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RECOGNIZING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KANGCHENJUNGA CONSERVATION AREA AS A POTENTIAL WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTY IN NEPAL

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■ Abstract

The Kangchenjunga Conservation Area in Nepal is a potential World Heritage Site because of its unique characteristics and strategic location. The exceptional altitudinal range (from 1,200 m to 8,586 m at Mt. Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak) within an area of only 2,035 km² has created pristine habitats for flora and fauna. The local people practice a variety of livelihoods, including agriculture, pastoralism, forestry, and trade, resulting in a vibrant cultural tapestry. The human settlements within the area are some of the highest altitude settlements known in the world that adapt traditional systems for coping with a harsh environment. The area holds both challenges and opportunities from conservation and development perspectives. In order to translate challenges into opportunities, there is a need for a more integrated and coordinated approach with multiple-stakeholder participation. The recognition of the area as a World Heritage property can provide a platform to bring stakeholders together to better manage the natural and cultural entities of this "Gift to the Earth."

KEY WORDS: Heritage, Eastern Himalaya, *Larix*, Limbu, Snow leopard

■ 1. Overview

The Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (IUCN Category VI) is a community-managed protected area located in the north-eastern corner of Nepal. It shares borders with the Khangchendzonga National Park (Biosphere reserve) in Sikkim, India, to the east and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), China, to the North (Chaudhary et al. 2015, KCA 2019). The area towards the west is called Papung, which acts as a corridor connecting the Kangchenjunga

Conservation Area (KCA) to another protected area, the Makalu Barun National Park. The KCA lies within the Sacred Himalayan Landscape and Kangchenjunga Landscape and is a crucial link in the chain of transboundary protected areas maintaining contiguous ecosystems across the region (ICIMOD, WCD, GBPNIHESD and RECAST 2017, Bhandari et al. 2018, Gurung et al. 2019).

The KCA covers some 2,035 km² of land in the Taplejung district within the eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot [Fig. 1]. It was established

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in 1997 and handed over to the community for management in 2006. It was declared a “Gift to the Earth” as part of the World Wildlife Fund’s (WWF) Living Planet Campaign by the people of Nepal to the global community in 1997, given its natural and cultural riches (Bhandari et al. 2018).

Over 6,500 people, from 1,257 households, reside in the KCA. The population is dominated by *Limbu*, *Rai*, and *Sherpa* ethnic groups. The conservation area exhibits one of the widest altitudinal ranges of any protected area worldwide.

The extraordinary vertical sweep of over 7 km, from 1,200 m to over 8,586 m at Mt. Kangchenjunga, within an area of only 2,035 km², has created pristine habitats for flora and fauna. The name of the protected area itself was derived after Mt. Kangchenjunga. The area represents high mountain physiographic regions, with 41% of its area covered by rocks and 23% by snow and glaciers. The remaining 36% is covered by forest (16%), shrubland (10%), grassland (9%), agricultural land (0.5%) and lakes (0.1%) (KCA 2019).



Figure 1: Location map of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (Credit: Hem Raj Acharya 2019)

■ 2. Overall significance

The conservation imperative for the KCA comes from its coverage that protects important biological diversity of Eastern Himalaya (see Mittermeier et al. 2004) as well as the people that depend on it for their livelihood (Chaudhary et al. 2015, Bhandari et al. 2018, KCA 2019). One of the oldest monasteries –*Dhiki Chhyoling*– as well as ethnic diversity, cultural practices, rich biodiversity, and diverse wetlands, make the KCA a complete blend of cultural and natural heritage. The tangible and intangible values of the KCA show that the property has the potential to meet the following World Heritage criteria: (iii) exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition which is living; (vi) tangibly associated with living traditions of outstanding universal significance; (vii) exceptional natural beauty; and (x) significant natural habitats for *in-situ* conservation of biological diversity.

Several glacier lakes are the major attraction of the high-Himalayan region. Yangma village (11 households), one of the highest altitude settlements (4,200 m) in Nepal, lies in the KCA (KCA 2019). These places are also the most important tourist destinations.

2.1 Natural values

The complex topography of the KCA harbors important biological diversity with many endemic species from two Global 200 ecoregions of Eastern Himalaya – the Eastern Himalayan Broadleaf and

Conifer Forests and the Eastern Himalayan Alpine Meadows. It is home to protected species such as the Snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), Himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), Musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*) and the Pahare monkey (*Macaca assamensis*). The Snow leopard is a high-Himalayan carnivore, which is considered a flagship species [Fig. 2]. Likewise, the Red panda is an indicator of suitable wildlife habitat and referred to as umbrella species of the temperate zone. The KCA is also an Important Bird Area, which harbors 252 local and migratory bird species, including eight globally threatened species. It also provides a pristine habitat for many threatened and endangered plant species, including the Lauth salla (*Taxus wallichiana*) and Kutki (*Neopicrorhiza scrophulariiflora*). The area also harbors more than twenty species of Rhododendrons, one of the key species from eastern Himalaya (Poudel, Acharya, Uprety, Dhakal, and K.C. 2018). Large and pure stand of *Larix* forest can be found in the KCA.

2.2 Cultural values

Though the population and households are sparsely distributed in the KCA, they represent a mosaic of ethnic groups. The area is primarily the home to the *Limbu* community, belonging to the *Kirat* ethnic group. An old Limbu saying, “*ghar odar ho, ban bhandar ho*” or “the house is a shelter whereas the forest is a storehouse,” indicates how the *Kirat* worldviews see the forest. The ethnocultural fabric of the region is rich in traditional practices



Figure 2: Snow leopard, the flagship species in Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (Credit: Hem Raj Acharya 2016)

and, consequently, the residents of the KCA have been using a vast array of these natural resources in various ways for their subsistence. The religious sites, such as temples, monasteries, and lakes, in the area, attest to the KCA's rich cultural heritage [Fig. 3]. The local people pursue a variety of livelihoods, including agriculture, pastoralism, forestry, and trade, resulting in a vibrant cultural tapestry. The annual cycle of transhumance migration of grazing animals is unique to the landscape [Fig. 4]. People of the area have historically and culturally established close linkages with neighboring countries. Transborder trade and cultural exchanges have been taking place for a long period of time (Chaudhary et al. 2015).



Figure 3: Goddess Pathivara in Taplejung district (Credit: Author 2017)

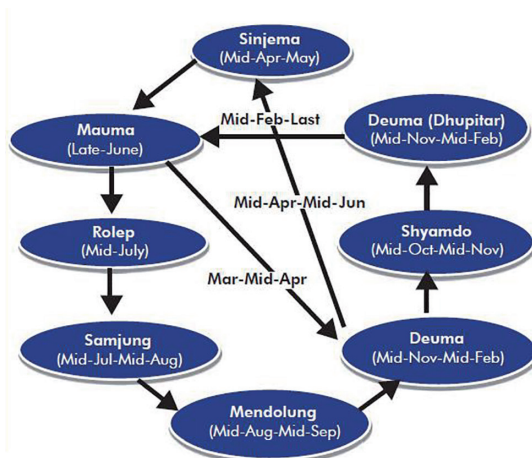


Figure 4: Seasonal grazing pattern of herders in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. Each box represents 'goth/kharka' and time of the stay of cattle in the 'goth'; 'goths' ranging from c3900-4200 m elevation (Source: ECCA-Nepal 2008)

3. Management

3.1 Management authority

Management authority for the KCA is primarily the responsibility of the Nepalese Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), within the Ministry of Forests and Environment.

The ministry endorsed the KCA Management Regulations in 2007. Under these regulations, the KCA Management Council (KCAMC) was formalized and was responsible for the implementation of the approved plan. The KCA Office coordinates between the Council and DNPWC to provide the necessary technical support to the Council, investigate and settle judicial cases regarding the forest and wildlife crime, and implement approved activities.

3.2 Participatory management

The Government of Nepal aims to achieve its conservation and development goals in the KCA through the integration of natural resource conservation with sustainable community development (Amatya, Brown, Sherpa, Shrestha, and Uprety 1995). It aims to achieve this by strengthening local community capacity to improve their socio-economic conditions. Therefore, participatory conservation approaches have been adapted for the area's management. The KCAMC formation has been a significant milestone for institutionalizing a participatory conservation approach in Nepal. The government handed over management of the KCA to the KCAMC in September 2006. Since then, the KCAMC is the highest decision-making body of the KCA and has roles and responsibilities for the management of natural resources, biodiversity conservation, and community development activities. The KCA has set an example and is proof that when communities are empowered to manage their resources, provided with livelihood options linked to biodiversity, and when good governance practices are institutionalized, communities are very likely to become conservation stewards (Bhandari et al. 2018). This model of conservation has been adopted in other parts of Nepal.

The KCAMC implements conservation and management activities through community-based organizations. This includes seven user committees, 26 conservation community forest user groups, 46 user groups, 35 mother groups, five co-operatives, four Snow leopard conservation sub-committees, eight community based anti-poaching units, and six fire control sub-committees (KCA 2019). These community-based organizations are significant assets and provide opportunities in the KCA for its sustainability. Conservation and development partners are supporting the KCA in various ways.

■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

Transboundary illegal wildlife trade, human-wildlife conflict, over-exploitation of medicinal herbs, forest and rangeland degradation, and habitat loss are the major threats to conservation. Likewise, inadequate resources (both financial and human) and capacity within the local authorities are major issues. The government's vision to develop the KCA as a tri-national peace park with China and India did not materialize due to lack of continuous efforts, and also the partners had problems with the connotation of "peace" since there was no conflict. The KCA also provides essential research facilities for the Snow leopard as the international stakeholders on Snow leopard have agreed to establish a Snow leopard research station in the KCA.

The remote location and lack of infrastructure make large areas of the KCA inaccessible. The weather, especially in the upper reaches, is extreme, and the area is highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change (Upriety et al. 2017). High expectations of local people for development and prosperity have impacted the ecosystem's integrity and associated values. Likewise, rapid socio-economic transformation and discouragement of traditional practices, such as shifting cultivation (see Aryal, Kerkhoff, Maskey, and Sherchan 2010), have had negative impacts on nature-culture interfaces. Out-migration, a national phenomenon, is a concern. Sustainable financing for conservation and development activities, including mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, conservation of wildlife habitats, and controlling cross-border illegal wildlife trade, are the current challenges.

The pristine biodiversity and culture, potential sites for promoting ecotourism, the willingness of the community to participate in conservation activities, and the existing community-based management council are some of the major opportunities in the area.

■ 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The KCA contains characteristics that could justify its potential Outstanding Universal Value, and therefore it could be considered for nomination to the World Heritage List. Though it has not been placed yet on Nepal's Tentative List, it potentially meets criteria (iii), (vi), (vii) and (x), which are under the criteria for which the neighboring Khangchendzonga National Park in India was inscribed in 2016. It has maintained contiguous vegetation ecosystems as well as

cultural linkages with China and India. The site has been well-managed, and the stakeholders have been working together for a long time to manage it. Therefore, the stakeholders should work together now in the nomination process. If recognized as a World Heritage Site, it will contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in various ways. The following are some of the recommendations for consideration by the policymakers:

1. The inaccessibility of the region meant that community stewardship would be necessary. The community has been engaged substantially, but this can be further improved by supporting traditional livelihoods and the equitable sharing of benefits.
2. As the area is the blend of nature and culture and the similar adjacent area in India has been declared as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Nepalese government should initiate studies to identify the best available option to protect the uniqueness of the landscape. This could result in Nepal's first mixed heritage site. Along with this, the area could also be designated as a Tri-national Meeting Park. The scientific community and conservationists should advocate and lobby with hands-on information for nominating the site. Fulfilling data gaps, updating current understanding, and inadequate knowledge management should be immediately addressed for proper policy advocacy and formulation.
3. Currently, three parallel discussions can be initiated: first, consider the KCA for World Heritage, second, consider Kangchenjunga Landscape Nepal part as World Heritage and third consider whole Kangchenjunga Landscape that covers parts of Nepal, India, and Bhutan for World Heritage. However, the best option is to go for the KCA as a Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage Property in the World Heritage List, and later it can be considered for transboundary World Heritage Property. This will provide opportunities to work together with Indian counterparts since the Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim has already been inscribed (Wagh 2017). The collaboration between the two countries will be fostered by the fact that both properties meet the same criteria,

and the properties are inseparable from natural and cultural interconnectedness point of view. The lessons from Lake Ohrid in Albania and North Macedonia can be studied for this possibility (UNESCO n.d.). If this can happen, it will be an outstanding example in the Himalayas. The latter two options would take a long time to materialize.

4. The functional integrity of this protected area would also profit from opportunities to engage with neighboring countries such as India and China, which share the broader ecosystem; the most apparent collaboration should be with the Khangchendzonga National Park in India as this protected area is contiguous with the KCA.
5. Legal protection, policy, and management should be progressively reformed and improved to ensure an appropriate balance between the natural, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the KCA.

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