooperation Framework for conservation and sustainable development in the Kailash Sacred Landscape.



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