

Biodiversity Conservation in the Kangchenjunga Landscape

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Biodiversity Conservation in the Kangchenjunga Landscape

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The area surrounding Mount Kangchenjunga in the eastern Himalayas is spread across four countries: Nepal, India, Bhutan, and China. It includes many protected areas—of particular interest to mountain lovers—that are still unexplored. However, these protected areas are islands that are facing degradation through a number of activities, the latest of which is tourism. The pressures on the region range from subsistence agriculture to the extraction of forest products to tourism. The fact that 1.5 million people live in this landscape, with heavy dependence on landscape resources, has resulted in the need for “integrative” and “livelihood-linked” conservation. Because of the four jurisdictions, this region is an obvious candidate for some form of transboundary management or cooperation.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) began a project in 2002 aimed at developing a sustainable approach to transboundary biodiversity management of this landscape. The southern part of this area (excluding China) contains 9 protected areas; one aim of this project was to identify 6 conservation corridors to link these areas. (It is expected that the People's Republic of China will soon be included in

activities.) The present book arose out of the need to identify issues surrounding conservation challenges and actions needed to formulate appropriate and feasible strategies to address them within an area where livelihoods are mainly dependent on natural resources.

The book includes 17 research papers dealing with conservation and development issues within Bhutan, India, and Nepal. The papers are grouped into three sections: biodiversity conservation, socioeconomic and livelihood aspects, and the policy perspective. While the book covers a lot of material, it lacks unity, possibly as it did not result from a conference or some other forum at which the authors could exchange ideas. There is very little internal referencing, so that it appears that authors were unaware of the work being done by others—which leads to repetitiveness when the book is read as a whole. I would have appreciated one good map that put everything in perspective—geography, political boundaries, and the extents of the various reserves and projected corridor areas. A significant omission is any map locating the central massif around which all these are collected—Mount Kangchenjunga.

There is a very broad-brush approach to issues that does not seem to be backed up by in-depth understanding of the biota. For all the good words and intent, care must be taken that, in the shift from a “people exclusionary” approach to “integrative conservation,” the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater; in an initiative aimed at biodiversity, biodiversity should attract some of the attention. The section on botany appears well researched, but fauna do not seem well understood at all. For example, mammal species are listed on p 44, but all are medium to large species; the small terrestrial mammals and bats are not mentioned. Are these actually known? There are no pointers in the papers or the references to a broader understanding of the biodiversity that

needs conserving. Apart from guides to birds (always a well-documented group), the references to fauna are general: the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Red List, or papers on wildlife corridors. There seems to have been little practical input into understanding the extent of biodiversity.

The papers vary in quality and their relevance. While some of the more development-oriented papers reference biodiversity elliptically, one makes no pretense and does not mention the overarching theme at all.

I have a few small points of criticism regarding the production of the book. The general editing appears to have been well done, but a few errors slipped through. For instance, though this is a geographic information system-oriented book, p 22 has latitudes and longitudes that put Nepal very close to the North Pole. The chapters are all prefaced by a photograph—it would have been nice if they had been captioned. This is a small criticism, but, along with the absence of a useful map, the absence of captions does make it difficult to envisage the area and the problems. As such, the book may be restricted in its usefulness to those already in the know. Nevertheless, as a whole, it makes a good attempt to reconcile the real needs and economic aspirations of the inhabitants of a complex landscape with the desire to maintain the functioning of that landscape, not only for their own continued wellbeing but also for the wellbeing of its biodiversity.

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