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Information Document: Evaluations of Shey-Phoksundo National Park (Nepal) by IUCN
and ICOMOS

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

SHEY-PHOKSUNDO NATIONAL PARK (NEPAL)

1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) **IUCN/WCMC Data sheet** (16 references).
- ii) **Additional literature consulted:** UNDP. 1998. **Ecoregional Cooperation for Biodiversity Conservation in the Himalaya**. 396p; Gurung, H. 1980. **Vignettes of Nepal**. Sahayagi Press; Anon. 2000. Proceedings of Himalayan Biodiversity Prioritisation Workshop. Dec. 1999. Kathmandu, in press; norwell, K and P. Jackson. 1996. **Wild Cats**. Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan. IUCN/SSC; IUCN. 1998. Regional Action Plan for Protected Areas in South Asia. 32p; IUCN/WWF. 1995. **Centres of Plant Diversity** Vol.2; WWF. 1997, **The Global 200**; WCMC. 2000. Global Overview of Protected Areas on the World Heritage List of Particular Importance for Biodiversity. Draft; Governments of Nepal and Netherlands. 1995. Biodiversity Profile of the High Mountains and High Himal Physiographic Zones. Technical Pub. 14. Euroconsult; Valli, E. and D. Summers. 1986. **Dolpo – Hidden Land of the Himalayas**. Aperature.
- iii) **Consultations:** 8 external reviewers, Nepal Government officials, WWF field staff, IUCN Nepal office.
- iv) **Field visit:** Jim Thorsell, P. Juurand, and Nilan Cooray (ICOMOS). September. 2000.

2. SUMMARY OF NATURAL VALUES

Shey Phoksundo National Park (SPNP) is located in the Dolpo region of western Nepal bordering on the Tibetan Autonomous region of China. At 355,500ha, it is Nepal's largest national park. A buffer zone of 123,361ha exists around the park which also covers 4 villages within the park as enclaves. The physiography of one-third of the park area is high, rugged Himalayan mountains rising to 6883m at Mount Kanjiroba. The landscape in the remainder of the SPNP consists of high gently undulating hills merging into the Tibetan Plateau and steppe. The park protects the eastern portion of the Karnali River watershed and is located in a transition zone between the eastern and western Himalayas. A major physical feature is the Phoksundo lake, a glacially dammed, oligotrophic body of water in the southern section of the park. The predominant ecosystem in the trans-Himalayan region is treeless, dry, high altitude cushion-plant and shrub formations. Xerophytic mat vegetation covers 20% of the park while 17% is glaciers, snow and rock. Less than 5% of the park is forested, principally along river valleys on the south flanks of the Himalayas. Thirty-two species of mammals occur, notably a good population of the threatened snow leopard and its main prey, the blue sheep. Almost 200 species of birds have been recorded. SPNP is also inhabited by 3144 people with a transhumant pastoral way of life. There are numerous cultural artifacts including 24 monasteries and hundreds of "chortens" as symbols of the Bonpo religion of the people of Dolpo. There are no roads in the park and tourism is limited to some 500 trekkers per year.

3. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Almost 300 protected areas have been established in the Himalayan Highlands Biogeographic Province which includes portions of Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. Two natural World Heritage sites exist in this region (Nanda Devi and Sagarmatha National Parks) and a third (Central Karakorum National Parks) has been deferred. These two existing and one proposed sites have substantially higher scenic features including high mountain peaks and glaciers, but SPNP, located in the trans-Himalayan zone, contains more habitats typical of the Tibetan steppe and trans-Himal region. There are other protected areas in China that have much greater expanses of the Tibetan rangeland ecosystems notably the Chang Tang Wildlife Reserve in Tibet as well as other reserves in Qomolangma, Tashkorgan, Arjin Shan and the Wild Yak Valley in the Kunlun Mountains. There are several comparable trans-Himalayan sites in Ladakh and Zaskar in India but information on their legal status is not available. Another site with similar values is Sepu Kangri (6956m) in the Nyeuchen Tranglha range in Tibet with

its sacred lake and Bon monasteries. In this regional context then, SPNP is distinctive as it is in an intermediate position between the high mountains of the greater Himalayas and the high, dry hills of the Tibetan steppe, although it does not rate as one of the most outstanding sites of either region.

Within Nepal, the SPNP is known as one of the least disturbed protected areas compared to the nearby Annapurna Conservation Area (100,000 local residents) and Sagarmatha (3,500 local residents), though it is not in the relatively pristine condition of Nanda Devi World Heritage site in India. Although SPNP has the distinctive feature of Phoksundo Lake, it does not have other outstanding natural features such as the Kali Gandaki gorge in the neighbouring valley of Mustang. Indeed, several reviewers have noted the importance of this gorge as a faunal divide as well as outlining other natural values of Mustang which are not found in SPNP (argali sheep, Tibetan wild ass, endemic butterflies).

Under WWF's Global 200 programme, SPNP falls within two ecoregions of the Western Himalaya – the subalpine conifer forests and the Alpine shrub/meadow. A total of 38 protected areas occur in these two ecoregions. Results of a biodiversity prioritisation workshop on these sites are expected in 2001.

One of the main natural features on which the nomination of SPNP rests is its importance for snow leopard conservation. This endangered species is threatened throughout its range which covers 1.8mil.km² in 12 countries in the central Asia/Himalayan region. The total snow leopard population is estimated at 4510 – 7350 with the greatest number found in China, Kyrgystan and Mongolia. Over 100 protected areas have habitat for the species with about half of these with confirmed sightings. One World Heritage site – the Golden Mountains of Altai – has been inscribed partially on the basis of the existence of snow leopard in that area and both the Nanda Devi and Sagarmatha World Heritage sites also record the species. Shey Phoksundo National Park is certainly an important stronghold for the snow leopard but it is one of many key sites in the region which protects this elusive and endangered cat.

4. INTEGRITY

The SPNP was formally gazetted in 1988 and all land with the exception of 1.7% of the area is owned and administered by His Majesty's Government of Nepal. The private land within the park is owned by 4 Village Development Committees and is considered part of the buffer zone of the park which is not a part of the nomination. The impacts of human activity in these villages is, however, evident in their environs in the form of collection of forest products, livestock grazing and medicinal plant harvesting. Poaching of wildlife was common prior to park establishment but is now minimal. With only 500 trekkers in an average year, tourism is not currently a management problem as it is in nearby Annapurna (48,000 annual visitors).

Shey Phoksundo National Park has a draft management plan for the period 1999-2001 which is currently being updated. The park has been the beneficiary of substantial external support from USAID and WWF. It is also one of the focal sites for an ethnobotanical project under the People and Plants Initiative of UNESCO/WWF and Kew. Both the management plan and the existence of these two projects are doing much to address the threats to the park as outlined in the previous paragraph. Further, the park has sufficient staff and budget and good relations with local residents. The recent maoist disturbances in the Dalpo region, however, could cause disruptions in the future.

It is noted that SPNP borders on the Tibetan Autonomous region of China but information on the conservation values and status of the adjoining territory was not available.

In conclusion, the SPNP with its large size and the existence of a buffer zone is an effective conservation unit. Its ecological viability is strengthened by a management framework that is adequately staffed and funded.

5. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

5.1 Cultural Values

As the site is also nominated under cultural criteria, ICOMOS will be providing a separate evaluation on these aspects. IUCN would note that, as with most protected areas in Asia, strong connections exist between culture and nature. Along with the neighbouring Mustang valley, there is a very strong cultural overlay in SPNP which has been noted by reviewers and which will be evident in the report of ICOMOS.

5.2 Regional Biodiversity Assessment

A more systematic evaluation of the regional importance of SPNP will be available when the results of a WWF workshop held in December 1999 on Biodiversity Prioritisation in the Himalaya is published. Preliminary results from this workshop suggest that the area adjacent to SPNP westward to Namja-Changla Pass is an important area for montane ungulates.

6. APPLICATION OF WORLD HERITAGE NATURAL CRITERIA

The nominated site has been proposed for inscription under natural criteria ii, iii and iv:

Criterion (ii): Ecological processes

As SPNP lies in a transition zone between the more humid eastern Himalayas and the drier western Himalayas, as well as the Tibetan Plateau and the main Himalayan chain, it has a mix of species from various geographic regions. It is noted, however, that the Kali Gandaki gorge in Mustang as well as the Sulej Defile in India are also considered faunal divides and that there are other areas that equally display the trans-Himalayan transition zone. The SPNP certainly has high conservation value at the national level for this phenomenon but IUCN does not consider that the nominated site meets this criterion.

Criterion (iii): Superlative natural phenomena or natural beauty and aesthetic importance

The landscape found in SPNP is of high scenic value. The nomination emphasises the two particular features of Crystal Mountain and Lake Phoksundo which indeed are attractive but the case that they are "superlative" was questioned by reviewers. Similarly, the waterfall below Lake Phoksundo and the peaks of the Kanjiroba Himal are of high natural interest but they are surpassed by many other similar features in the region. IUCN thus does not consider that the site meets this criterion.

Criterion (iv): Biodiversity and threatened species

The nomination document focuses on the importance of SPNP for conservation of snow leopard. As indicated in section 3 above, however, the park is but one of many reserves in Asia that also protects this endangered cat and it is difficult to justify this criterion on just this one species. The park also is home to a typical array of other Himalayan species but not the variety and populations found in other Himalayan and central Asian reserves (for example, Chang Tang). The park's vegetation, particularly its ethnobotanical value, is also diverse and of interest but more at the national and regional level than internationally. IUCN does not consider that the nominated site meets this criterion.

In conclusion, IUCN has found this a difficult nomination to assess. The SPNP has many important natural values and the site is effectively managed. The park is clearly significant at the national and regional levels but a clear and convincing case for its importance as a natural site at the global level has not been made. However, the case may be more clear when the results of the regional biodiversity assessment are available next year but at this point IUCN is reluctant to make a definitive final conclusion. Whether a revised nomination taking in part of the area on the adjoining Tibetan side as well as Upper Mustang would be possible is not known. Thus, although the case for listing SPNP as a World Heritage site on natural criterion has not been made, further information in 2001 may alter this assessment.

7. RECOMMENDATION

IUCN recognises Shey Phoksundo National Park as an important park in the Himalayan regional context but concludes that the case for inscription has not yet been made. IUCN suggests that the Bureau **defer** a decision on the nomination for reasons given in the above paragraph.

ICOMOS TECHNICAL EVALUATION

Shey Phoksundo (Nepal)

No 992

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Shey Phoksundo National Park
<i>Location</i>	Dolpo and Mugu Districts, Mid-Western Development Region
<i>State Party</i>	Nepal
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1999

Justification by State Party

Note 1 This property is nominated as a *mixed site*, under the natural and the cultural criteria. This evaluation will deal solely with the cultural values, and the natural values will be covered in the IUCN evaluation.

Note 2 The text below is an abridged version of the justification in the nomination dossier, dealing only with the cultural aspects of the nomination.

Shey Phoksundo National Park constitutes a thriving paragon of an ancient culture associated with the unique biological diversity of the highest terrestrial ecosystem on Earth. Nepal's largest National Park represents a true trans-Himalayan region, largely nestled in the rain-shadow of the Himalayan Range in the Tibetan Plateau of the Palearctic Region. Shey Phoksundo's remote character has not only allowed both its biological and its cultural resources to remain well preserved, but it has also enabled an incomparable and exceptionally intact human ecosystem within the Himalaya to flourish.

The National Park remains a refuge for one of the few pockets of extant Tibetan culture in the Himalaya. Dolpo (the name traditionally used for the area covered by the National Park) is also the living spirit of the Bonpö religion, a precursor to Buddhism; indeed, it is the only surviving intact area where Bonpö still flourishes in peoples' daily lives. The landscape is dotted with the architecture and cultural symbols of pre-Buddhist Bonpö, including distinctive and sacred monasteries such as Shey Gompa, as well as numerous mural paintings, *thangka*, and *chortens*. The residents of Dolpo are a living legacy of the traditional way of life that has evolved over centuries and is still actively evolving. The National Park contains not only one of the highest settlements (Shey, 4480m) engaged in transhumant agro-pastoralism, but also one of the oldest and most exemplary system, since Dolpalis residing in the area since the 10th century have combined this way of life with age-old,

though declining, traditional trading routes to Tibet.

Cultural criteria iii, iv, and v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. It is also a *cultural landscape* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

Dolpo is culturally unique in that it is, according to one commentator, "the last enclave of pure Tibetan culture left on earth." The people of the area are of pure Tibetan stock, with a way of life that cannot be far removed from that of the Ch'ang Tartars from central Asia, the original Tibetans. There are four main ethnic groups – Lama, Baiji, Gurung, and Rokaya – living in nineteen villages that are mostly located on the outskirts of the National Park.

It is also the last remaining region in which the Bonpö religion is practised. This shamanistic religion, with animistic and tantric elements, antedates the imposition of Buddhism by Lhasa kings in the 8th and 9th centuries, and it survives in its purest form and as part of everyday life only in the remote southern part of Dolpo, mostly in the villages of Ringmo and Pungmo. These two villages are closely linked culturally and are recognized as a separate sub-unit. Elsewhere, and particularly in northern Dolpo, Buddhism is the predominant religion.

Transhumance is practised, livestock being taken to mountain pastures in the summer and brought down again during the winter. For example, Ringmo is a summer settlement at 3600m, on the southern bank of Phoksundo Lake. The entire population of Pungmo (thirty households and c 160 inhabitants) spends the winter months (February–May) at the temporary village of Koinre, at a lower altitude. Whilst this is a practical necessity in these harsh climatic conditions, it also has the advantage of allowing the respective ecosystems to recover and ensuring the continuous availability of grazing for livestock. In addition to this pastoral transhumance, crops are cultivated in small fields, particularly *uwa* (a local variety of wheat), maize, and buckwheat, as well as some vegetables.

There are three forms of architecture that are unique to the high Himalaya. The *chorten* (the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit *stupa* or memorial sanctuary) is the purest form of the meditating Buddhist mandala, and there are hundreds of these monuments in Dolpo. They are larger and more complex in form than others in the Himalayan region, and most bear an inscribed Bon mantra instead of the more common Buddhist *Om Mani Padme Hum*. In some places there are strings of *chortens* at the beginning and end of each village and along the trails, so as to separate sacred from profane spaces. Local materials are used – wood, clay, chalk, and rocks – and some are elaborately decorated and contain relics and other ancient artefacts.

There are 24 active *gompas* (monasteries) in the nominated area, both Buddhist and Bonpö, and most of them located in

remote scenic sites. In addition, the remains of many abandoned *gompas* and meditation caves are to be found.

Shey Gumpa is a monastery of the reformist Kagyu Buddhist sect. It is an important place of pilgrimage at the time of the full moon in August, when pilgrims circumambulate the sacred Crystal Mountain, at the foot of which the monastery is located.

Thashung Gumpa, at Phoksundo Lake, was built 900 years ago to conserve wildlife. The head abbot of a nearby monastery requested poachers to refrain from slaughtering musk ox in great quantities, and founded the *gumpa* when they failed to comply. Samling Gumpa is especially important to the Bonpö and a very early foundation. Another important pilgrimage site is Nellahi-Tingnam-So Lake.

The vernacular houses of the villages are timber-framed mud-brick buildings in tight rows. As with the *chortens* and the *gompas*, only local materials are used. Their facades are adorned with pillars, balustrades, and trapezoidal windows, all in wood and painted in various combinations of black, white, and red. The roofs are flat and plastered with a thick mud covering on a birch-bark backing. This form of roofing is appropriate to the steppe landscape of the region, in the rain-shadow of the Himalaya. The roof space provides dry and secure conditions for the storage of foodstuffs and other goods.

There is an age-old tradition of trade in this region, using pack animals (in this case yaks). Locally produced grain and flour, woollen goods, and medicinal plants are bartered by the Dolpali traders in other parts of Nepal (but no longer in Tibet) for salt, tea, rice, milk products, and livestock. This ancient commercial tradition is under threat at the present time as a result of the closure of the frontier with Tibet and the advent of new forms of handling long-distance goods.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Shey Phoksundo was officially designated a National Park in 1984, under the provisions of the 1973 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act.

Management

The whole area is owned by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation of the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation. There are detailed regulations in force to regulate access to the National Park and to provide protection for wildlife and landscapes. Regulations are also in force in the designated buffer zone around the Park.

All the communities within the National Park have formal Community Forest Management Committees; they also have informal pasture management committees. Of equal importance are the traditional institutions based on religious trusts that have been managed the landscape, both built and open, for many generations. This may best be described as a collective spirit of community heritage management. It has recently been strengthened by the creation of schools expressly designed to inculcate respect and reverence for the cultural and natural heritage in the young people.

The Shey Phoksundo National Park is a self-contained entity so far as management is concerned. It has its own administration, headed by the Park Warden, with appropriate

staff at all levels. There has been a deliberate policy in recent years of progressively involving local communities more and more with conservation activities.

The Five-Year Management Plan for Shey Phoksundo National Park 1997-2001 places considerable emphasis on the natural heritage of the Park, but it does contain policies and programmes for the conservation of the cultural heritage, and in particular work programmes for the conservation of three of the most important *gompas*.

Conservation work in the National Park has benefited from considerable assistance, particularly in survey and training programmes, from a number of non-governmental organizations, such as the WWF, and from bilateral aid, notably from the US Department of the Interior by means of USAID programmes.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Conservation as such has only very recently played a role in the life of Shey Phoksundo. It began in the early 1970s with plans to establish a wildlife reserve. So far as the cultural heritage is concerned, the concept of conservation is only now beginning to be introduced. However, the cultural heritage of Dolpo has been conserved using traditional materials and techniques for many generations and without external influences, by virtue of its remoteness.

The ICOMOS mission, while generally approving the level of conservation of the traditional settlements, expressed concern about the conservation of the *chortens* that were visited. The mission also found the re-plastering of the walls in the *gompas* visited and the restoration of the wall paintings not to be carried out to an acceptable level.

Authenticity

Because of the reasons cited above under "Conservation history," the nominated area may be considered to have retained a substantial degree of authenticity and integrity. This was confirmed by the ICOMOS expert mission, with the exception of the use of synthetic paints in the restoration of some of the mural paintings in the *gompas*. The management policies now in force should ensure that this continues in the future so far as the vernacular buildings are concerned, but as greater care must be exercised in the choice of paints for the restoration of paintings.

However, the authenticity of the settings of the traditional villages is badly disrupted by the location and style of some of the official buildings (see "ICOMOS recommendations for future action" below). The same criticism applies also to the camping site at Ringmo, which occupies a site close to the lake and adversely affects the important relationship between the settlement and the major natural feature.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

For climatic and logistic reasons the joint ICOMOS-IUCN expert mission was not able to visit this property until October 2000.

Qualities

Shey Phoksundo National Park contains a remarkable culture of considerable antiquity associated with the highest terrestrial ecosystem on Earth. Its remoteness has made it possible for its cultural resources to survive virtually intact. Of particular interest is the survival of a pre-Buddhist religion that plays an active role in the everyday life of its adherents, which is very rare in this region.

Comparative analysis

There are some 270 protected areas in the Himalayan mountain region, in six countries (Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan). Nine of these are in Nepal. In cultural terms, none has the level of authenticity and integrity of the Shey Phoksundo National Park. The nearest is the Upper Mustang part of the Annapurna Conservation Area, which is similar in several respects, such as the wide distribution of *chortens* and a long trading tradition. However, the greater remoteness of Shey Phoksundo has ensured that it has been less contaminated by outside cultural influences than Upper Mustang. It is also especially noteworthy for the remarkable survival of Bonpö as an active religion that permeates every aspect of the daily life of its practitioners.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

Whilst the general level of authenticity in the vernacular buildings was good, the ICOMOS mission drew attention to the materials and workmanship of a number of buildings constructed by the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation, which clashed badly with both the vernacular buildings and the natural environment. ICOMOS urges the State Party to give priority to the replacement of these structures with buildings that in terms of design and materials are in harmony with the traditional architecture and natural surroundings.

The ICOMOS mission was also concerned about the location of these buildings and of the camp site at Ringmo. The State Party should give urgent consideration to the resiting of these elements, which seriously disrupt the relationship between the settlement and the natural environment.

Considerable work is needed as a matter of priority in the restoration of most the *chortens*, which are neglected and deteriorating rapidly. The State Party should request international assistance from the World Heritage Fund for the restoration of the historic structures. There is also a need for a training strategy, making use of surviving traditional skills and imparting them to a new generation. This could also be the subject of a request for training assistance from the Fund.

As a basis for future management and presentation, it is essential that the State Party should set up a project for the scientific documentation of the cultural heritage of Shey-Phoksundo National Park, including survey and inventory. It should pay particular attention to the relationship between the cultural and the natural heritage.

Finally, it is important that a multidisciplinary body should be established to advise the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation on all aspects of the cultural heritage. This body should be responsible for the establishment of management and monitoring guidelines for the cultural heritage of the Park.

Brief description

The Shey Phoksundo National Park contains a remarkably intact cultural heritage that goes back many centuries. It retains a living pre-Buddhist religion which is active in the everyday life of the people, along with its places of worship and pilgrimage. A pure form of transhumance, with livestock moving to upland pastures in summer, is still being practised.

Recommendation

That further consideration of this nomination be *deferred* to enable the State Party to take account of the recommendations of the ICOMOS mission quoted above.

ICOMOS, November 2000