Himalaya: Mountains of Life

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Himalaya: Mountains of Life

By Kamal Bawa and Sandesh Kadur. Bangalore, India: Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, 2013. 308 pp. US$ 65.00. ISBN 978-1-61584-512-5.

Himalaya: Mountains of Life is a new coffee-table book published by the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Asia's leading environmental nongovernmental organization. Just as a kaleidoscope never ceases to amaze with its grandeur of color and pattern, this 300-page, large-format book, packed with stunning images of landscape, wildlife, and people of the Himalaya, captivates the reader's attention. Accompanied by a website (http://www.himalayabook.com) that captures some of that imagery, the book nicely complements the same authors' book on the Western Ghats (Kadur and Bawa 2005). The focus of the present book is on the Eastern Himalaya, which covers parts of Nepal, Bhutan, and the northeast Indian states of West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. This region, often referred to as the "Third Pole," has some of the highest mountain peaks and largest glaciers in the world. There is, however, enormous variation in altitude. The 7096 km^2 of the tiny state of Sikkim (approximately one-sixth of the area of Switzerland) has an altitudinal gradient from 280 to 8585 masl and hosts many types of vegetation from semi-evergreen forests to alpine meadows. This variety of vegetation types is also home to a disproportionately large number of species, making the Himalaya one of the world's biodiversity hotspots (Conservation International 2013). This biodiversity, however, also faces a variety of anthropogenic threats.

Himalaya: Mountains of Life has a clear message. By showcasing the rich variety of life in the Himalayan mountains, the authors also make the reader aware of threats to a unique natural and cultural heritage that the Himalaya embody. The book entices the reader into the Himalayan landscape by illustrating people's farming practices, the regional network of nature reserves, the rich variety of wildlife, and unique cultural traditions that have evolved over millennia. Each political unit in the Eastern Himalaya—the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Sikkim alongside Bhutan and Nepal—is described, with the authors' gaze shifting in turn from the land to the people, then to the regional history, and finally to the prospects for the region's biodiversity. The photographs help to bring many stories alive: vast snow-capped mountains evoke admiration, indigenous people performing their religious rituals evoke fascination, and the portrayal of some of the world's longest and widest rivers evokes a sense of veneration. Together the images and the information that accompanies them give a feeling of vastness and splendor of this stunningly beautiful part of the world. The portrayal of people in subsequent pages of the book is equally captivating. The images of graceful traditional dances of the Bodo people, fishing by the Apatani, hunting by the Naga, and portraits of the Lepcha and the Nyishi people all give an insight into the way of life in the Himalaya, the harsh environmental conditions that people put up with, and the creative ways they practice for living with nature. One cannot but admire the heritage of nature-culture captured in these photographs.

The book goes on to seduce the reader further with spectacular plant and animal life in the Eastern Himalaya. Both sections are written around impressive images of plants and animals. Plant life includes ferns, conifers, lilies, orchids, balsams, primulas and, of course, rhododendrons. Many of these are popular garden plants in Europe and North America, and to see them in their native habitat leaves no doubt why they were brought back by 18th- and 19th-century explorers and introduced as ornamental plants. The animals of the Eastern Himalaya are as spectacular as the plants but do not have the benefit of being introduced elsewhere in the world as ornamental species, which means that many are threatened in their native habitat. A disproportionately large number of these animal species are endemic, found nowhere else in the world. The list includes a stunning array of invertebrates and vertebrates. The Eastern Himalaya are a heaven for nature enthusiasts, particularly lepidopterists and ornithologists. Fishes, amphibians, and reptiles are not far behind in competing for color with butterflies and birds. Many full-page plates in the book display the splendor of their shape and form. Wild mammals are also depicted in a series of high-quality images. Many of the mammals are endemic and rare and have started to bear the brunt of anthropogenic modification of the Himalayan landscape, which is encroaching upon their habitat and pushing them farther and farther into remote corners of this mountain range. Primates such as golden langur, western hoolock gibbon, and Arunachal macaque are endangered; the Royal Bengal tiger is highly threatened because of the trade in its skin and body parts.

The biodiversity of the Himalaya faces a number of threats that this book highlights. The construction of large dams for hydroelectricity and the consequent construction of roads and buildings make hitherto remote areas habitable, further attracting land clearance, logging, poaching, tourism, and a variety of other activities that transform the natural surroundings. Such infrastructure projects have an indirect effect on biodiversity. Climate change is also troubling the so-called "roof of the world" by increasing its temperature, melting its glaciers, and forcing many species to migrate beyond their current home ranges. Added to this,

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some species are facing increasing pressure from over-harvesting. For example, the caterpillar fungus, *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, which grows in alpine pastures between 3500 and 5000 masl, is considered a tonic and aphrodisiac in traditional Chinese medicine. This expensive commodity is collected by thousands of people in Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet every year in May and June, causing serious concerns for its future. Bawa and Kadur make a number of suggestions for conservation of biodiversity in the Himalaya. One important suggestion is about transboundary conservation. Although political units have strictly enforced boundaries, the biodiversity in the Eastern Himalaya transcends those boundaries. To maintain the color, the pattern, and the dynamism of this kaleidoscope of nature and culture, and to secure its future, the nation states in this region will need to work jointly. *Himalaya: Mountains of Life* makes a persuasive case for safeguarding the future of this unique nature-culture heritage.

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