

Sacred sites and protected areas: An interplay of place-views

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Introduction

Most people follow and are influenced by some kind of spiritual faith. In a recent WWF/ARC research report (Dudley et al, 2005), we identified two broad ways in which these faiths can in turn influence biodiversity conservation in protected areas. First, through the direct and often very effective protection afforded to wild species in sacred natural sites – groves, lakes and so on – and in semi-natural habitats around religious buildings. And second through their profound impact on our attitudes to protection of the natural world with their philosophy, teachings, investment choices, approaches to land they control and through religious-based management systems such as *himas* in some Islamic countries.

Sacred natural sites are almost certainly the world's oldest form of habitat protection. Although some exist inside official protected areas, many thousands more form a largely unrecognized 'shadow' conservation network throughout the world, which because of their spiritual significance can often be more stringently protected than state-run reserves.

Where the link between sacred sites and official protected areas exists, there are often differing worldviews – or 'place-views' at play. If they are not appropriately managed, these differences in understanding can lead to problems on the ground. But if the spectrum of knowledge is well used, then there are real opportunities to be brought to bear for both biological and cultural diversity.

Periyar Tiger Reserve is nestled in India's undulating South Western Ghats, where Lord Ayappa is said to roam the jungles that engulf Sabarimala temple, one of Hinduism's most popular pilgrimage sites. Two principal government bodies work in the area, the Tiger Reserve's management team and the Travancore Dewaswom Board (TDB), the agency in charge of pilgrimage management. Admittedly, they both view the area quite differently. The Tiger Reserve's main objective is to conserve the biodiversity of the park, whereas the aim of the TDB is to attract even more pilgrims to Sabarimala and improve the facilities and infrastructure for the millions that visit each year. These two objectives are often at odds and provide an interesting illustration of how differing views of place – or 'place-views' can collide and create conflict.

Sacred sites exist in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the world's 'official' protected areas. This means that people have a special regard for hundreds or thousands of protected areas not necessarily because of their importance to biodiversity, but because of their 'less tangible' spiritual values.

Different place-views come into play in practically all protected areas, regardless of their spiritual status, but the difference is particularly poignant in places of sacred

or religious importance. How the traditionally secular, scientific place-view interacts with the indigenous/religious/spiritual place-view in these areas is decisive. It can be a cause of conflict, but can also present an important window of opportunity for both parties. Bridging the gap between these place-views is increasingly being recognized as critical for the good governance of many areas that are currently facing a high degree of threat to biodiversity and to the cultural and spiritual values for which the area is revered.

This chapter draws on many examples of these oft-conflicting place-views in practice and concludes with challenges to faith communities and conservation practitioners to work more closely together to view their 'places' in a much more holistic manner.

Differing place-views on the balance

If you ask 100 people about the same place, you will get 100 different answers. Some may differ only slightly, others radically. Just like everyone has a 'worldview', everyone implicated with a certain place has a 'place-view'. A delineated place is a small version of the world itself – the experience of a people or an individual in the place defines the common or personal perception of that place. Is it the place you live or the place you work? Is it the place you make money from or the place you worship? These questions and many more contribute to the definition of place and make for a wide variety of place-views that can often contradict one another.

Place-views, like people, can be grouped for the sake of argument and so for the purpose of this chapter we can describe a place-view as a consistent (to a varying degree) and integral sense of existence in a place, which provides a framework for generating, sustaining and applying knowledge.²⁵

Unfortunately, in the world of nature conservation and in particular protected areas, accepting and considering the fact that different social categories have different place-views has not always been at the top of the conservation agenda. But now in response to increasing criticism and a dawning realization that this is no longer a viable strategy in so many biologically important places where people live and worship, the strategy is slowly beginning to change.

World Wide Fund for Nature's Statement of Principles on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation

The place-view balance in sacred sites is tipped one way or another for a number of reasons:

- There is no common understanding of sacred places. This may be because these special areas are kept so strictly secret that even protected area staff do not know where they are, for example, Lobeke National Park, Cameroon

²⁵ Adapted from a definition of 'worldview' taken from source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worldview>

- There is no respect for the sacred elements of a site. This may be because of a general lack of understanding or willingness to understand, or due to differences in religious beliefs and tendencies, for example, Kata Tjuta National Park, Australia
- The effects of one place-view are damaging to the objectives of another. This can work both ways. The effects of pilgrimage, for example, can sometimes prove detrimental to the biodiversity values of a protected area, for example, Periyar Tiger Reserve, India. Or the effects of tourism, for example, to sacred places can be detrimental or offensive to the spiritual values of the place, for example, Devil's Tower National Monument, US.

Everything that people in and around protected areas see or think is filtered by their place-view. It is not simply a religious or spiritual perspective for it covers all areas of reality linked to that place. However, when the place is deeply tied to collective reverential sentiment, the links between place and identity become so much stronger. As such, when conflict does arise it can be seen not just as an aggression towards a local community, but as a slight against a people, a culture, a religion and an identity.

The link between sacred sites, faiths and protected areas

There are many links between spiritual traditions and protected areas. Long before the existence of officially protected areas as we now know them, people were protecting their sacred lands. Sacred sites are probably the oldest method of habitat protection and they still form a large and mainly unrecognized network of sanctuaries around the world. Some researchers (Malhotra et al, 2001) suggest that there may be as many sacred sites as there are protected areas. And if expert opinion is to be believed, which indicates the possibility of over 100,000 sacred groves in India alone, then this is certainly the case.²⁶

The links between sacred places and conservation are not restricted to traditional or indigenous belief systems. They in fact occur all over the world and across all faiths, from the 'mainstream' (Palmer, 2003)²⁷ to the localized.

The recent WWF/ARC report by Dudley et al (2005) details 100 protected areas around the world that are important to one or more faiths. Many of these areas are threatened as a result of conflicting place-views. Box 1 summarizes a few pertinent examples of where the spiritual place-view runs up against other place-views resulting in problems both for the biodiversity and the cultural and religious values of the area. These problems are common in areas where sacred sites and protected areas meet the world over.

²⁶ http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/04_02_sacred_groves.html

²⁷ In alphabetical order: Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism.

Box 1 Examples of place-view conflicts

Pacific

Australia

Protected area name and other data: Kata Tjuta National Park (within which lies: Ayers Rock – or Uluru). Declared: 1977; size: 132,566 ha; IUCN category: II and World Heritage Site.

Faith and significance to the faith: Traditional. The traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta are the Anangu Aboriginal people. The park, and in particular the Uluru monolith, is of religious significance to the Aborigines (Mountford and Roberts, 1965). In Aboriginal mythology Uluru is the Intelligent Snake from the universe, who emerged from a rainbow and slithered down to earth; in other traditions it arose suddenly out of a larger sandhill (Roberts and Roberts, 1975). Uluru is depicted by Aborigines as a symbol of fertility. It is shaped like a horseshoe lying on its side. The lower part of the 'U' undulates and is filled with eggs. Thus the figure symbolizes both male and female and is considered to be the father and mother of all forms of life. The Anangu believe that Mount Uluru is hollow, and that it contains an energy source that they call 'Tjukurpa', the 'dream time'. They believe that the area around it is inhabited by ancestral beings whose activities are recorded at many separate sites (Layton, 1989).

Conflict of place-view: The park was returned to Aboriginal management in 1985. Although visitors are asked not to climb the rock, many still do. When this results in injury or death, it is particularly trying for the indigenous hosts as they subsequently observe a 'worrying time'.

This place-view conflict arises from ignorance. Visitors simply don't understand that Uluru for the local people has the same significance as a church or a temple or a mosque. The result is detrimental to the spiritual values of the site.

Pacific

Papua New Guinea

Protected area name and other data: Various, Papua New Guinea; IUCN category: VI.

Faith and significance to the faith: Traditional. Papua New Guinea's population of 5.5 million people live largely in rural areas and most follow a subsistence lifestyle based on farming, hunting and collection of forest and sea produce. More than 50,000 years of human habitation in New Guinea has resulted in a rich and holistic understanding of the natural environment. Each of the country's 820 language groups has developed its own mechanisms for protecting and using its resources and these in turn have fostered the creation of untold thousands of traditional protected areas and protective practices, including:

- Restriction or prevention of gardening, hunting, gathering or general access in the domains of forest spirits or *masalai*;
- Controlled reefs that are recognized as the domain of water spirits;
- Areas that have been restricted to respect the site of past sickness, historic events or to mark the death of an elder;
- Areas where seasonal restrictions on the hunting of species have been installed or where certain animals (such as clan totems) may not be hunted.

The constitution of the modern state of Papua New Guinea recognizes customary ownership of 97 per cent of the land area of the country. Community control of inshore fisheries is also tacitly acknowledged, though legal recognition is much less clear.

Customary protected areas remain powerful in many parts of the country and offer examples of conservation through an informal system (WWF, 2006).

Conflict of place-view: It was revealed during a recent survey of protected areas in Papua New Guinea that logging concessions had been granted over no less than 12 of the 51 protected areas assessed. The communities concerned were not aware of these developments.

The place-views at play in this situation are at totally opposing ends of the spectrum. The community objective is to be able to continue to live, hunt and garden on the traditional lands of their ancestors. The objective of the government departments in question is to make money from the country's natural wealth, in this case timber. Fortunately there is another place-view in the country that has adopted a middle ground. The view of the nature conservationists is that we must start to bridge the gap between place-views to make room for development, spirit and the natural world.

It is hoped that strengthening the protected area system in Papua New Guinea and helping to develop the capacity of local clans to better protect their areas in a climate of increasing threats to the nation's natural resources will respond to the issues raised by conflicting place-views.

The following is a vision for the Transfly ecoregion (Papua New Guinea and Papua, Indonesia) that starts to build the bridges.

We, the peoples of the TransFly, are proud of our land, our stories, our heritage and our natural environment. Our children learn to look after our land through the law of our ancestors, with careful management and by joining hands across borders. May our monsoon forests and savannas continue to teem with birds, our rivers with barramundi and saratoga and our swamps with crocodiles. Let our spirits fill our children's dreams and may we dwell in communities of wealth and beauty.

North America

USA

Protected area name and other data: Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming, USA; America's first declared National Monument, 1906; 545 ha; IUCN category: III

Faith and significance to the faith: Traditional. Native American Indian. Long before western settlers laid eyes on the dramatic monolith now known as Devils Tower, this was sacred land for native American tribes including the Arapaho, Crow, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Lakota and Shoshone.²⁸ Native names for the monolith include Bear's Lair, Tree Rock and Bear's Lodge and in 2005, an initiative to recognize the name Bear's Lodge as an additional designation was thwarted for fear of jeopardizing the tourist trade. There are several traditional legends about the rock. One of these tells of two Sioux girls who were out collecting flowers when they were chased by bears. Taking pity on the girls, the Great Spirit (Supreme Being) made the earth rise up on the spot where they were, leaving the bears clawing down the sides of the rock. This is an area where people still come to worship and pray for their ancestors.

Conflict of place-view: The protected area is managed by the US National Park Service who allowed the Native Americans to come back to worship this place after having been banished completely for many years. But despite this attempt by the Park Service, the conflicts persist. The bears' claw marks in the monolith have made the rock ideal for rock climbers. And of the 400,000 visitors to the area every year, hundreds come to climb it. This

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devils_Tower_National_Monument

activity is of course sacrilegious for those who hold the place sacred. Again the Park Service has attempted to reconcile the differences by instating the 'June voluntary closure' to rock climbers,²⁹ as this is a particularly special time in the Native American calendar. This has apparently reduced the number of climbers by 80 per cent. Efforts of the Park Service however are not always appreciated by the local, non-Native American residents of the area, who also see this place as theirs, who cannot understand the religious significance of the rock, and who often take offence at the prayer bundles left by the Native Americans and at their attempts to reclaim the land.

There are many distinct place-views interacting and conflicting at this site: the Park Service; the local communities; the visitors; the climbers and tour operators; and the Native Americans for whom the place is sacred. All view the place in very different ways and without some major efforts to reconcile these, the conflicts will continue to the detriment both of the place and its spiritual values (McLeod/Earth Island Institute, 2002).

Asia

Japan

Protected area name and other data: Sacred sites and pilgrimage routes in the Kii Mountain Range; declared 2004; size: 495 ha; World Heritage Site, 2004.

Faith and significance to the faith: Shinto and Buddhism. Three sacred sites – Yoshino and Omine, Kumano Sanzan, and Koyasan – are linked by popular pilgrimage routes to the ancient capital cities of Nara and Kyoto.

The sacredness of the site has resulted in important ancient trees and groves being preserved, including: an ancient *Podocarpus nagi* at Kumano Hayatmam Taisha, planted according to legend, in 1159; the Nchi primeval forest, part of the Kumano complex, has been protected since ancient times as a sanctuary; giant trees of up to 500 years old around a cemetery in Koyasan; natural silver fir forests along a pilgrim route, protected since the 15th century; 108 ha of protected *Magnolia sieboldi*; and a group of ancient cedar trees said to be 3,000 years old (ICIMOS, 2004).

Conflict of place-view: 15 million tourists visit the area every year, of which around 26,000 come from outside Japan. Infrastructure for the tourists and pilgrims (car parks, museums and other facilities) has increased accordingly. Evidently the intents and purposes of the hikers differ from those of the pilgrims. And both these place-views differ again from those of the World Heritage and protected area management. Like many protected areas that have to deal with heavy pilgrimage or uncontrolled tourism, there are imminent threats to the biodiversity and sanctity of the places in question. These must be managed carefully, with everyone's interests and place-views taken into proper consideration.

Asia

Cambodia

Protected area name and other data: Mondulkiri Protected Forest, Mondulkiri Province.

Faith and significance to the faith: Traditional. The forests of Mondulkiri used to be part of a logging concession until the country's logging ban in 2002. The indigenous people who live here worship burial forests and spirit forests, where foreigners are rarely allowed to venture. These are places where ancestors dwell and when offence is made to the ancestors by the wrong use or non-respect of the forests, the result is bad luck for the entire village (bad crops, disease and so on). These places are still very much part of the villagers' lives.

²⁹ www.nps.gov/dete/

Worship and offerings are performed regularly (Higgins-Zogib, interviews and personal observations).

Conflict of place-view: Only a few years back (prior to the country's logging ban in 2002), the logging company that was given the concession was very much active in the forests. Although informed of the burial and spirit forests, these were not always respected. The villagers complain of bad luck befalling the village after the forests had been disrespectfully penetrated and disturbed by the loggers. The area is now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries, unlike most of the other protected areas in Cambodia, which are governed by the Ministry of Environment. Sacred places were never taken into consideration in the land-use planning of the area. Now two major international NGOs work in the area, WWF and World Conservation Society. Due to a relatively recent concern by conservation NGOs for local communities, livelihoods and development issues, the indigenous peoples are now consulted and considered partners in conservation. Spirit and burial forests and other sacred natural elements of this protected area are therefore taken into account and respected by them.

Today the spiritual values of a site are still frequently not considered when planning conservation and conservationists (protected area managers, policy-makers, and even NGO staff) often lack the skills or knowledge to deal effectively with sacred sites and the people for whom they are sacred. Yet what we have seen in some of the above examples is that the conservationists often have an important role to play in bridging gaps between conflicting place-views. Herein lies a great opportunity still to be adequately explored.

Success in co-managing for faith and nature is almost always a matter of developing effective and trusting partnerships between the different stakeholders involved. In some of the protected areas detailed above, the conflict is so deeply rooted in history and common sentiment that the gaps in understanding are often very difficult to bridge. But the values of these places are worth that additional effort to ensure at least a common understanding of the whole range of issues.

Endogenous knowledge, spiritual heritage and cultural disintegration

The fact of the matter is that until relatively recently, endogenous knowledge was not taken very seriously by 'conservationists'. It has always been overridden by feelings of superiority of western science and rational thinking. But like life itself, place is more complex than that and the modern method has often not been sufficient to deal with the complexity – particularly when the place in question is a sacred place where people live and worship.

In some ways the indigenous and western scientific methods are not too different. They are both attempts at making some sense out of the nonsensical; of putting some order to the chaos! But whereas western science has always tended to compartmentalize things, indigenous knowledge continues to work on holistic grounds. This is arguably where nature conservation has gone wrong. There has been a general failure to view the cultural and spiritual as an integral part of the natural.

In the eyes of the local people, more than the biological uniqueness, it is the spiritual heritage of place that renders it so special and so important to preserve. People throughout time have been much more inclined to safeguard their natural environment when it is linked with their deep-rooted belief systems. Although it would be unfair, and indeed untrue, to make any kind of sweeping statement that indigenous knowledge for natural resource management is always the right/best way, there are countless cases where endogenous knowledge of natural place and resources has proved to be a welcome addition, if not superior to, scientific conservation measures. This is true, for example, in Aboriginal Australia, where the use of indigenous fire techniques has proved critical not only in terms of fire management but also in terms of encouraging growth of certain useful species and in general maintaining a healthy equilibrium in the landscapes. But are there also examples of the contrary, for example, animals, plants or sites becoming extinct or being destroyed because of certain taboos or religion-based customs. In efforts to address such trends, IDEA in India has collaborated with traditional experts to help them to make the shift from hunting to environmental protection by building on the concept of totem.

In the remote areas of Lachung and Lachen, Sikkim, India, there are indigenous natural resource management systems that have never been documented. Under the Dzumsa system, ruled by the head *Pipon* (head man), the two valley communities of this Eastern Himalayan state keep a tight reign on all of their land and the socio-political and environmental processes and systems that govern it. However, even in these remote parts, the influence of a rapidly modernizing India is increasingly felt in these communities. In Lachung there is a steady out-flux of Lachungpa³⁰ youth to Sikkim's capital, Gangtok, or further a-field, in a bid for new levels of education and employment. While this may be a natural and healthy development, the endogenous systems and knowledge that have remained present through history and resisted the challenge of integrating into the folds of the Maha Bharat (Great India), are slowly starting to decline.

This type of cultural disintegration is happening in many places. From the diminishing influence of the monasteries in the Buddhist world, to the breakdown of aboriginal communities, to a more general world-shift towards a global economy and 'californicationized' aspirations. Because people with strong spiritual beliefs have traditionally been the voluntary protectors and guardians of the natural world, this cultural disintegration is certainly taking its toll on the natural environment.

A 2002 SWOT analysis by UNESCO on the potential role of sacred sites as tools for biodiversity conservation concluded that one of the main threats and weaknesses in this field was cultural change (UNESCO, 2003):

Sacred natural sites are subject to changing value systems and cultures and therefore may 'lose or gain their sacred value' and with this any conservation function that might exist. Modern development and changes of societal systems may significantly reduce their number and integrity. Moreover, transmission of traditional knowledge is collapsing.

³⁰ The people of Lachung are referred to as Lachungpas and the people of Lachen, Lachenpas.

Conversely it may be argued that strengthening endogenous knowledge systems, cultural diversity and spiritual heritage could well contribute considerably to the conservation of biodiversity and natural systems of the planet.

Managing biological and cultural diversity: Some conclusions

Many sacred natural sites are under threat from cultural disintegration and habitat degradation

Sacred sites both within and outside the global protected areas network are increasingly threatened. Cultural breakdown, pressures on land and resources and poor governance together permit deleterious use and are harmful not only to the biodiversity of an area but also to its spiritual values. Therefore conservationists and faith groups have a common goal, which must be further explored.

Identifying the right kind of management system for sacred and protected areas

Bringing a sacred area into a national protected area system can increase protection for the site but sometimes at the expense of its spiritual values. This very much depends on what type of protected area is established.

IUCN/WWF distinguish the following management categories for protected areas:

- Category Ia: *managed mainly for science or wilderness protection* – area of land and/or sea possessing some outstanding or representative ecosystems, geological or physiological features and/or species, available primarily for scientific research and/or environmental monitoring.
- Category Ib: *managed mainly for wilderness protection* – large area of unmodified or slightly modified land and/or sea, retaining its natural characteristics and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed to preserve its natural condition.
- Category II: *managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation* – natural area of land and/or sea designated to (a) protect the ecological integrity of one or more ecosystems for present and future generations, (b) exclude exploitation or occupation inimical to the purposes of designation of the area, and (c) provide a foundation for spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities, all of which must be environmentally and culturally compatible.
- Category III: *managed mainly for conservation of specific natural features* – area containing specific natural or natural/cultural feature(s) of outstanding or unique value because of their inherent rarity, representativeness or aesthetic qualities or cultural significance.
- Category IV: *managed mainly for conservation through management intervention* – area of land and/or sea subject to active intervention for management purposes so as to ensure the maintenance of habitats to meet the requirements of specific species.

- Category V: *managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation or recreation* – area of land, with coast or sea as appropriate, where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity. Safeguarding the integrity of this traditional interaction is vital to the area's protection, maintenance and evolution.
- Category VI: *managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural resources* – area containing predominantly unmodified natural systems, managed to ensure long-term protection and maintenance of biological diversity, while also providing a sustainable flow of natural products and services to meet community needs.

Strictly protected areas or national parks (IUCN categories I and II) that are wholly reliant on state or another central authority management can cause problems. Sometimes people can lose control of their sacred areas or they can become subject to heightened tourism, for example. Most protected area managers hired and trained in the traditional conservation science manner are not prepared to manage natural sites for the needs of faith groups or taught to value and incorporate into their management the other place-views that exist at a particular site. Decisions about whether or not to make a sacred natural site an official protected area must be made on a case-by-case basis.

Other IUCN categories of protected areas, including III, V and VI may be of more relevance. Community conserved areas, for example, fall into category VI and can provide a sound basis for people to live and worship in their traditional lands, while protecting them from external threats.

Endogenous knowledge and strong spiritual belief systems are critical to protect the natural world, both within and outside the official protected area system

Sacred natural sites are important to the conservation of biodiversity. But more than that, the natural voluntary guardians of so many lands and waters are inspired by belief systems, some of which go back thousands of years and remain strong today. Moreover, the influence that faiths have over their followers in terms of how they vote, how they interact with their environment, how they invest and so on, is non-negligible and provides a window of opportunity for conservationists to influence in turn the environmental debate.

Endogenous knowledge systems have always been essential to maintaining a healthy equilibrium in some of the most biodiverse corners of the world. Environmental NGOs such as WWF, IUCN and TNC are increasingly looking to these techniques to inspire their own work and attempting to work with indigenous peoples and local communities for nature conservation.

The conservation community must work in closer collaboration with faith groups at all levels

Because there is a common goal in terms of sacred natural sites, conservationists and faith groups must work more closely together to develop a more holistic – and therefore, realistic – view of the landscape.

Capacity needs to be built both within the conservation community in terms of dealing with faith groups and endogenous knowledge systems, and within the faith groups in terms of conservation and dealing with external threats. Collaboration with, joint studies and planning exercises of conservation groups with traditional spiritual leaders could be a key. Also traditional spirituality is dynamic and is changing in response to experiences. If conservation groups prove to be an asset for spiritual leaders, they may be prepared to learn, deal and strategize together. Lastly, trusting partnerships are what will make the difference. There are already some good role-models to follow here.³¹

Conservation groups can often be the facilitators for change in places where different place-views conflict

We have seen that bridging the gaps between some of the extreme place-views that exist can be an important role for conservation groups and traditional spiritual leaders can be facilitators for change in conservation groups. To conclude we can consider a quote from Phil Sullivan, Aboriginal Heritage Officer, National Parks and Wildlife Service, New South Wales, Australia: 'The "natural" and "cultural" heritage of National parks is not separate. This is an artificial white-fella separation. They are still boxing the whole into sections; we need to integrate management into a holistic view of the landscape'.

If conservationists are to be truly relevant in a protected area or landscape, if they are to really engage local stakeholders, and if they are to respect the rights of indigenous peoples, different faith groups and cultures, then they must learn to understand the environment as others understand it. They must, as Phil Sullivan puts it, move away from the 'white-fella separation' and think holistically about all the values of an area – the tangible and the not-so-tangible.

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³¹ For example, Kanchenjunga Conservation Area success in Nepal. See for further details: http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/asia_pacific/where/nepal/news/index.cfm?uNewsID=81140

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