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KENNETH D. CROES

CONSERVING THE KING: INVERTING THE ORIGIN STORY OF THE ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA PROJECT OF NEPAL

In early 1985, King Birendra traveled to the Annapurna region, Nepal's most popular trekking destination, to declare the need to protect the area's environment. Birendra's declaration would result a year later in the establishment of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). The management of ACAP would fall to the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, a non-governmental organization named after the king's father and headed by his brother Gyanendra. This paper argues that the royal family's conspicuous association with ACAP was an attempt to renew a flagging monarchical legitimacy. A generation earlier, Birendra's father, King Mahendra, had staked the legitimacy of Nepalese monarchy on the delivery of development to the people. By the mid-1980s, with Mahendra's development vision largely unrealized, and with a series of palace scandals further undermining the idea of monarchical beneficence, the royal family sought to position itself within the emergent discourse of environmental conservation in the Nepalese Himalaya.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of Nepal's largest protected area, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), begins with what can be approached as a kind of origin story. We usually associate the idea of origin story with mythos, or the belief system of a cultural group. Applying it as an analytical concept to the realm of conservation and development, however, is a way to make strange what would otherwise pass as commonplace. The origin story of ACAP is something that one can encounter in many social locations, including United Nations websites, Nepali school textbooks, international press reports, academic publications on conservation, and tourist guidebooks. ACAP's field staff mention it when instructing the visiting staff of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who come to ACAP for professional training on how to emulate ACAP's widely acknowledged success. Foreign trekkers, too, learn about ACAP's origin story while watching English-language videos about ACAP shown twice daily at ACAP offices. What everyone learns in these different social locations is that ACAP owes its origin to the initiative and beneficence of Nepal's late King Birendra. An article in an anthology devoted to conservation policy puts it this way: "In the spring of

1985 His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev visited the Annapurna region and issued a directive to improve and manage tourism development . . . while safeguarding the environment and natural heritage of the region" (Bunting et al. 1991:165).

According to ACAP's origin story, the project's association with the royal family is a boon to the project, something without which ACAP would not even have been possible, let alone successful. Indeed, ACAP has been an enormous undertaking by any measure: at 7,629 square kilometers, or 5% of Nepal's territory, the Annapurna Conservation Area is the largest protected area in Nepal; it is home to some 130,000 residents; and it is staffed by more than 200 professionals trained in fields such as civil engineering, forestry, conservation biology, business management/tourism, anthropology, and sociology. Many observers believe ACAP would not have succeeded had a Nepali government agency, or worse a private NGO other than the King Mahendra Trust, attempted to undertake it. "ACAP was born with a silver spoon in its mouth," an Indian national working in Nepal in the field of conservation told me, summing up ACAP's manifest success. In a different register, but echoing the point, the article from the conservation policy anthology

quoted above writes: "Despite increasing interest in private approaches to conservation, no such institution [as the King Mahendra Trust] has previously undertaken responsibility for an area of such global importance as Annapurna. The King Mahendra Trust, with its close ties to Nepal's political power structure (HRH Prince Gyanendra is the Chairman) and its organizational flexibility, is well qualified for the task" (Bunting et al. 1991:165).

Repeated and recited in manifold contexts, ACAP's origin story stands in for what was actually a complex process through which ACAP was established. The objective of this paper is to supply some of the complexity missing from ACAP's largely taken-for-granted story. ACAP's origin story maintains that the initiative and continuing patronage of the royal family accounts for ACAP's success. In this paper, I wish to invert this association by asking: How has ACAP's success benefited the royal family? More fundamentally, why would the royal family have a high-profile association with a conservation project at all? I will argue that associating with environmental conservation gave the Nepali royal family opportunities to renew the king's role in national development. A generation earlier, King Birendra's father, Mahendra, had worked to define monarchy, not multiparty democracy, as the more appropriate Nepali institution for guiding Nepal into an uncharted modernity. Mahendra promoted monarchy as the link between Nepal's traditional past and its modern future, and as the beneficent intermediary between local desires for development and international ideas and funding. King Mahendra himself would become Nepal's "father of development." In defining monarchy in these ways, Mahendra staked the legitimacy of post-Rana monarchy on the celebrated vehicle of development. As the disparity between development promises and results widened in the 1970s and 1980s, monarchical legitimacy was undermined. A series of scandals associated with members of the royal family weakened monarchical legitimacy still further. It was in this context of flagging monarchical legitimacy, I argue, that the royal family took up the cause of environmental conservation and ACAP in particular.

"OURS IS A BACKWARD COUNTRY"

To understand why King Mahendra staked the legitimacy of monarchy on development, it is important to recall the political context following the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951. In the immediate post-Rana period, the king and the political parties professed to be united. Both had risked their lives in the uprising against the Ranas and both had therefore earned the moral legitimacy to lead the nation. Moreover, the commitment of both King Tribhuvan and the party leaders to redress the Ranas' deliberate and sustained neglect of the people's welfare gave the king and the parties a common platform from which to launch a new political order: Nepal was to be a "developing nation," a nation in headlong pursuit of *bikas* (development). In the euphoria surrounding the downfall of the Rana regime, Nepal's identity as a developing

nation was full of promise. Broadcasting over Radio Nepal in November 1952, Tribhuvan's heir, Crown Prince Mahendra, could speak of development as something that could be achieved in short order:

[T]he development of the country is a great must. The paucity of resources for the development is but natural in an underdeveloped country like ours. But our man-power is tremendous. If we would take a united vow to engage ourselves in such activities as road-building and canal-digging it should not take long to initiate revolutionary changes in our country (Mahendra 1966:7).

The democratic parties, King Tribhuvan, and Crown Prince Mahendra were agreed, at least initially, that multiparty, parliamentary democracy would be the proper antidote to the tyranny of the past and the only truly effective vehicle for developing the country. All were agreed that within two years, Nepal would adopt a new constitution and that in the new political order the monarchy would reign but not rule.

DEVELOPMENT DEFINED

Consensus, to the extent it existed between the parties and the king in the early post-Rana years, quickly gave way to competition over state power. It was in this context that Mahendra, who ascended the throne in 1955, began to define his monarchy using the rhetoric of development. In the 1950s, Mahendra was certainly aware of the emerging international importance of development. In 1949, U.S. President Harry Truman, in his inaugural address, had laid out a grand plan for the development of the world's "underdeveloped" peoples (Truman 1964 [1949]). At the same time, the international community was establishing the institutions for international aid in the form of United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Development in this era was fast replacing colonialism as the economic and political framework in which rich and poor countries would interact.

Mindful of these trends, King Mahendra made several international trips in the late 1950s—to India, England, the United States, and Japan, and other countries—positioning himself as an intermediary between Nepal and the international community in the cause of national development. Upon returning from his first such trip, to India, in December 1955, Mahendra stated in a speech that during his six-week tour he had "studied attentively the industrial centres, dams, canals, cottage industries, and village development work" (Mahendra 1967:32). He commended the "tremendous accomplishments of India within so short a span after independence" (Mahendra 1967:32). Mahendra thought the same possible for Nepal: "[I]f we could forge ahead in nation-building activity unitedly and unanimously, I do not think it would take us long to make our country prosperous" (Mahendra 1967:32).

King Mahendra's trips abroad worked in tandem with his establishment of a tour commission (*daudaha*) to visit Nepal's various regions to assess local development needs (Joshi and

Rose 1966:185). On his stops in various parts of the country, Mahendra listened to the people as they spoke of their local problems, and he often intervened to expedite government attention to neglected issues (Rose and Scholz 1980:47). For the local Nepalis who gathered to listen to his speeches and to talk with him directly, the experience must have been extraordinary. Although democratic party politicians had already begun to court support among their constituents in just this way—visiting with local people, listening to their problems, and promising redress through development—Mahendra's tours marked the first time a national figure, let alone a king, had made these tours across the entire country. Mahendra's tours likely instilled in the people as never before the optimism that development was possible and that the government, and more specifically the king, had the commitment and wherewithal to bring it about. Mahendra's tour commission may very well have been plotted out as pure political calculation—and party publications saw it that way at the time (Joshi and Rose 1966:252)—but it was politics of a different sort from what the Nepal polity had known before; it was politics in the age of *bikas*.

DEVELOPMENT DEPLOYED: PANCHAYAT RAJ

In December of 1960, just 20 months after the first nationwide election had brought the Nepali Congress party to power, King Mahendra sacked the government, jailed the top party leaders, and suspended the constitution. Mahendra justified his coup on the grounds that not only had the party in power, the Nepali Congress, been ineffective but also that the 10-year “experiment” with parliamentary democracy itself had failed to bring about any significant development (Mahendra 1967:5-9). Mahendra called for a governing system that emerged from the historical, cultural, and material conditions of the Nepali people. Panchayat Raj, which Mahendra would construct over the next three years, would become that system.

Through Panchayat Raj, King Mahendra established what amounted to royal monopolies on the symbolism and organization of development service. In so doing, Mahendra sought to establish a system in which all development works would be associated institutionally, legally, and symbolically with the king. One of the ways King Mahendra brought about the monarchical monopoly on development was through his manipulation of the government bureaucracy (Rose and Scholz 1980:54-6). Mahendra reviewed the bureaucracy, purging it of party loyalists, as one of his first actions as king in 1955. He did so again in 1961. Throughout his reign, from 1955 to 1972, Mahendra used the influx of foreign aid to expand the bureaucracy, providing a professional outlet for the growing number of Nepalis with higher and specialized educations (Hoftun et al. 1999:81).

The monarchy's monopoly over development extended to a ban on development work by private individuals and organizations. Only the bureaucracy and officially recognized organizations such as the “class organizations”

could legitimately engage in public services. Designed as an alternative to political parties, “class organizations” were established at the local, district, and national level for women, laborers, students, children, young persons, peasants, and servicemen. Each class organization was bound by law to confine itself to the proper occupations and problems within its own class—to its own “class interests.” The government disbanded several ad hoc student and women's organizations that formed to carry out specific public works and that failed to affiliate themselves formally with the official class organizations (Joshi and Rose 1966:407). Burghart (2001 [1994]) tells of student groups associated with the underground parties that would undertake the occasional collection of roadside rubbish. The government would invariably arrest them, and thereby the state “preserved its privilege to serve the public. This service was carried out by the king, or persons acting in the name or with the authority of the king” (Burghart 2001 [1994]: 8-9).

Development projects became a means to demonstrate the beneficence of His Majesty's Government. The Village Development Worker (VWD) program of the 1950s and 1960s sent a small but growing elite of educated Nepalis out to the remote corners of the kingdom to assist people in local-level development projects such as drinking water systems, crop irrigation, and school construction. This program was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). John Cool, a USAID worker, reflected in 1962 on one of the effects of the program:

The impact of the Village Development Worker upon the rural people has been much greater than is generally recognized. Ten years ago no one in the village had ever considered that their government had any interest in their development and welfare. Through Village Development they first learned that their government “cared” (quoted in Skerry et al. 1991:46 by Fujikura 1996:302-3).

The monarchy monopolized not only domestic development but also, eventually, the flow of aid from all bilateral, multilateral, and international NGOs. In 1977, the National Social Services Coordination Council was established under the leadership of Queen Aishwarya. In the year of the establishment of the Coordination Council, international aid covered over half Nepal's annual budget (Khadka 1991:699), and this Council was established ostensibly in order to coordinate the inflow of aid and thereby to avoid duplication of effort.

HIS MAJESTY'S MONOPOLY, UNDERMINED

Upon King Mahendra's death in 1972, Crown Prince Birendra inherited both the throne and the Panchayat system. The monarchical monopoly that Mahendra had established over development would become a liability for his heir. By the time that King Birendra and Prince Gyanendra affiliated themselves with the King Mahendra Trust in 1982, the Panchayat system was suffering from a decline in popular legitimacy—due, in

part, to the failure of development. Despite two decades of effort, the prosperity and progress that King Mahendra had promised had failed to materialize. By 1982, Nepal's per capita income had reached only \$100 (Upreti 1983:146). Nepal's population had more than doubled—from 8 million to nearly 20 million—between the end of the Rana regime in 1951 and the mid-1980s (Raepier and Hoftun 1992:76). And the portion of the labor force engaged in agriculture, much of it subsistence-level, remained largely unchanged over the period at 90 percent (Upreti 1983:147).

The poor standing of the royal family among Nepalis in the 1970s and 1980s was exacerbated by a series of rumors and palace scandals, implicating the king's younger brothers, Princes Gyanendra and Dhirendra, and Queen Aishwarya. For one, all three of these members of the royal family were widely viewed as opponents of democracy. When King Birendra conceded, in late 1979, to the political parties' demand for a nationwide referendum on the future of the Panchayat system, many Nepalis believed that Aishwarya, Gyanendra, and Dhirendra tried to convince Birendra to quash the protests through repressive means rather than accede to their demands (Hoftun et al. 1999:93). For their manipulation of politics and politicians behind the scenes, Gyanendra and Dhirendra came to be referred to as "unconstitutional elements" (Hoftun et al. 1999:105) and the "underground gang" (*bhumighat giroh*) (Hoftun et al. 1999:99). Rumors of drug and gold smuggling by the palace were also prevalent during this period (Hoftun 1999:105). Queen Aishwarya was rumored to have used her position as head of the National Social Services Coordination Council to divert a fortune in foreign aid into a Swiss bank account (Brown 1996:125).

The most outrageous royal scandals of the 1980s, however, surrounded the alleged violent political maneuverings of Gyanendra and Dhirendra. Gyanendra, for his part, was thought to be linked to a series of bombings in June 1985 that were meant to disrupt a *satyagraha* (non-violent civil disobedience) by the political parties to protest the ban on party activity. Dhirendra's most notorious scandal allegedly involved an attempted murder of investigative journalist Padam Thakurati, a longstanding critic of the palace (Hoftun et al. 1999:106). An investigation netted Dhirendra's aide de camp, Bharat Gurung, and two other prominent figures (Hoftun et al. 1999:106). Dhirendra was not officially tied to the crime, but after the convictions he renounced his royal privileges, left Nepal, and divorced his wife, the sister of Queen Aishwarya, a move that many interpreted as the palace distancing itself from a wayward royal (Hoftun et al. 1999:106).

NATURALIZING LEGITIMACY

As the developmentalist state floundered, the Nepali royal family undertook to regain legitimacy. I argue that the royal family chose environmental conservation to bolster their legitimacy because of the emerging sense of ecological crisis in Nepal among the international community. And I argue

that they chose the Annapurna region in particular because of its availability for co-optation. Just as King Mahendra had seized on development in an era in which development was ascending, so did his sons choose a cause that had emerged as a great concern to the international community in the previous decade and a half.

"TRAGEDY IN SHANGRI LA"

Western scientists and forestry experts had begun to call attention to problems of subsistence forest use in the Himalayan foothills from the mid 20th century. It was only in the late 1960s and especially the 1970s, however, as the environmental movement was gaining ground in industrialized countries, that a sense of "ecological crisis" in the Himalayan foothills emerged among conservationists, academics, and development workers. Alarm over population growth hit a crescendo with the publication of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* published in 1968. In the early 1970s lowland areas in Bangladesh and India experienced greater than normal flooding, and scientists, environmentalists, and governmental officials took this flooding as proof of the link between Himalayan deforestation and flooding of the Ganges River (Guthman 1997:52).

In 1974, the German Overseas Technical Aid organization sponsored a meeting on "the Himalayan problem," inviting Erik Eckholm, a staff member of the Washington, D.C.-based Worldwatch Institute, to publicize the proceedings (Guthman 1997:55). Eckholm's account of the conference findings appeared first in a 1975 *Science* article, "The Deterioration of Mountain Environments." This was followed a year later by his book-length *Losing Ground: Environmental Stress and World Food Prospects* (1976). In both publications, Eckholm's scope is global but Nepal is presented as a kind of paradigmatic example of the dangers facing all Third World mountain environments: "There is no better place to begin an examination of deteriorating mountain environments than Nepal," (1975:764) Eckholm writes in the *Science* article, opening a section titled "Tragedy in Shangri-La." By decade's end, according to a review by Guthman (1975), Eckholm's publications were cited in the fields of international development, government administration, conservation, and the sciences of conservation biology, ecology, hydrology, and agronomy. The sense of "crisis" in mountain ecology that Eckholm gave voice to had become orthodoxy (Guthman 1997:55).

The perception of ecological crisis in Nepal mobilized a vast legislative and institutional response on the part of Nepal's government in association with international donors throughout the 1970s and beyond. In 1973, Nepal established its Department of Soil and Water Conservation. Also in 1973, the government launched the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Project with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization (IUCN 1993), which led to the establishment of four of Nepal's national parks and

two of its wildlife reserves. The National Forestry Plan of 1976 explicitly recognized the reliance of the majority of Nepal's poor population on forests. And for the first time, Nepal's 1975-1980 five-year plan recognized deforestation as a major development problem. In 1980, Nepal passed the Community Forestry Act, which decentralized authority over the conservation of forests to local communities. The Nepali royal family attempted to position themselves in this emergent discourse of crisis in Nepal's mountain ecology by intervening in a high-profile way, which I turn to in the next section.

CO-OPTING A CHARISMATIC TOPOLOGY

Amid the growing concern about Himalayan ecological crisis, certain regions in Nepal have received more attention and aid than others. In the same way that the animals of greater significance to the wildlife preservation wing of the environmental movement—whales, baby seals, and pandas, for instance—are referred to as “charismatic megafauna” to point up their disproportionate appeal and influence, we might refer to the regions of special importance to the forest and wilderness conservation wing of environmentalism as “charismatic topologies.” I use “topology,” following Brosius, who defines it as “constructions of actual and metaphorical space” (1999:281). “Topologies,” Brosius explains, “lay the groundwork for interventions by defining the political and institutional space of environmental debates, by prescribing certain forms of environmental amelioration, and by identifying the most appropriate agents to undertake such interventions” (1999:281-282). The concept of topology helps us examine the ways that physical environments possess not only physical but also symbolic resources.

Nepal's most famous charismatic topology is Mt. Everest. The late-colonial competition of European nations to be the first to ascend Mt. Everest, the Earth's highest mountain, attracted international attention (Ortner 1999). When the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and the New Zealander Edmund Hillary captured the honor for the British crown in 1953, the world followed the events with rapt attention and Norgay and Hillary were celebrated with enormous fanfare. The Mt. Everest region was designated as Sagarmatha National Park in 1976. Prince Gyanendra played a role in the process leading up to Sagarmatha's establishment, calling for a study by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation on the environmental degradation of the Khumbu region and the policies that would be necessary in a park to address them (Brower 1991:74). The indigenous inhabitants of the area, the Sherpas, have achieved international fame in their own right insofar as their ethnonym has become synonymous with the kind of mountain guiding that made them well known (Adams 1996).

Another such charismatic topology is found in the Annapurna massif, a cluster of high-mountain peaks that ACAP presently encompasses. Like Mt. Everest, the Annapurna region owes its early international reputation to mountaineering. At

8,091 m (26,545 ft), Annapurna I stands as the Earth's tenth highest peak. As with Mt. Everest, summiting Annapurna I was surrounded with late-colonial international competition. When a French expedition reached the summit in 1950, Annapurna I became the world's first peak over 8,000 m to be summited. One of the expedition's participants, Maurice Herzog, published an account of the expedition, *Annapurna*, in 1953. The summit of Annapurna I's south side in 1970, too, was publicized in *Annapurna South Face* by summit team member Chris Bonnington.

A geological feature of the Annapurna massif that has attracted the attention of a large number of foreigners and contributed to the region's status as a charismatic topology is the so-called Annapurna Sanctuary. Located at the headwaters of the Modi Khola River valley, the Sanctuary is a basin—also referred to as an “amphitheater”—formed by towering Himalayan peaks on all sides. The valley approach to the Sanctuary and the basin itself had been used by nearby Gurung villagers as a summer grazing area before trekking tourism began. The first documented entry to the Sanctuary by a western foreigner was in 1956, when Jimmy Roberts was conducting reconnaissance for a British expedition to Machhapuchhre, one of the Annapurna massif's peaks (O'Connor 1989).

Trekking tourism in the Annapurna region arose in a spontaneous rather than planned and regulated way, and soon became viewed as exacerbating the deforestation that rural Nepalis were forced into owing to an expanding population. Talk of protecting the Annapurna region, according to Stevens (1997:244), started as early as the 1960s. The first official proposal came in the form of the Nepal government's Tourism Master Plan of 1972, which identified four charismatic topologies for national park protection: Mt. Everest, Langtang, Chitwan, and Annapurna (HMG Nepal 1972). The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Project conducted by the Nepali government with the assistance of UNDP and FAO helped to establish national parks at the first three of those sites. In 1977, a domestic conservation organization, the Nepal Nature Conservation Society, submitted a formal proposal to the government to make the Annapurna region a “national recreation area,” which would recognize and regulate the growth of tourism for the economic benefit of local people (NNCS 1977, cited in Messerschmidt 1984:7-8). In 1982, the World Pheasant Association proposed its own designation of “Himalayan pheasant reserve” in an attempt to protect the vast diversity of pheasant and other avian species that inhabit the region (Forster and Lelliott 1982: 34, cited in Messerschmidt 1984:8). Karna Sakyā, a prominent Nepali conservationist, lent his support to the calls for protected area status for the Annapurna region beginning in the 1980s (Stevens 1997:244).

In 1984, an American anthropologist, Donald A. Messerschmidt, began to circulate a proposal, titled “The Annapurna Human Resources and Conservation Expedition,” that outlined a comprehensive research project to document

the environmental and cultural status of the Annapurna region in preparation for the establishment of a national park. Messerschmidt's proposal exceeded in comprehensiveness any previous proposal for the region. Messerschmidt proposed to organize research by several academic disciplines and professional fields, including, as he summarizes them in his proposal, "the natural sciences (e.g. wildlife, botany, ornithology, physical anthropology, entomology), the social sciences (anthropology, cultural heritage, ethno-history), human ecology (incl. environmental and regional planning), and economics (including recreation and resource economics)" (1984:ii).

In addition to positioning his proposal as more comprehensive than earlier proposals in terms of the scope of preparatory research, Messerschmidt sought to convey that his proposal was better affiliated. At the time Messerschmidt submitted his proposal, he was on the faculty of the Department of Anthropology at Washington State University, and he writes that he had "available the full resources of that scientific research institution" (1984:Appendix A:3). Messerschmidt demonstrated Nepali government support for his proposal in the form of a letter from Bishwa Upreti, the Director General of HMG's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. Upreti writes: "Our Department has been considering creating a national park in Annapurna and Dhaulagiri region. At the moment, we are in [sic] short of base line information of natural and cultural resources of that area. For this matter, I am happy to see that a full fledged study is planned by Dr. Messerschmidt" (1984:Appendix D). Messerschmidt also mentions the support of "the HMG National Planning Commission and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (through their joint program to develop a National Conservation Strategy for Nepal),...and the King Mahendra Trust for the Conservation of Nature" (1984:Appendix A:1).

Messerschmidt had not yet secured funding for the research envisioned in his proposal, but indicated that "Proposals are being submitted to national and international agencies and research foundations, and to non-governmental and private organizations. Private business is also being approached to assist" (1984:Appendix A:3). And he writes further that "Some prospective funding organizations have shown interest in specific parts of the research or the development components" (1984:Appendix A:3). The proposal appends a letter from the United Nations Development Programme in Nepal, stating that the UNDP could not cover all of the costs for the expedition but that it would be "willing to consider limited funding under an umbrella-project where the major contribution would be borne by other donors under cost-sharing arrangements" (1984:Appendix E).

It is clear that Messerschmidt intended his proposal to convey a sense of momentum and to be a catalyst toward action in the Annapurna region—and it was a catalyst, but in a direction that Messerschmidt did not envision. Within months of when Messerschmidt began circulating his

proposal, King Birendra traveled to the Annapurna region and decreed that the Annapurna region must be studied comprehensively in preparation for the establishment of a protected area there. Birendra traveled to the region as the King of Nepal, and no higher authority in Nepal could have spoken. But King Birendra went to the Annapurna region also as the official patron of the King Mahendra Trust, a potentially rival NGO for the organization of research about the Annapurnas as well as for the subsequent administration of whatever project would result from the research. From the point that King Birendra visited the Annapurna region, it was clear that the matter of conferring some form of protected area status on the Annapurna region was a *fait accompli*, and that it would no longer be in anyone else's hands. Indeed, whereas Messerschmidt claimed the support of the King Mahendra Trust for his research expedition that he proposed in 1984 (Appendix A:1), in 1985 the King Mahendra Trust would conduct its own preparatory research and would formulate its own plan for the conservation of the region.

CONCLUSION

King Birendra's visit to the Annapurna region and his subsequent decree effectively co-opted the momentum to grant some form of protected area status to the Annapurna region that had been set in motion twenty years earlier. Taken as a whole, the series of unsuccessful proposals for protecting the Annapurnas had, in their own way, contributed to the special status of the Annapurna region. Together with the region's international mountaineering history and the steadily increasing arrivals of foreign trekking tourists, the proposals had consolidated the Annapurnas as a charismatic topology, one that possessed not only natural resources for its inhabitants and tourist resources for foreign visitors but also symbolic resources for the organization that would manage both.

Association with environmental conservation and ACAP in particular, I argued here, was a way for the royal family to renew the sense of beneficent monarchy that King Mahendra had established a generation earlier and thereby to shore up monarchical legitimacy. By the time that the royal family associated itself with the cause of environmental conservation, the legitimacy of the Panchayat system and monarchical rule had been weakened by decades of development inertia as well as a series of palace scandals and rumors. The Nepali royal family did not initiate the idea of ecological crisis in the Himalayas but nevertheless took up with it in ways that were intended to address their crisis in legitimacy.

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ENDNOTES

1. This paper draws on doctoral dissertation research carried out in Nepal from October 2000 to January 2002. The research was supported by dissertation research grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Princeton University Council on Regional Studies, the Princeton University Center of International Studies, and by a pre-dissertation fellowship award from the Social Science Research Council.

2. ACAP is the showcase project of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (hereafter King Mahendra Trust). Named in memory of King Mahendra, who reigned from 1955 until his death in 1972, the King Mahendra Trust was established in 1982 with

the royal patronage of Mahendra's first-born son, His Royal Majesty King Birendra. Upon establishment of the King Mahendra Trust, King Birendra's younger brother, then-Royal Highness Prince Gyanendra, became the organization's first chairman of the board of directors. King Birendra and Prince Gyanendra served in these capacities until the murder of King Birendra in June 2001, whereupon Prince Gyanendra ascended the throne and assumed his fallen brother's position as patron of the King Mahendra Trust as well. The new King Gyanendra resigned as the chairman of the King Mahendra Trust's board of directors and appointed his son, Prince Paras, to replace him.

3. His Majesty Mahendra Bir Birkram Shah Dev. Speech at Dhankuta, Nepal. March 1, 1957. Mahendra (1967:72).

4. The first tour commission was dispatched in April 1955, just a month after Mahendra took the throne. Composed mostly of pro-royalists, the first tour commission was criticized by the democratic parties for concerning itself less with the needs of local people than with gauging the strength and influence of the parties outside Kathmandu, the national capital, and Mahendra soon abandoned it (Joshi and Rose 1966:185). Mahendra revived the tour commission

a few months later, however, in January 1956, this time heading up the tour himself.

5. I rely on Hoftun et al.'s (1999) *People, Politics, and Ideology: Democracy and Social Change in Nepal*—a detailed historical account of the politics of the 1952-1995 period—as a source for the rumors and scandals that I cover in this section. My purpose is not to portray the rumors and scandals about the palace as facts but rather as social facts—that is, public perceptions with widespread currency at the time.

6. The certainty that marked the perception of Nepal's ecological crisis in the early 1970s has given way to "uncertainty on a Himalayan scale" (Thomson and Warburton 1985, Thompson et al. 1986), according to some analysts. Thompson and Warburton (1985) and Thompson et al. (1986), for instance, have argued that Nepal's ecological crisis is not primarily due to population growth but to the inherent volatility of mountain environments.

7. In the form of the "Annapurna Conservation Area Project, Nepal, Operational Plan" (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation 1986).

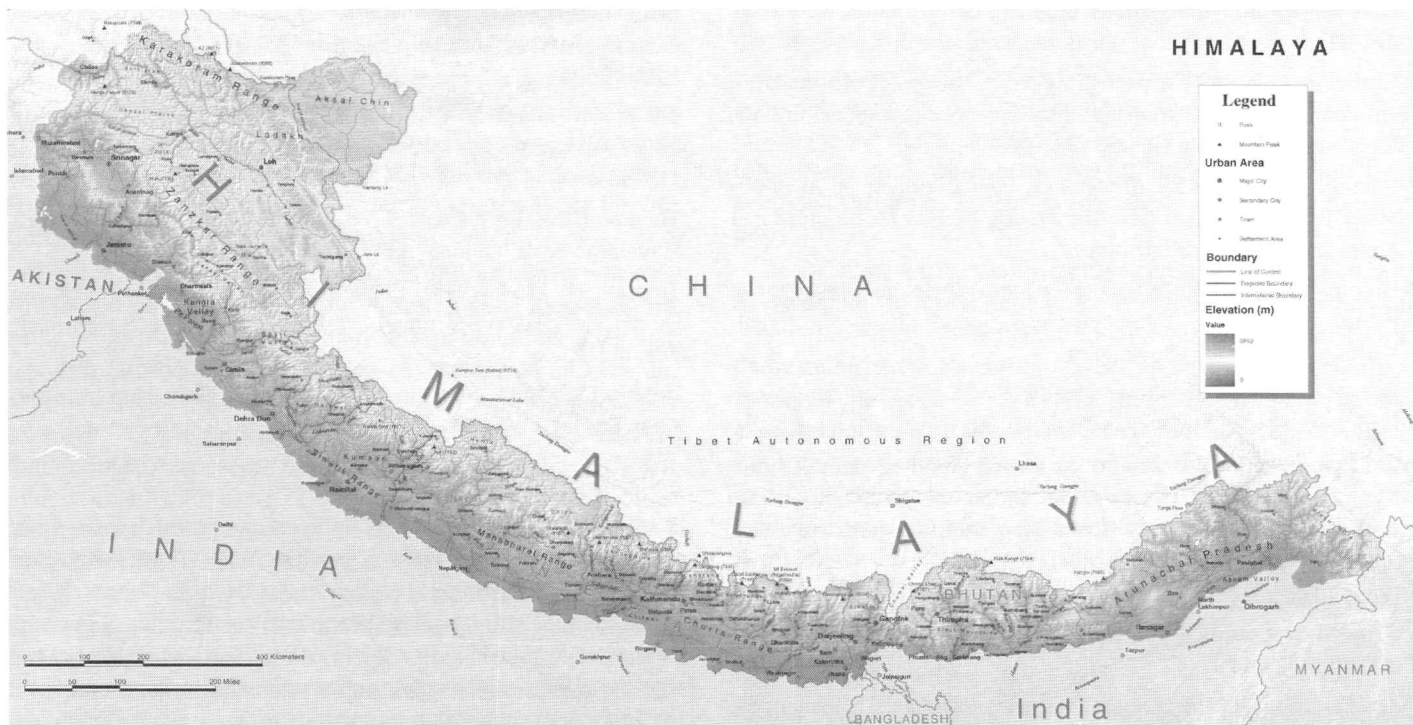


ILLUSTRATION ADAPTED FROM ZURICK AND PACHECO, ILLUSTRATED ATLAS OF THE HIMALAYA