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Between China and Nepal: Trans-Himalayan Trade and the Second Life of Development in Upper Humla

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Abstract

Upper Humla, an area in northwestern Nepal bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region, has lost much of its prosperity over the past five decades. The region's recent history has been shaped by modernization efforts and development initiatives on both sides. However, the author argues that, contrary to the common conception that Communist reform in Tibet dismantled the traditional economic foundation of trade-based Himalayan livelihoods, different forces were at work in the case of upper Humla. Three benevolent development initiatives in public health, wildlife conservation, and community forestry triggered the decline. The "second lives" of successful development, rather than the side effects of modernist planning, are responsible for upper Humla's current predicament.

Keywords: Nepal, Himalaya, trade, Humla, development, wildlife, conservation, tigers, community forestry, salt, iodine deficiency, goiter, public health, modernity, sustainability

Misunderstandings

It was mid morning on a late September day in 2011. There was a queue in front of the public satellite phone in Halji, the largest village in the Limi Valley in the district of Humla. Among the crowd were two staff members of a Nepali NGO. They looked weary and a bit disenchanted, but they were happy to talk. They had traveled from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj; flown to Simikot, the district headquarters of Humla; and walked for seven days to reach the village. They had spent the previous night in thin sleeping bags without tents, braving wind and rain at 4,000 meters above sea level. The purpose of their journey was to introduce local village women to the basics of microcredit management. A microcredit scheme had been established for the region in the previous year, but nobody from Halji had made use of the facility. Thus, this NGO decided to provide training.

These were busy times in Halji. The majority of people had just come back from Purang, the bustling town across the border in western Tibet, where they had spent the summer working on construction sites, doing business, and organizing supplies for the winter. Now, the grass on the edge of the barley fields needed to be cut and carried onto the roofs to dry. As the nights were getting colder, it was time to bring down the yaks from the pastures on the plateau a long day's walk north of the village. Soon the harvest would begin. Nobody could afford to spend two days on a training course in microfinance management. The course seemed especially impractical because it was to be conducted in Nepali, a language many in Halji had difficulty understanding (the language spoken in the valley is Tibetan). Moreover, there was little scope for the type of entrepreneurship that microcredit would facilitate. There were no shops in the village; the campsite where the occasional trekking group stayed was managed by the youth club; and other outside guests were accommodated on a defined rotational basis, in order to make sure that revenue and burden were shared equally between the households.

Despite the feeling that such training would be a waste of time, people feared that it would seem rude to send the two brave men back without giving them a chance to accomplish their mission. After all, not many NGOs send their staff to the remote Limi Valley. A village meeting was called to discuss the issue and decide what to do (figure 1). As a matter of fact, the people of Halji were desperately seeking support from outside—just not in microfinance management. Glacial floods had hit the village each summer for the past five years, devastating fields, destroying houses, and threatening Halji's ancient Rinchenling monastery—the village's spiritual and social center. The monastery was built by the great translator Rinchen Zangpo a thousand years ago and is probably Nepal's oldest Buddhist *gompa*. Despite all the talk about climate change mitigation and cultural preservation in development circles, no development organization had committed itself to supporting the village in this urgent matter.

Development and Its “Second Life”

The episode described above reflects a common complaint in upper Humla as well as in Nepal's high Himalayan areas in general. Not only NGO personnel, but politicians, bureaucrats, and even the higher Maoist cadres are usually high-caste Hindus from the lower hills with little concern or sympathy for the situation in the Himalayan valleys wedged between Nepal and

Tibet. Their advice, policies, and development agendas for upper Humla are often less than helpful. The result is, on the one hand, what political scientist James Scott (2009) would call a “Zomian” strategy: the “highlanders” practice the fine art of not being governed—or at least of not being governed too much. They selectively evade the prejudice, policies, and taxes of the lowland states. On the other hand, they often feel excluded from the benefits of “development.”



Figure 1. Halji, Limi Valley, Nepal. The young village leader after a meeting in which NGO matters were discussed (one in a series of images; see www.theotherimage.com/village-meeting/). All photos in this article were taken by the author in 2011–2012.

Upper Humla is not an isolated refuge of local, embedded communities. Situated at the juncture of ancient trade routes, it has a long tradition of reaching outward. Yet, in lowland imaginations, the Bhotias of upper Humla predominantly figure as the backward hillbillies of one of Nepal’s most remote corners.¹ Remoteness, however, is a relative condition; it depends on where one chooses to locate the center. And, in the case of upper Humla, remoteness is also a relatively recent condition. In the words of a Humla intellectual I interviewed:

Once, we were in the center: Mount Kailash is there, Lake Manasarovar is there, and the caravan system was functioning very well. So, actually, we were in the core area. But after the development began—the so-called development—we became very, very backward.

First and foremost, this quote refers to Mount Kailash as the cosmological axis of the universe and to the distant past when western Tibet was a vibrant center of civilization and an important pathway linking Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent (Petech 1958; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 224–225; Rizvi 1999, 3–21). In addition, however, the quote also resonates with more recent events and encapsulates both a contemporary predicament and a paradoxical diagnosis.

The predicament is that Humla lost much of its prosperity over the past two generations. It turned from a moderately, albeit unevenly, prosperous pathway for trans-Himalayan trade into a remote backwater dependent on the Government of Nepal and the World Food Programme (WFP) to meet subsistence needs. According to the WFP’s Nepal Food Security Monitoring System, Humla faces a severe food crisis, with levels of malnourishment “comparable to [those of] the worst countries in Sub-Saharan Africa” (NeKSAP 2009, 2). In July 2010, almost 75 percent of Humla’s population was classified as “highly food insecure” (WFP 2010, 3).² An analysis of the reasons behind this predicament hints at a paradox: the quote above posits backwardness not as a result of the lack of development, but rather as something associated with its arrival.

The notion of development (*bikas*) is pervasive in Nepal. Foreign aid and development initiative—with their discourses, infrastructures, personnel, career paths, and dependencies—have been enormously influential in the country (see, for example, Bista 1991). Even Nepal’s smallest administrative unit, the Village Development Committee (VCD), puts “development” squarely at the center of its *raison d’être*. More than five thousand NGOs are active in Nepal (figure 2).³ Whether they are invested in improving public health, education, or rural livelihoods (the classical domains of development), or whether their aim is to support street kids, migrant laborers, or trafficking victims (dealing with the negative side effects of “modernity”), they all phrase their agendas in a language of development in which sustainability, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation have long transcended purely technocratic reasoning. Similarly, the idea of development also informs the situation across the border in the Tibet Autonomous Region. China’s Great Western Development initiative (*xibu da kaifa*) brings money, transport infrastructures, jobs, and a Chinese take on conservation and preservation to western Tibet.



Figure 2. More than one hundred NGOs are present in Simikot, the district headquarters of Humla

In brief, upper Humla is surrounded on the north and south by a myriad of development initiatives, yet most of them do not specifically target the area. The way they affect local livelihoods is by tacit implication rather than explicit concern. While upper Humla has remained largely outside the purview of development planning, it has never been decoupled from it. I argue that the current predicament is intrinsically linked to three larger initiatives—the eradication of goiter, wildlife conservation, and community forestry. These initiatives were not designed specifically for upper Humla; their aim was to solve larger problems. Yet they affected local livelihoods in crucial ways.

The problem is not that development is dead or has not yet reached upper Humla. Its sway over daily life is pervasive. However, it is as if development led a parallel or “second” life in these mountain valleys: real, palpable, and obvious for everybody involved, but hidden from view for those who engage in its primary planning. What makes the present case relevant beyond its immediate context is that the initiatives at stake were not technocratic development programs that could be easily dismissed as ill-conceived modernist planning. Arguably, the initiatives that brought about the current predicament were and still are successful in their “primary lives.” However, the ways in which development is experienced in upper Humla is predominantly defined by the second lives of these initiatives.

Trade and Communist Reform

In upper Humla, as in many places along the southern flanks of the Himalayas, prosperity is associated with trade and trade-related activities. Most high-altitude villages are able to produce only one harvest per year, and the yields do not guarantee year-round subsistence. Based on data from Jang, the second largest village in the Limi Valley, social anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein calculated that in 1973–1974 the combined output of pastoral and agricultural activities accounted for only 57 percent of the population’s subsistence requirements (1975, 95). Thus, like most other communities living in the higher valleys close to the Tibetan border, upper Humla is a society of craftspeople, entrepreneurs, and traders as much as it is a society of peasants and herders.

The trans-Himalayan trade that the people of upper Humla traditionally engaged in is a classic example of an exchange system between two ecological zones. The middle and lower regions of Nepal produce a surplus of grain but suffer from a lack of salt. The arid Tibetan Plateau features plenty of natural salt lakes; the pastoralists who live there are, however, in need of grain. The constant demand for grain on one side of the Himalayas and salt on the other side formed the basis of a relatively stable exchange system. This system provided a niche for those specializing in trade, transportation, storage, and distribution, and it facilitated settlement in places that would otherwise have been practically uninhabitable. The salt-grain trade in Humla was also closely coupled with pastoral transhumance. The seasonal migrations of large herds of sheep and goats provided the transport capacity to cross the rugged Himalayan terrain. Each animal carried 10 to 20 pounds of salt or grain in a double-pouched bag strapped to its back.

The traditional caravan system brought to the food-deficient higher valleys not only basic necessities but also ample opportunities for business beyond salt and grain. Wool, pashmina, Tibetan antelope pelts, animal hides, yak tails, medicinal herbs, musk, timber, dyes, spices, yeast, and all kinds of manufactured goods were traded across the Himalayas.

This trade system underwent a thorough transformation in the course of Tibet’s integration into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s. In October 1951, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) marched into Lhasa and completed what is now called, in Chinese Communist Party rhetoric, the “peaceful liberation of Tibet.” A year earlier, in September 1950, the Kingdom of Nepal had signed an agreement with the newly founded PRC, the third article of which stated that “all treaties and documents which existed in the past

between Nepal and China including those between Nepal and the Tibet Region of China are hereby abrogated” (OGBIR 1965, 6). The agreement thus stripped all existing arrangements and customary rights of their legal basis.

Six years later, in September 1956, an “Agreement on Trade and other Related Matters” laid the foundations for new bilateral ties. The agreement granted inhabitants of the border districts a right to cross the border for the purposes of local trade, pilgrimage, and family visits, under the condition that they would return within a month and not travel outside a belt of 30 kilometers to each side of the border. Six commonly used trade routes between Nepal and Tibet were singled out as formal entry-exit points.

In the spring of 1960, a border agreement (OGBIR 1965, 6) and a “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” (Kansakar 2001, Appendix III) were signed between the PRC and the Kingdom of Nepal. These accords stipulated the formal demarcation of a borderline by a joint boundary commission that met four times and, in October 1961, assented to a principle borderline that became officially recognized in the border treaty of 1961. Remaining details were settled over the next two years. Finally, a boundary protocol was signed on January 23, 1963, and integrated into the existing border treaty.

The PRC is generally seen to have taken a lenient stance vis-à-vis Nepal. China ceded an estimated 500 square kilometers of disputed territory to the kingdom (OGBIR 1965, 6). The Limi Valley, which used to pay head tax (*mi khral*) to Tibet but land tax (*sa khral*) to Nepal (Goldstein 1975, 90) was placed unambiguously within the territory of the latter. More importantly for the livelihoods of the communities close to the border, however, the 1963 border protocol put an end to the cross-border use of pastureland. While the Himalayan valleys receive much snow during the winter, the windswept Tibetan Plateau remains largely free of snow, making it possible for yak and Tibetan sheep to survive. Therefore, the traditional winter pastures of many Himalayan communities were located within Tibet. Losing access to these pastures was highly disruptive for agropastoral economies in Nepal’s Himalayas (Goldstein and Messerschmidt 1980; Bauer 2004). In addition, the monopolization of the salt trade and the creation of pastoral communes limited the opportunities of nomads within Tibet to engage in trade (Goldstein and Beall 1990).

One could argue that these modernist development initiatives on the part of Communist China, again by extension rather than by design, were responsible for what has been called the “Himalayan impasse.”⁴ This impasse of the 1960s indeed hit some areas, including the upper

Arun Valley, Dolpo, and Mugu, with full force (see Humphrey 1985; Bauer 2004, 107–132). In Humla, however, the post-1959 transformation was not experienced as an impasse. The salt-grain trade did not collapse, nor did the caravans disappear (figure 3). And unlike in other border areas, access to winter pastures within Tibet was not immediately cut off.⁵ Moreover, the trading communities in Humla used mainly goat and sheep caravans, whose traditional winter grazing grounds were located further down in lower Humla and adjacent districts. Thus, they were not affected by the restrictions on cross-border pastures.

In addition, Humla's Tibetan neighbors remained dependent on grain from Nepal. From the perspective of Beijing in the 1950s, the region of western Tibet bordering Humla, situated more than 1,000 kilometers away from both Lhasa and Kashgar, was among the most inaccessible areas of the entire country. To bring this region under effective control was a challenge. The Chinese began constructing a road from Kashgar to Ngari through the area north of Ladakh.⁶ Work started in 1953 or 1954, and the road reached Gartok, a trade hub in western Tibet, in October 1957 (Arpi 2004, 126–129).



Figure 3. One of the few remaining salt caravans below Yalbang, September 2011. To see a short video clip, visit www.theotherimage.com/salt-traders/.

Because the army personnel and road workers, in addition to the local population, had to be fed, and a famine afflicted large parts of China in the late 1950s and early 1960s, demand for grain remained high. Consequently, caravan trade did not decrease. Austrian ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who visited the area in 1972, witnessed bustling trade fairs in upper Humla; Nepalis were allowed to go to Purang, and Purangbas came down to Yari and Yalbang (1975, 253–256). About Yari, one of the highest villages in Humla, von Fürer-Haimendorf noted that “the inhabitants appear relatively prosperous, and only a few families have to seek outside seasonal work” (1975, 254). Similarly, Goldstein (1975) encountered relative prosperity in the Limi Valley during his field research in the early 1970s. My own findings, based on interviews with Humla traders, corroborate the image of relative prosperity, although inequality between villages and between families within villages was certainly high.

The border demarcation, Communist reforms, and Party State’s modernist development efforts across the border in Tibet affected Humla much less than they did other areas in northern Nepal. It took the three campaigns mentioned above—the eradication of goiter, the fight against wildlife trafficking, and the introduction of community forestry—to dismantle Humla’s economic system. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Fortified Salt

In the early 1960s, the Government of Nepal became aware of the widespread problem of iodine deficiency responsible for the high levels of goiter and cretinism throughout the country (Siva 2010). In 1963, the Nepal Salt Trading Corporation was founded with the explicit objective to make iodized salt available to all citizens of Nepal.⁷ As Tibetan salt was not “fortified” with iodine, India was the only source of industrially processed, iodized salt (figure 4). In 1973, the Government of India offered to help tackle the problem on a larger scale. An agreement was signed and India pledged to assist Nepal in the fight against goiter (CommonLII 1973). The Government of India not only agreed to bear the cost of 100,000 tons of Indian salt per annum—the entire yearly demand of Nepal—but also offered to construct warehouses for storage and to subsidize transport to twenty “inaccessible districts of Nepal” (Karmakar and Pandav 1985). These districts included all the Himalayan valleys bordering Tibet (CommonLII 1973, Annex 1).



Figure 4. A package of fortified salt in a village near the Tibetan border.

The subsidies were comprehensive. “Transportation by rail, road, and air; packing, stamping, and labeling of bags and expenditure on salaries and allowances of liaison officer and staff employed specifically for distribution of iodized salt in inaccessible areas” were all paid for by the Government of India (CommonLII 1973, Article III). The agreement was initially signed for four years (1973–1977) but was continuously extended until 1998. It was renewed again in 2004 and, with the exception of 2008, has been in operation ever since. The last memorandum dates from October 2011 (GON, GOI 2011).

India’s well-meant brotherly gesture directly undermined the profitability of the trans-Himalayan salt-grain trade. Ethnologist Hanna Rauber (1980; 1981) shows the ramifications of Indian salt for a group of nomad salt traders in Humla, and international development scholar Kenneth Bauer (2004, 124) depicts a similar outcome in Dolpo. What did the salt traders do? Some gave up and refocused their efforts on agriculture or other ventures. Others offered their services as contractors for the transport of Indian salt into the hills. Most, however, saw no other

choice than to accept the losses and continued to travel to the Tibetan border and back (see von Furer-Haimendorf 1975, 264). Although less profitable, trade and transhumance still made economic sense, because (1) the food supplies of not only western Tibet but also the traders' own native villages were dependent on the grain brought by caravans from the south, and (2) the seasonal movements of sheep and goat herds had to continue anyway—up to higher elevations in summer and down to the forests of lower Humla and neighboring districts in winter.

There is no question that the goiter control program contributed to better health for many. In fact, iodine deficiency was considered to have been almost eradicated by the end of the 1990s.⁸ There is also no question that the subsidies brought affordable salt to places where trade with Tibet had collapsed and salt had to be imported from India anyway. Furthermore, it can be argued that competition from Indian salt was not new in the Tibetan salt trade. Since at least 1920, cheap Indian salt was readily available in the lower hills of Nepal, and the profitability of Tibetan salt had started to decrease gradually long before the goiter program started. In addition, it is not clear to what degree the salt subsidies actually interfered with the existing trade system. The cheap iodized salt may not have reached all of Nepal, as subsidies may have been diverted on the way. Although there are no studies for the 1970s, a national health and nutrition survey carried out in 2005 revealed, surprisingly, that despite all the efforts and subsidies only 58 percent of Nepal's population had access to iodized salt. "The remainder rely on local rock salt imported from Tibet, which is sold for cooking and other purposes, such as feeding to livestock and food storage, without iodine fortification," the study claimed (Dahal 2009). Despite all of these qualifications, however, there is little doubt that the salt subsidies directly hit the core of the trade system on which local livelihoods were built. In upper Humla, subsidized salt rather than a Himalayan impasse was the harbinger of economic decline.

Save the Tigers

Trans-Himalayan trade was always more diverse than just salt and grain; many a wealthy trader made profits on high-value items. Watches and dyes were much sought after in Tibet until the 1980s, for example. This kind of low-volume, high-value trade was inherently less entangled with the caravan system, and to a certain extent, it helped offset the vanishing profits from the salt trade. During the 1960s and 1970s, the trade in Tibetan antiques—items that were, depending on one's perspective, either saved from destruction during the Cultural Revolution or

stolen from monasteries and people's homes—also constituted a highly profitable yet morally contested business. Most important, however, was probably the trade in wildlife products.

There is a long history of trade in wildlife products, including the skins and bones of leopards and tigers, otter pelts, the fur of Tibetan antelopes, musk pods, bear bile, and the gallstones of buffalo and elephants. Tiger bone is a traditional ingredient in Chinese medicine; musk pods are used for perfume but also—together with bear bile and gallstones—for a variety of formulas in Tibetan medicine. Pieces of otter, tiger, or leopard fur are used to trim traditional festive robes in Tibet, and the down fur of chiru antelopes is used to make *shahtoosh* shawls, for which Kashmiri weavers are famous. All of these items were once legal and licit merchandise. Today, all of them are protected by national and international conservation laws, and their trade is strictly forbidden. The populations of tigers, leopards, snow leopards, Tibetan antelopes, otters, musk deer, and bears have declined sharply over the past century. Estimates suggest that no more five thousand tigers are still alive, down from more than one hundred thousand a century ago (Banks and Newman 2004: 2).

In 1975, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) came into force. The tiger (*Panthera tigris*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) were listed in Annex 1 of the treaty, meaning that international trade in these species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances. The Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*) was added to this list in 1979. Enforcement of the convention however, was initially lax, and trade did not stop. Only in the second half of the 1980s, when the global environmental movement and the idea of biodiversity began to gain traction, and a large number of NGOs started actively campaigning to save endangered species, did governments feel pressured to do more to enforce CITES. Step by step, control along the main trafficking routes increased.

According to several insiders I interviewed, the local boom in wildlife trade began with its more strictly enforced ban in the late 1980s. As control became tighter, the trade shifted to more remote border crossings in northern Burma, Arunachal Pradesh—and Humla. Although known to be illegal, trade in tiger bones or antelope pelts was not widely considered to be “illicit,” to use the distinction proposed by Willem van Schendel and Itty Abraham (2005). It was certainly less frowned upon than the trade in religious artifacts. With the salt trade reduced to a shadow of its former self and Tibetan antiques no longer readily available by the late 1980s, traders felt there was no other option than to tap the region's last remaining asset—its remoteness, which

guaranteed a certain degree of invisibility. In the words of a local trader remembering the 1990s, “Many people did illegal business, but they had no choice.” In addition, the doors were still wide open on the Chinese side. Only hesitantly, and after much domestic and international pressure, did China begin to tighten control of wildlife imports and exports. In 1993, tiger bone was finally removed as a medical ingredient from the official *Chinese Pharmacopoeia*, and the production and distribution of formulas containing tiger bone were outlawed. A report on these measures prepared by the CITES Management Authority of the PRC recalls what this implied:

To save and conserve the global tigers, China banned all trades in tiger bones and rhinoceros horns in 1993, although suffering from an economic loss of four billion US dollars. Implementation of such a trade ban has seriously impacted not only the Chinese traditional culture but also the medicinal treatment and health care of the Chinese people, in particular those in poverty. (CITES PRC 2006, 4)

In the same year, the Changthang Nature Reserve was created, with the explicit purpose of protecting the Tibetan antelope. Henceforth, hunting and trade of pelts were strictly forbidden.⁹ With the harsh penalties for poachers and traders and the rising risk of being caught, the business became all the more lucrative. Around the turn of the millennium, Tibetan antelope pelts were still bartered for tiger bones at the rate of two bags to one (Yonzon 2006). Lhasa allegedly became a center of illegal wildlife trade around this time. Leopard skins were selling for about US\$850 and tiger skins fetched \$10,000. A single kilogram of tiger bones sold for \$500 to \$1,000. Given that the dry bones of an adult tiger weigh up to 15 kilograms, one tiger could command up to \$25,000. Tailor shops in Lhasa had fur-trimmed Tibetan costumes on public display. In October 2003, the skins of 31 tigers, 581 leopards, 778 otters, and 2 lynx were found in a single truck on its way from western Tibet to Lhasa. They had been smuggled in either via Ladakh or Humla. This spectacular seizure was just one among many (Banks and Newman 2004).

The image of the “Tibetans” involved in such activities was difficult to reconcile with the popular stereotype of the Buddhist pacifists in exile. Prasanna Yonzon, CEO of Wildlife Conservation Nepal, writes, for example:

The database on confiscated wildlife goods in India and in Nepal suggests that Tibetans are the primary buyers, as more than 90 percent of traders are from Tibetan communities. Smuggling tiger skins is one of the many interrelated criminal activities. (2006)

However, Yonzon is quick to add, these “Tibetans” usually carried Nepalese or Indian passports and were not to be confused with the “Tibetan exile authorities of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India.” In other words, the “real and good” Tibetans are the proper refugees; the “bad and fake” ones are those with Nepalese citizenship engaging in trans-Himalayan trade.

The issue continued making headlines, and finally the Dalai Lama himself came forward with a strong statement about the importance of wildlife conservation. In January 2006, he appealed to his Tibetan compatriots to stop wearing fur-trimmed robes (Blondeau and Buffetrille 2008, 305), and his words had an immediate and profound effect.¹⁰ There was no longer any doubt that the tiger and antelope business was not just illegal but also illicit. With the Dalai Lama’s intervention, wildlife conservation gained the moral upper hand.

Several people from Humla were caught and convicted to long prison sentences for their involvement in the trade; many more suffered high financial losses. As the risks increased, most traders finally abandoned the business. It has not disappeared, but it has clearly moved further underground since the early years of the new millennium. During my last visit to Humla, in October 2012, a young man turned up at the roadside camp where I was staying. After a few rounds of Chinese liquor, he claimed to be in possession of a couple of rhinoceros horns, which he intended to sell in Purang. Nobody believed him—not because it had just been announced that no rhinoceros had been poached the previous year,¹¹ but because it was considered highly unlikely that anybody still involved in this sort of business would openly brag about it.

Community Forests

While the first two initiatives—focused on public health and wildlife conservation—had arguably little effect on local livelihoods, the third initiative—concerning community forestry—was aimed at both conservation and rural income generation. Ironically, it is this highly lauded initiative that finally rang in the end of the caravan trade.

In 1957, the Government of Nepal decreed the nationalization of all private forests. Official rhetoric justified the step by pointing to increasing forest degradation. At least in part, however,

the decree was directed against the overthrown Rana elite that had ruled Nepal between 1846 and 1951 (Pokharel et al. 2007, 8–9). During the Rana regime, members of the ruling family and important officials were rewarded for their services with forestland, under the so-called *birta* system. Almost one-third of the total forest and cultivated land were under *birta* tenure by 1950, 75 percent of which belonged to members of the Rana family (Joshi 1993, cited in Gautam, Shivakoti, and Webb 2004, 137).

Regardless of the motives behind forest nationalization, the decree triggered anger and controversy not only among the formerly privileged but also among the entire rural population, whose customary use rights were curtailed. Some argue that nationalization effectively destroyed indigenous systems of forest management (cf. Gautam, Shivakoti, and Webb 2004). As the state had no capacity to replace this management system, the jungle became a de facto open-access resource.¹² This, in turn, led to a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968) in the form of extensive deforestation. The Forest Act of 1961 introduced stricter rules and higher penalties for encroachment, but the act failed to have much impact, mainly due to a lack of manpower to enforce it. The newly established Forest Ministry of His Majesty’s Government had only half a dozen trained foresters at its disposal.

Forests also faced increasing pressure in the Terai, the lowlands bordering India. The successful malaria eradication programs of the 1950s—another modernist development initiative—had resulted in a massive migration movement from the hills to the lowland plains. In an attempt to channel and control this movement and to prevent the unauthorized appropriation and clearing of forestland, the government initiated resettlement programs for the people in the hills.¹³ All in all, more than 200,000 hectares of forestland was cleared in the Terai and in the lower foothills, or Siwaliks (Gautam, Shivakoti and Webb 2004, 138). The caravan traders in Humla who used to spend winters in the south were well aware of these developments. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf quotes the headman of the village of Kermi, himself a former trader, who, upon visiting his trade partners and ceremonial friends in Acham District south of Humla some five years previously, was shocked to find the pastures where he used to graze his sheep transformed into cultivated land and much of the forest around them cut down. Even collecting enough wood for the campfire was difficult, he recounted (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 265).

In the 1960s and 1970s, international experts drew a bleak picture of the future. They warned that high birthrates would lead to overpopulation in the hills and further increase pressure

on the forests. Once the forests were cut, the lower areas would suffer from increasing floods and erosion. The most pessimistic scenarios claimed that, unless immediate action was taken, degradation might eventually be irreversible and lead to a total loss of forests by the end of the twentieth century. Some argue, however, that such warnings were not realistic and triggered a “pseudo-crisis” (Ives and Messerli 1989, 208).

Regardless of the accuracy of these prophecies, the fact is that the voice of the international development community had great influence in shaping Nepal’s forestry policy. The idea that the tragedy of the commons could be stopped only by organizing stakeholders gained momentum. In 1978, first trials with participatory forest management began in Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha, two districts north of Kathmandu. The results were promising, and the concept of community forestry became the cornerstone of Nepal’s forestry laws. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS, 1989), the Forest Act (1993), and the Forest Regulation (1995) paved the way to the widespread adoption of the model. Eventually, the system was introduced throughout Nepal (Pokharel et al. 2007).



Figure 5. A herd of sheep coming down a forest, near Sallikhola, Humla, 2012.

Nepal's community forestry is generally celebrated as a showcase achievement in development circles. What is less known are its side effects on the caravan trade in Humla. Community forests are managed by local forest user groups that define duties, regulate benefit sharing, and control access. The system privileges local residents; mobile outside users are considered intruders to be either taxed or expelled. When community forestry finally reached Humla in the second half of the 1990s, the sheep and goat caravans lost their traditional winter grazing grounds. The local forest user groups either obstructed access, demanded prohibitively high grazing fees, or simply expelled the caravans with force. A series of violent confrontations between forest user groups and caravan traders took place in the late 1990s, and most traders gave up and sold their herds. Sheep and goat caravans can still be seen on their way through Humla (figure 5). However, they are much less frequent than before and tend to belong to people with access rights to winter grazing grounds.

Conclusions

Although the collapse of the salt business in the 1970s hit the caravan traders hard, many families continued to have herds, as they were still considered important for two reasons. First, the goats and sheep served as insurance: in difficult times they could be sold. And second, the caravans still brought grain from the south. Now this grain must be flown into Humla or transported down from the Chinese border (figure 6).



Figure 6. A chartered airplane bringing WFP rice to Simikot airport.

In Humla, the first years of the twenty-first century are remembered as a difficult time. The combined side effects of a successful public health initiative to eradicate goiter, the increasing risks in the illegal wildlife trade, and the highly lauded community forestry put many households in a precarious situation. People have reacted with a variety of strategies to the crisis. Some invested in mules and continue to engage in trade with Tibet, since the demand for goods from China—from rice, flour, and alcohol to kitchen utensils, clothes, shoes, cement, and tinned roofs—is growing. Others opened restaurants, found work in local NGOs in Simikot, or tried to establish their own organizations. Closer to the border with China, especially in the Limi Valley, people now rely on seasonal work across the border in Purang. Known as hard and tough laborers, they earn good salaries and buy whatever they need in China. As guests in the “primary” life of China’s Great Western Development strategy, they contribute to, but are also increasingly dependent upon, its success.

Meanwhile, the food crises continue to make headlines. The consensus among development agencies and NGOs is that a combination of factors is responsible for the current situation, including population growth, low agricultural yields, climate change, poor soil fertility, insufficient irrigation, high food prices on the world market, and a series of severe winter droughts since 2006. However, population growth was never been an issue in highland Nepal, low agricultural yields are nothing new, and the region is food deficient even in a good year. No attempt is being made to understand why and how people have survived and even prospered there for centuries. And despite the importance of trans-Himalayan trade in the memories, hopes, and ambitions of local people, I have not found any report that makes the obvious connection between the demise of the caravans and the shortage of rice. Rather, reports keep talking about the remote poor, who suffer from a “lack of access to family planning services,”¹⁴ or argue that “the cost of their hunger remains largely hidden due to their isolation” (NeKSAP 2009, 11). The “second lives” of otherwise successful development initiatives remain out of sight and thus continue to produce misunderstandings.

In Halji, where the two brave men who had walked for seven days were waiting to train local women in microfinance management, a village meeting was called to figure out how to deal with the situation. Finally, a compromise was reached. Two grandmothers and a monk (tacitly extending the program’s eligibility criteria) were sent to attend the training session. The valley’s

community health-care worker was asked to act as translator. The next morning, the group gathered in the health post outside the village, where the two instructors were waiting with flip charts and colorful diagrams.

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Notes

- 1 Bhotia is a generic term for the Tibetan-speaking population in northern Nepal.
- 2 “Highly food insecure” refers to phase 3 on the World Food Programme scale: “Household members have significantly reduced their consumption, calorie and nutrient intake is highly deficient. In addition the household is undertaking irreversible coping mechanisms such as selling productive assets and taking children out of school” (WFP 2010, 3).
- 3 See “NGO Federation of Nepal” website (www.ngofederation.org), accessed September 4, 2013.
- 4 See website for the “International Seminar: The Himalayan Impasse” held in Bonn, Germany, January 28–29, 2013 (www.sfemt.fr/international-seminar-the-himalayan-impasse-bonn-germany-28-29-january-2013), accessed September 4, 2013.
- 5 Limi herders were still able to use one pasture area in Tibet against the payment of a fee known as *tsa rin* (*rtsa rin*). This pasture area, however, was of lesser quality than the areas used before, and the arrangement was temporary—it had to be renegotiated every five years. Goldstein notes that given these uncertainties, by the mid-1970s Limi people were already cautious about further investments into their herds of yak and sheep (Goldstein 1975, 94). Although the agreement was renewed several times, later versions insisted on a reduction of the number of animals. The last agreement expired in 1991. A final grace period of one year was negotiated, during which many herders sold most of their animals.
- 6 This area, known as Aksai Chin, is claimed by India and still disputed. The construction of a Chinese road through Aksai Chin became one of the reasons for the 1962 Sino-Indian War.
- 7 See “Nepal Salt Trading Corporation” website (www.stcnepal.com), accessed September 4, 2013.
- 8 Since then, however, it has again become more acute (Siva 2010).
- 9 The dramatic account of a young Beijing-based journalist, who had accompanied a group of self-proclaimed Tibetan rangers on their mission to stop poachers from killing entire herds of Tibetan antelopes, was instrumental in raising domestic pressure and putting the issue on the Party State’s agenda. The story later became the basis of the award-winning film *Kekexili-Mountain Patrol* (2004).

- 10 In Yushu (Qinghai Province), Tibetans publicly burned their festive costumes. The Chinese authorities intervened and admonished Tibetans to stick to their culture and not listen to the un-Tibetan demands of the “Dalai clique.” The episode triggered an ongoing spectacle of authenticity and Tibetanness, in which “resisting culture” has become a token for real Tibetan identity (Saxer 2012).
- 11 In January 2012, the Forest Ministry of Nepal declared 2011 as successful year in rhinoceros conservation: not a single rhinoceros was poached in Chitwan National Park. However, on a global scale, rhinoceros poaching reached its highest levels in over twenty years (IUCN 2013).
- 12 Some, however, contest this claim. Gilmour (1991) argues that new local forest management systems came into being even after 1957.
- 13 Resettlement, however, can also be explained as a proactive strategy to prevent potential Indian immigrants from settling in Nepal.
- 14 See “Foundation Nepal, Life in Humla” website (www.foundation-nepal.org/content/life-humla), accessed September 4, 2013.

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