



Article

The Sacred Himalaya Initiative

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Highlighting the interplay of religion, ecology, and sustainability

Building on the success of Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH), the Sacred Himalaya Initiative: Sacred Landscapes and Sustainable Futures explored links between religious beliefs and environmental sustainability. The India China Institute (ICI) at the New School in New York worked with a team of researchers from India, China, Nepal, and the United States to study and document relationships between religion and ecology, focusing on sacred landscapes, pilgrimage routes, and ecological, economic and cultural sustainability and resilience in the Himalayas.

The project aimed to document the flows of cultures, goods, peoples, and ecosystem services within a region known as the Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL). This region is composed of an ecologically and culturally diverse landscape spanning three countries: the remote southwestern portion of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, adjacent districts in the Far-Western Region of Nepal; and the northeastern flank of Uttarakhand State in northern India. One of the most ecologically significant aspects of the KSL is its biodiversity, as there are wetlands, old-growth forests, and rangelands that provide habitats for numerous species. In addition to the beauty and importance of the landscape, its cultural,

religious, and historical values make much of the region sacred, and there are numerous pilgrimage routes and sites throughout the area. One of the main goals of the Sacred Himalaya Initiative was to deepen knowledge and shape policy about how communities can address the interplay of ecology, religion, and cultural factors to create sustainable futures for this region's residents.



Source: *Nomad Bikers via Unsplash*

Religion and Climate Adaptation

While the majestic snow-capped Mount Kailash mountain remains one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in Asia, it is vulnerable to environmental degradation. Rapid changes associated with increased tourism and climate change have negatively impacted the livelihoods of local communities in the region and highlight the need to develop strategies for long-term ecological and economic sustainability:

The KSL's unique geography is noted for high altitude lakes, mountain peaks, and permafrost. It is also significant for its size (11,969 square miles), and its ecological dynamics: the area forms the upper catchment for four of Asia's major rivers: the Indus, Sutlej, Brahmaputra, and Karnali/Ganga. More than one million people live downstream from those rivers and their livelihoods depend on the continued environmental health of the waterways.

—[From About Sacred Himalaya Initiative](#)

Given that the KSL is home to many sites (both human-made as well as natural places like rivers and peaks) that are meaningful to many different religious groups, what religious resources are available to mitigate these climate related challenges? The Sacred Himalaya Initiative's research efforts were primarily focused on understanding and documenting everyday lived religion and mapping sacred values, meaning, and symbolism across a diverse and shared landscape. Creating ethnographically informed case studies on the region's varied and complex socioreligious traditions was paramount:

Within India, the practice of tirthayatra, the act of making a spiritual journey to a sacred spot, has a long tradition going back to the Rig Veda and Mahabharata, and is considered a devotional sacred duty by Hindus.

For many Tibetan Buddhist and Bon pilgrims, the practice of ritually circling Mount Kailash, referred to as kora or kyang khor, plays a central role in the spiritual cleansing of pilgrims and acts as a way to connect with mountain spirits and generate merit, which is important for a person's growth toward enlightenment.

For Jains, the top of Mount Kailash is said to be the site

where Bhagavan Rishabha, the tirthankara or holy founder of Jainism, first achieved spiritual liberation, and the base is a pilgrimage destination.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is similarly said to have made an important pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, where he learned many great spiritual lessons that he recorded in the Sidh Gohst, or Dialogue with the Sages.

Lastly, in the indigenous Bön tradition its founder, Tonpa Shenrab, took up residence near Mount Kailash and established the ancient Zhang Zhung civilization.

—[From About Sacred Himalaya Initiative](#)



Raimond Klavins via Unsplash

Participants of the Initiative worked with local communities and the Nepal-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) on field research. The resulting [Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative](#) brought together an expanded community of scholars that generated ethnographically informed research on the intersections of religion and ecology in Himalayan communities. Another objective was to document the flows of cultures, goods, peoples, and ecosystem services within the KSL. Improved regional case studies focused on sacred landscapes and religious resources and helped highlight relevant and overlooked community concerns, information and data that can inform and guide policymakers and scholars.

Outcomes

From April 20 to April 23, 2017, the New School in New York City hosted an international conference, Mountains and Sacred Landscapes. ICI, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC), American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, and ICIMOD were partners for this event.

The conference had 225 attendees from over twenty-five countries (every continent except Antarctica was represented); thirty-nine sessions of panels, papers, roundtables, and alternative formats, six keynote or plenary sessions; and other special events. Mountains and Sacred Landscapes sought to critically explore how the idea of sacred landscapes connects to growing pressures from social and ecological changes. Some discussion points included the major challenges and opportunities facing diverse mountain communities from the Himalayas to the Andes to the Appalachians in the twenty-first century; religious conceptualizations of place and landscape; relationships between mountain spiritualities and peoples adapting to climate change; traditional ecological knowledge held by communities that can help address issues of social and ecological justice; the future of mountain and forest peoples; and the fate of more-than-human worlds inhabiting these diverse landscapes. Many of the following questions were asked in panels and workshops:

***What kinds of meanings shape and are shaped by the effects of climate change, mass extinction, human population growth, and the ecological degradation of mountains, forests, rivers, and other sacred landscapes?
How do ritual activities linked to sacred landscapes***

respond to environmental challenges, or not? How do mountains—as highly biodiverse ecosystems, as critical sources of water, energy, and materials, as repositories of tradition, and as sacred beings—remain vital components in ongoing processes of religious change? How do understandings of the sacred manifest within and across different landscapes, such as deserts, rivers, or forests?



Roundtable session hosted by Steve Paulson. Source: Sarah Pike and Rob Boschman via [ISSRNC](#).

The conference featured many working group discussions that were rooted in contemporary debates at the intersection of religion and the environment.

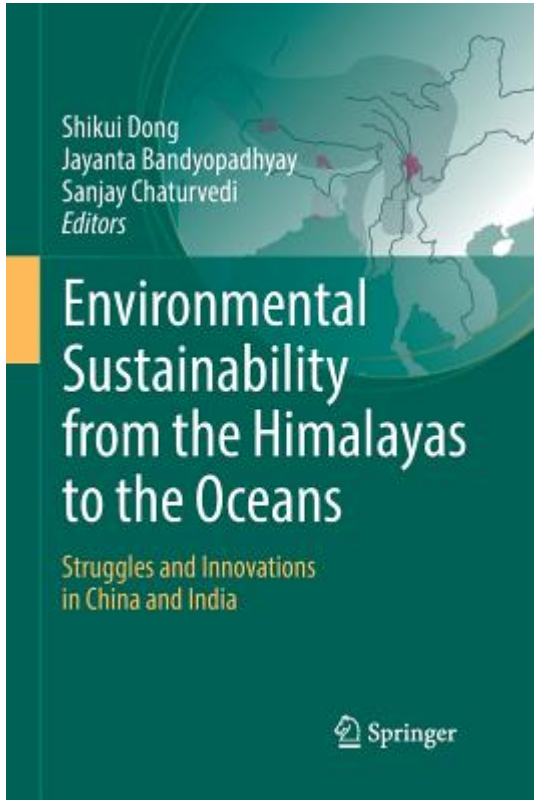
One such event was “Teaching Through Tipping Points: Education, Extinction, and Eudaimonia.” This panel interrogated the ways we teach religion and nature within the context of cultural collapse or other equally disruptive tipping points:

As scholars of religion, nature, and society, how do we expose our students (undergraduate and/or graduate) to the guiding research questions and literatures of our interdisciplinary field within the context of rapidly approaching planetary tipping points? What does it mean to discuss Lynn White, Jr.’s thesis that an elective affinity between increasingly invasive agricultural technologies and Christian dominion themes promote anthropocentrism when we have recently experienced the hottest July (2016) in the history of our keeping records of global temperatures? Does part of grappling with religion-nature-culture interactions also include tactics of resistance and activism? Is there any such thing as “neutral” readings we might assign, given our planetary reality? Are there discussions we are required to have, given our circumstances where we can assume a possible increase of planetary temperatures of 4 C? We will raise such questions in hopes of generating a critical, honest

discussion about our roles as teachers and mentors in this critical period of time in the history of the human animal. We will also spend time looking at the mission statement of conference participant's respective institutions, seeing how the mission allows for, or doesn't allow for, thinking about teaching as a form of activism, and what this might look like for all involved.

Another roundtable of note was “Sacred Landscapes in the Himalayas—Rubin Museum of Art Roundtable and Tour,” which focused on interpretations of sacred mountains and their associations with sacred places represented in the art of diverse cultures in and around Himalayan regions. Highlighting the multifaceted relationships with mountains and sacred landscapes found in artistic expressions from India, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Nepal and the United States, the panel featured talks by Rubin Museum curators Jorrit Britschgi, Karl Debreczeny, Elena Pakhoutova, Beth Citron and Soundwalk Collective members.

[Click here to read the full conference program](#)



There was also a book launch featuring a collection of essays edited by ICI Fellows Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, Sanjay Chaturvedi, and Dong Shikui called [*Environmental Sustainability from the Himalayas to the Oceans: Struggles and Innovations in China and India*](#) (Springer, 2017).

Two additional collections of folk stories emerged from the Sacred Himalaya Initiative: [*Shared Sacred Landscapes, Stories from Mount Kailash, Tise & Kang Rinpoche*](#) and [*Mortal Gods, Stories from the Kailash Region*](#).