Conservation For Whom?: The Struggle for Indigenous Rights in Sagarmatha National Park

Jake Sivinski
SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Inequality and Stratification Commons, Natural Resources and Conservation Commons, Natural Resources Management and Policy Commons, Place and Environment Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2226

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
Conservation For Whom?: the struggle for indigenous rights in Sagarmatha National Park

Jake Sivinski
Academic Director: Isabelle Onians
Lewis and Clark College
Psychology
Solukhumbu, Nepal
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of SIT: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples
Fall: 2015
# Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements...........................................................................................................................................2
Abstract..............................................................................................................................................................3
Introduction..........................................................................................................................................................4
A History of Conservation.................................................................................................................................7
Traditional Sherpa Ecology................................................................................................................................11
The Yul-Tim System...........................................................................................................................................15
Current State of Affairs......................................................................................................................................18
The Challenge.....................................................................................................................................................22
Why are ICCA’s Important?.................................................................................................................................25
The Solution.......................................................................................................................................................29
Conclusion..........................................................................................................................................................31
Methodology.......................................................................................................................................................32
Appendix..............................................................................................................................................................33
Glossary...............................................................................................................................................................34
Bibliography........................................................................................................................................................35
Oral Bibliography..............................................................................................................................................36
Suggestions for Further Research.....................................................................................................................38
Acknowledgements:

This research project would not be possible if it were not for the help of many different individuals. The first person I would like to thank is my guide Lakpa Sonam Sherpa. Without his help I would not have been able to do the research that I have done. As well I would like to thank my good friends Daylandu and Da Ongchhu Sherpa for their help organizing the logistical aspects involved with my trek.

In addition I would also like to thank the entire staff and student body of the fall SIT: Tibetan and Himalayan peoples trip for inspiring me to conduct my research. In general I would like to thank all the staff members involved in the program for providing me with excellent information and valuable guidance with how to proceed on my work. As well I would like to thank SIT for providing me with a monetary stipend that helped make this research possible.

Finally I would like to thank all the people who put up with me and consented to being interviewed for this project. Without you I would not have much of the information I have today and this paper would lack any real meaning. It was inspiring to get to meet so interesting and unique people during my travels and I am in debt to you for sharing your stories with me. Included in this group are my parents and family without whom none of this would have been possible.
Abstract:

Since its creation in 1976 Sagarmatha National Park has been the subject of a great deal of internal scrutiny by the regions indigenous Sherpa Inhabitants. Since their arrival in the Khumbu valley some four centuries ago, the Sherpa people have held a deep respect for their land and have practiced a highly organized and effective form of environmental stewardship which they refer to as Yul-Tim. At its core Yul-Tim relies on the authority of certain village members to make and enforce rules within the community: a practice that has been greatly undermined by creation of SNP. While SNP has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the environment of the Khumbu valley, its impact on people is something that needs to come under review. Under close examination the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation has shown a clear lack of respect for indigenous peoples and their conservation methods. This is an issue that cannot continue and requires change if the park is to survive.
Introduction:

From Edmond Hillary and Tenzing Norgay’s first ascent of Mount Everest on May 28th 1953, a global spotlight has been fixed on Nepal’s Solukhumbu region: the home of the great mountain which the areas indigenous people refer to as Chomolungma (ICUN 1999). Ever since, foreign tourists have flooded the Khumbu valley and its surrounding mountains in search of adventure and a glimpse of the areas stunning mountain scenery. However, these foreign tourists are not the first to step foot in the Khumbu valley. In fact the areas indigenous Sherpa people have resided in the valley for as long as four centuries. Originating from the Kham region of Tibet, the valleys original Sherpa inhabitants were and continue to be Buddhists, who left their homes and migrated to the valley in search of what they thought of as a Beyhul: a sacred and hidden valley where their great religious saint Guru Rinpoche is said to have spent time and meditated (UNESCO, 2015).

When faced with a sudden onslaught of foreign tourists, this pastoral culture which had lived in various states of isolation for hundreds of years struggled to deal with a difficult situation. As the number of visitors grew, so did the strain on local resources and the amounts of trash left behind by the area’s seasonal population booms. However locals were also faced with an overwhelmingly profitable business situation. Lodges and restaurants shot up all over, and the area started its long march towards the well-developed tourist destination it is today (ICUN 1999).

With the money to be made in the region, it was not long before the Nepali Government took notice and began to pass laws that would place itself at the center of the area’s economic boom (Stevenson, 2015). They also desired to pass laws that would preserve Nepal’s natural places for future generations (UNESCO, 2015). The first of these new laws was the Private Forest Nationalization act of 1957. This law converted the ownership of all private forests to property of the Nepali Government. The stated goal of this act was to prevent private land owners from felling forests on their property (Stevenson, 2008). However it also meant that the
state now owned much of the country’s natural places which would be key in the future economic boom brought about with the tourist industry.

The Forest Nationalization Act was extremely unpopular with many private land owners in the country for obvious reasons (ICUN 1999). Land that once belonged to people or villages now belonged to the state for them to do with what they wished. This caused an uproar in many rural areas who found themselves effected by this new law. Communal land management was taken into the hands of the government who for the most part had little experience in the area.

As if to cement their new grip on the countryside, The Nepali government passed the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973 (Stevenson, 2015). This new law made it possible to give official status to many natural areas now owned by the government. As a result of this new law, stewardship of land in the countries new National Parks was legally passed to the government. Beginning in 1976 the Khumbu valley received national park status and has since become Sagarmatha National Park. Since then strict laws on resource use and waste disposal have been passed in the aim to preserve the pristine alpine landscape. In addition to laws concerning conservation, the government also began to require that tourists purchase permits before entering the area, which have since generated a tremendous amount of money (Unesco 2015).

As with the Forest Nationalization Act, the declaration of the Khumbu Valley as Sagarmatha National Park caused a great deal of backlash within the community (ICUN 1999). While the stated goal of the park was to protect the areas natural resources and landscape, the policy’s enacted by park management are seen by many as too restrictive to the livelihoods of many of the parks residents (Ang-Nyma Sherpa, 14, 11, 2015). As a result many community leaders rejected the government’s plans to make the area a national park. However these objections were ignored and the park was created.

Representative of the turmoil in which it was founded, much of SNP’s early history was marked by disagreement between park officials and the local Sherpa community. Many of these disagreements stemmed from the fact that local communities already enforced their own
unspoken laws in regards to land conservation (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa, 8, 11. 2015). The government chose to overlook traditional methods and instead relied on strict enforcement of laws that drastically limited or even banned local people from accessing natural resources. In many cases the new government intervention upset a fine balance that had existed between Sherpa and their environment for centuries (Stevenson, 2015). To this day despite numerous attempts, indigenous Sherpa conservation methods still lack any sort of official or legal status.

While there was a great deal of disagreement between locals and park officials, the declaration of the valley as SNP did have a positive impact on the logistical infrastructure of the area (ICUN 1999). The government brought in the army to document and enforce rules and regulations amongst the areas tourist population (Manuse Paudil, 8, 11. 2015). As well the presence of government infrastructure has made it possible to better facilitate the construction of trails and airports leading to an even larger increase in tourism in the area, even further boosting economic gains. As a result more and more Sherpa found themselves abandoning their agrarian lifestyles in favor of the new and booming tourism business (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa).

Perhaps in concert with increasing numbers of tourists, the anger of local Sherpa continued to grow. Most of the outcries of anger were being heard from areas that surrounded the national park. As a result of strict rules within the national park that limited communities access to firewood and other crucial natural resources, the area surrounding the national park was finding its environment under increased strain. Local communities’ cries grew to a crescendo and in 2003 the Government was forced to establish a buffer zone around the park to pad its borders from the threat of overconsumption and exploitation (Stevenson 2008, 2015).

The SNP buffer Zone is a much more heavily populated and resource rich area than the high alpine terrain found within much of SNP. As a result, the rules brought about by community’s inclusion into the buffer zone have created a good deal of problems within the region. Frustration is growing among community leaders and dialogues with park officials have become difficult (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). As a result traditional practices are no longer being encouraged and many local Sherpa people have abandoned them altogether. For a people whose culture is
closely related to their land this trend is troubling, and it makes it worse that the government is taking no action to reverse it, and even seems to be encouraging it. The current state of affairs within SNP and its buffer zone are complicated to say the least. A tangle of communities and government officials that all seem to be obscuring the fact that the area is a national treasure occupied by a culture who cares deeply for its preservation.

A History of Conservation

The Khumbu Valley is full of numerous religious monuments that hint at its religious importance. (Sivinski 2015)

The first inhabitants of the Khumbu Region where emigrants from the Kham region of Tibet that most likely came to the area approximately four centuries ago. While these may have been the area’s first permanent settlers, evidence suggests that the valley has had at least part time residents dating back even further (Unesco 2015). These early settlers adopted the name
Sherpa meaning easterner in their Tibetan Mother tongue. The areas early visitors and settlers were a sort of religious pilgrim in search of a fabled Behyul in which the great Guru Rinpoche was said to have mediated and converted the local mountain gods to his Buddhist faith (Tenzin Nuru Sherpa 10, 11. 2015).

When the Sherpa Finally settled in the area they brought with them there traditional Nyingma Buddhist faith. Deeply embedded in this faith is respect for Natural areas (Tenzin Nuru Sherpa). Its practitioners believe the mountains to be a sacred place in which the gods reside. As such, Sherpa hold a deep respect for their natural world and take great pains to conserve it. They believe the mountains around them to be gods, each having its own sacred name, family, and gender. Mt Everest or Chomolungma itself belongs to a family of five mountains spread about the Himalaya. While Chomolungma may be the tallest mountain in the valley, it is by no means the most sacred. That title falls to the holey mountain Khumbu Yul-La or its other name Khumbila. It is at the base of this mountain that Guru Rinpoche is said to have converted the local deities to Buddhism some time during the 8th century, well before the Sherpa ever stepped foot in the valley (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). To this day Sherpa people pray to Khumbu Yul-La to allow them to live in the valley and grant them favorable weather and conditions to make life in their inhospitable environment possible (Tenzin Nuru Sherpa).
It is not only the mountains that have the status of gods, but the forest and rivers as well (Tenzin Nuru Sherpa). Sherpa’s believe that gods reside within forests and therefore go to great pains to not only preserve them but spread trees about their lands. Around many of the valleys villages and monasteries one will find groves of trees that in many cases are considered sacred. The most sacred of these forests are referred to as “Lama Nati” or Lama Forests (Stevenson 2008).

The largest of these forests is located in the village of Tengboche and surrounds the area. Residing in this forest is a species of juniper which the locals call shukpa which is supposed to have special powers. It is an important religious practice that Sherpa males are to come to the Tengboche forest and take a bow of one of the groves sacred shukpa trees and
bring them back to their villages to plant around their homes. It is said that cultivating a shukpa tree will bring a person a pure body and mind (Tenzin Nuru Sherpa). It is unthinkable that a Sherpa would ever step foot in a Lama Nati to cut down a tree. For this reason the forests are extremely well preserved and have been since long before SNP was established.

![Shukpa Tree Image]

3The Shukpa tree is a species of juniper which Sherpa believe to be sacred. Bows from these trees are taken and used to cultivate other groves elsewhere in the valley. (Sivinski 2015)

These religious beliefs have created a close bond between Sherpa and their environment. This bond is extremely important when one considers the harsh environment which the Sherpa have made their traditional home. For the entirety of their history the Sherpa people have lived a very fine balancing act between life and death. For this reason the rapidly growing population of both Sherpa and tourists has dangerously tipped the scales and has in many cases pushed the environmental resources to the edge (Ang-Nyama Sherpa).
Traditional Sherpa Ecology:

While one generally thinks of Sherpa as living only the high mountains, their settlements are actually spread out among a diverse area of climate zones (Unesco, 2015). It has been theorized that upon the their arrival in the Khumbu Valley 400 years ago, the glaciers in the area stretched far lower than they currently do, and that the climate in the area was much colder. As a result the first Sherpa settlements were likely well below the current boundaries of SNP somewhere around 2,000 meters above sea level (Lakpa Sonam Sherpa, 7, 11. 2015). Then as the glaciers slowly melted Sherpa found themselves able to go higher and higher and penetrate deeper into their holey mountains. While the vanguard of Sherpa society may have migrated upwards their communal breadbasket has remained at lower elevations (Lakpa Sonam Sherpa).

4 These fields lay at lower elevations near the village of Buksa. The traditional methods of terraced farmland, as well as rotational farming method can clearly be seen. (Sivinski 2015)
In the lower elevations of the Khumbu valley and Solu Region, one will find lush green forests and fertile terraced farmland: a stark contrast with the barren landscape found in the higher regions. Here farmers grow a wide variety of crops with two major growing seasons. The first harvest is sowed right before the start of the monsoon and taken right at the end of the fall season. It is in this harvest that all of the staples of their diet are collected: potato, millet, wheat, corn, barley, rice, tomato, buckwheat, cabbage, and various leafy greens are picked. While numerous other crops can be found in the area, these are the major staples due to the fact they can be dried and stored for later in the winter when food becomes scarce (Furinge Sherpa 7, 11. 2015).

Close to the village of Nuntala, the fall millet fields are ready for harvesting. (Sivinski 2015)

Additionally, it is during this time that farmers harvest the winter food of their livestock, which is primarily corn for chickens and goats, and hay for cows, yaks, and donkeys. The major crop from this harvest is potatoes which make up a large percentage of the Sherpa diet and can be found in almost all traditional Sherpa dishes. The second harvest is planted as soon as the
last one has left the ground and taken in early spring. This harvest is much less bountiful than the first and is almost entirely wheat. These two harvests have traditionally made up the entirety of the Sherpa diet for the whole year. Until the arrival of the tourist industry, the area was almost entirely self-sufficient only relying their immediate southern neighbors to fill in the gaps (Furinge Sherpa).

While the lower elevations act as a sort of bread basket, the upper regions of the valley were primarily set aside for the herding and grazing of game animals such as Yaks and Dzo. Naturally these two climate areas existed in perfect harmony, with those in the upper areas providing meat and other animal products, and those in the lower areas providing vegetables and plant products.

3 Yaks graze in the highlands of the upper Khumbu Valley near the village of Chukkung. In the late fall animals are herded into the highlands to make the most of the natural foliage before the regions long cold winter. (Sivinski 2015)
The trade between these two areas resulted in a great deal of goods moving between the upper and lower areas in the valley, and the development of a complex trade economy. In modern times an even larger amount of goods are carried up from lower Solu to keep up with the demand of the seasonal tourist and laborer populations in the upper stretches of the valley.

The bountiful harvest found in Solu and the lower stretches of the Khumbu valley are made possible by Sherpa’s in depth knowledge of the ecosystem and wide spread practice of sustainable farming. Sherpa take advantage of their short planting season and plant a wide variety of crops in close proximity to limit the mineral demand placed on the soil. This mixed sort of agricultural approach assures that certain plants do not place too large a strain on the soil. As well, for crops required in greater volumes such as potatoes, millet, and wheat: a rotational crop system is employed that works in a similar way to the mixed agriculture used with smaller volume crops in spreading out the nutrient demand placed on certain areas (Furnige Sherpa). These practices are essential due to the tremendous amount of effort it takes to build more terraces on the steep hillsides in the area. Therefore it is imperative that farmland stay fertile and that all terraced land is farmable every year.

Sherpa are also very aware that that they live in a fragile environment and take care to make sure their livestock does not overgraze in certain areas. They have developed a complex system that requires livestock owners to move their animals to certain pastures at certain times throughout the year. Usually in the spring before the monsoon, animals are moved to higher elevations to graze and feast on the new spring foliage. Once the rain and snows start at the higher elevations the animals are taken to lower elevations to not only to let the plant life at higher elevations recharge, but to avoid damage to the fragile high altitude tundra as it becomes soft and soaked with rain (Ang-Nyma Sherpa). Once in the lower regions animals are herded into specific areas in order to save communal land used for a wide variety of purposes.
The winter pasture used by the village of Khunde when the high tundra is not suitable for grazing. (Sivinski 2015)

The Yul-Tim and Nauwa System

Sherpa have a history of enforcing natural resource conservation standards within their community that long predates the creation of the national park. Due to the respect and value placed on their natural spaces, Sherpa have developed a highly advanced and extremely effective method which they use to manage their land. This system is called Yul-Tim and relies on individuals residing in a community who are known as nauwas. Traditionally there would be two nauwas operating in a village at any given time. The Shingi-Nauwa is the person in charge of enforcing rules regarding the forest, fire-wood, and agriculturally themed laws (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). The other individual is the louta-nauwa, who is in charge of enforcing all rules regarding livestock. They are also in charge of ensuring the preservation of the all rangeland in the area of a particular village (Ang-Nyma Sherpa). A village’s nauwas are determined by random selection and at the end of every year the title transfers to a new person. Usually when a nauwa is selected the responsibility of law enforcement falls on the whole of an
individual's family. If in individual or their family is incapable of performing the tasks required, they can seek assistance from other members of the community. As well if a person is having a tough time making another obey a certain rule they can turn to the community as a whole and employ the power of social pressure to force that person to obey the rules (Ang-Nyma Sherpa).

The laws that make up Yul-Tim are what one would refer to as unspoken laws in that they are not written down anywhere (Stevenson, 2008). However despite their lack of documentation, every member of the community knows exactly what they can and cannot do. Because of this fact, the most effective way of enforcing laws in within the community context seems to be the use of social pressure. Most Sherpa people already know what they should and should not do based on what has been passed down to them through their community. Therefore any breach in that established system is an affront against the community itself. In order to change the situation, the community often steps in to back the nauwa and force the individual to change their behavior (Ang-Nyma Sherpa). As well, in many cases, nauwas are sought for advice about what to do in any given situation. For example: if a villager is unsure of when to plant or harvest their crops, or even what crops to plant in a certain field, they will often consult the nauwa for advice about how to proceed. Because of this, it is important to keep in mind that the nauwa is not only a sort of quasi policeman but also the well of agricultural knowledge within a community. If the nauwa themselves does not know the answer to a particular question they have the authority to gather village elders and discuss a solution to a problem (Ang-Nyma Sherpa). As well the community aspect of the nauwa system allows for village members to have a platform from which they may make special resource needs known. If a family is large and has more mouths to feed they may able to discuss a situation with a nauwa in which they will be granted access to more wood or other resources than would be traditionally allowed. This makes for an extremely flexible system that assures the needs of community members are always met (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa).

As well as enforcing rules, nauwas will often decide what areas in the surrounding country are suitable for exploitation during any given year. A shingi-nauwa will often close a section of forest for wood collection that was used the previous year. Additionally in event of drought or some other natural disaster such as a fire, they may close entire forests to wood collection in
order to avoid too much strain on an ecosystem. A louta-nauwa will also perform similar duties when it is time to decide the new rangeland for village livestock. For example: at the change of a season the louta-nauwa will make sure that all the livestock belonging to villagers change pasture in order for the past one to regenerate. They also enforce a cycle system in which different pastures are used during different years to allow further regeneration of crops in a particular area (Ang Nyma Sherpa).

If a person is found to have violated any of the rules mentioned above they will be subject to a fine at the nauwa’s discretion. The money garnered from these fines is split up and shared amongst the community (excluding the offender) at the end of every year. This method of splitting up the money from the fines ensures that a community remains vigilant to the state of their environment (Ang Nyma Sherpa).

Overall Yul-Tim is a highly effective community run and enforced system that ensures the protection of natural resources. Within the village context the system is well refined and offers a perfectly flexible set of rules that can properly account for the special needs of certain individuals. However, with the boom of tourism in the area and the creation of the national park, Yul-Tim has come under threat and in many cases has been changed or even eradicated (Phurwa Lamo Sherpa 16, 11. 2015).
This Forest directly outside of the village of Khumjung has thrived for centuries under the care of the village’s shingi-nauwa. (Sivinski 2015)

Current State of Affairs:

After the creation of SNP in 1976, there was a great deal of strife within the Sherpa community residing both within and near its borders. Much of the protest put forth by the Sherpa community centered on the idea that they felt the new laws put forth by the government were unreasonably strict (ICUN, 1999). As well many community leaders already felt that they had a sufficient system to take care of the environmental conservation within the region.

However despite this initial protest SNP still very much exists today. So to do the Sherpa who called the area home at the time of its creation 39 years before. The Sherpa population in 1976 was 2,500 people while as of 2010, the population was somewhere closer to 6,000 and has likely grown since that figure was recorded. Along with the Sherpa population’s growth, the annual tourist visits have risen from 3,600 in 1979 to more than 25,000 in 2010 (Unesco, 2015).
With these numbers in mind it is not hard to see that the situation in Solukhumbu has changed since SNP’s early days.

A trail crowded with tourists is not an uncommon sight once one arrives in the SNP. (Sivinski 2015)

In light of these changes the task facing the Sherpa community and national park officials has become daunting. With the population of trekkers exceeding the local population by close to 5 times during peak season, park officials have had to make many improvements to the logistical side of things in the region (Manose Paudil). For the most part this has to with the construction of new bridges and trails to ease the transportation of both goods and people throughout the park and its surrounding regions. They have also had to enforce strict resource management rules within SNP itself, its buffer zone, and the territories on its southern boundary. Much of these rules have to with the felling of trees, as in the area, wood is both the primary source of heating and a required building material (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa)

Outside the parks southern boundary these rules require villagers to trek to their local governmental office, which in some cases may take several days, and pay a tax that allows them to cut down a single tree. This tax changes price depending on the size of the tree or the
species, with some being more valuable than others. The tree cutting season lasts only two months, in which villagers are allowed to cut down a maximum of 5 to 6 trees (Lakpa Sonam Sherpa). If one household finds themselves requiring more than their allotted amount they can ask to buy the tree rights not being used by other members of their villages, in a sort of cap and trade esque approach (Phurwa Lamo Sherpa). This system even applies to private land, thanks to the Forest Nationalization Act, and people have to pay taxes on trees cut down on their own property (a major source of source of contention) (Lakpa Sonam Sherpa). While 5 to 6 trees should be enough for any given family, the stricter laws in place within the national park and the buffer zone have placed the wood collected in the lower regions in high demand. Because of this, the forests in the lower regions have been coming under intense pressure in recent years.

Further up the valley in the buffer zone, the limits on wood collection are even stricter. In these regions the season for wood collection has been shortened to one month split up into two, two week sections. During these two sections the felling of trees is not allowed and only the collection of dead wood is permitted (Ang-Nyma Sherpa). In order to actually cut down a tree you must send for park representatives and have them assess the area in which you plan to cut the tree and mark the only trees that are suitable for harvest. In these areas residents are only granted permission to cut down two trees per year with those trees only coming from dead or dying trees within the forest (lodge owner). In some places within the national park itself, the cutting of trees and collection of dead wood is banned outright.

Within the National park and the buffer zone, there are similarly strict rules in regards to the construction of lodges and houses. If a land owner wants to build on their property they must have a team from the national park come to access the desired location. It is only then that permission can be given to build (lodge owner).

Strict park rules extend not only to Sherpa but to the parks visitors as well. From its onset the national park has imposed a permit system that requires foreign visitors to pay a fee in order to access the park. The park states publically that 30-50% of the profit garnered by the entry fee goes straight back to the community (Manose Paudil). However this rule seems to be
only spottily enforced and only in times when the government can afford to give communities money do they actually hand over anywhere close to 30-50% of their profits (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa).

Perhaps SNP’s best asset is an NGO by the name of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee. The SPCC as it is better known was funded by local people disgusted with the amount of trash that was accumulating in within the national park. Beginning in 1991 the SPCC took control of the management and disposal of waste within the park. As a result the park is drastically cleaner than it was before and a better disposal system has been implemented (Kapinaza Rai 14, 11. 2015).

Garbage and recycling cans are an uncommon sight in Nepal. However, thanks to the SPCC they are all over the trails in SNP. (Sivinski 2015)

Much of this infrastructure is aimed towards tourist areas leaving some more remote areas out of the picture (Stevenson 2015). However The SPCC is taking great pains to improve their work and is making every effort to bridge the gap to local people and help provide them with
an effective method with which to remove trash. In many areas this has taken the form of youth eco clubs that teach effective land stewardship and resource management (Kapinaza Rai).

**The Challenge:**

Sherpa make up one of Nepal’s 59 different indigenous groups. In the 2002 National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act, the government of Nepal defined ethnic groups such as the Sherpa as “Advasi Janajatia”, under the definition: “Those ethnic groups or communities that have their own mother tongue, traditional customs, a distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure, and a written or oral history of their own” (Stevenson 2015). While the territories of these groups has not been officially mapped, much of Nepal’s high Himalayan residents fall into this category.

While Nepal has formally recognized the existence of these groups, none of them have any sort of legal status or the ability to self-govern. The government of Nepal has failed to recognize these groups’ customary territories, collectively owned land, customary law, and customary land management practices (Stevenson, 2015). In many cases Nepal’s past legal history with laws such as the Private Forest Nationalization act, has placed these groups’ traditional homelands in the vice grip of the Nepali State. It is likely that this current state of affairs stems from the fact that since the time of its conception, Nepal has been ruled by a high caste Hindu elite that seems to have little interest in their countries indigenous communities. As a result Nepal’s indigenous communities have been subject to centuries of oppression and discrimination.

Nepal’s Himalayan region is by no means exempt from this oppression. These areas are home to 37 of the countries indigenous ethnic groups and almost all of these groups have had their communal land nationalized by the Nepali Government. Within this region there are no less than 4 national parks which make up 73% of the country’s total area that has already been given national park status. Most of the area comprised by these four parks is the homeland of the aforementioned 37 ethnic groups (Stevenson 2015). Despite the areas already being populated, not one of Nepal’s 4 Himalayan national parks was established with the permission
of local populations. In the case of SNP the park was actually established against the wishes of
the local population (ICUN, 1999).

While the residents of SNP and other Himalayan national parks protested their creation,
they did not find themselves in as bad a situation as some of Nepal’s other would be national
park residents. That is people were allowed to maintain title over their homes and fields and
weren’t forced to move off their land against their will (Stevenson, 2015). However, their
forests and range land were taken over by the government and people did lose the authority to
enforce traditional laws and impose self-government (ICUN 2015).

With the establishment of the SNP Buffer-Zone in 2003 many local Sherpa communities
attempted to solve these problems with the creation of Buffer-Zone user groups. These groups
were organized by the park service and are supposed to be a stage from which local
communities can make themselves heard. In many cases these groups have become the pillar
of society in villages located within SNP and the surrounding area (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). The
user groups have centralized community government and have also organized communities
onto a cohesive unit that can act and make their demands heard within the Nepali Government
(Ang-Nyma Sherpa).

While the government’s creation of the user groups has given Sherpa a chance to get
organized they still lack any sort of official status. They have given communities a chance to
come together to affirm their traditional laws, but that does not mean that the Nepali
government will do the same. If a BZUG has a demand they must voice it to a regional buffer-
zone user council who then decides the validity of the demand before it is finally sent to the
government to receive the final stamp of approval. However just because the communities has
filed a request with the government, does not mean that the request will be heard (Tenzin
Tashi Sherpa). In a sense, the government has created a voice for the local people which it can
chose whether or not to listen to.

In the case of demanding legal status or official recognition be granted to indigenous
community conservation areas, the Sherpa community has found itself in a familiar situation.
Despite the high level of organization and obvious benefits within the traditional system the
Nepali government has failed to accept the terms given by the community. In many cases governmental officials have failed to entertain questions about the legal status of ICCA’s within SNP. In a speech at the first annual ICCA convention in Nepal in 2011, Dr. Maheshowr Dhakal stated in response to a question regarding the issue, that the official creation ICCA’s was not a priority of the park service due to the existence of the national parks themselves, and additionally that if community members desired to speak to the park service about this issue they should take to appropriate official steps and file a request directly with the government itself (Maheshowr, 2011).

However in 2008 local Sherpa community leaders gathered to draft and sign a petition that called for the creation of what they called the “Khumbu Community Conservation Area”. The KCCA would unite the entire Khumbu area under the title of one large ICCA, renewing Sherpa people’s commitment to environmental conservation. The KCCA document made no demands on the government besides that they recognize the Khumbu valley as an ICCA and acknowledge the hard work of its residents who have strived to conserve it for the last four centuries. Their demands would not change the power structure within the park but rather would require the government to communicate more closely with communities and work with them for the benefit of all the parks residents (Sonam Gyalsen Sherpa 2008, Stevenson 2008).

While the appropriate steps were taken to bring this matter to the attention of the government during 2008, the governmental reaction was swift and harsh. Almost as soon as the petition was filed the government told the signers that their action was illegal (which it is actually not) and that they lacked the legal status to make a request of that magnitude heard before the government. The matter was quickly publicized as an attempted coup masterminded by a western college professor in order remove Nepal’s public sovereignty over its natural spaces¹ (Himalayan Times, 2008). As a result to all the negative press the Sherpa community was forced to formally withdraw their petition. The whole ordeal ended with a scathing public

¹ In response to a question about this matter Mr. Tenzin Tashi Sherpa related that the groups had conferred with a professor Stan Stevenson in 2008 who merely confirmed the fact that the Khumbu valley already was an ICCA
letter written by Sonam Gyalzen Sherpa in which he regrettably withdrew the petition but not without leaving some harsh words for the Nepali Government (Stevenson, 2008).

Seven years later, it is obvious that the events following the KCCA proposal were the result of the Nepali media misrepresenting the facts that both surrounded the proposal, and lied within it. In fact the proposal made no large demands from the government that should have elicited such a strong reaction from media outlets. It is possible that the strong reaction was more related to the fact that the Nepali government feared the implications of allowing local people even the smallest inkling of self-governance in an area where the policy of total control has been extremely profitable (Stevenson, 2015). While the official KCCA petition made no outright demands for increased autonomy to be granted to the area, the very fact that it happened right under nose of the park service seemed to pose an obvious threat to the authority of the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation in the area. With SNP generating a significant amount money for the government, this threat had to be taken seriously and squashed before it got too real.

Perhaps this idea could be generalized to not only ICCA’s within SNP but the parks very existence. In order to generate the most profit from the area, total control must be established, Nepal’s legal history has shown a strong commitment to the creation of total control over its natural and scenic places. It becomes obvious when one looks at the fact that since the creation of SNP in 1976, ICCA’s have been operating within the parks boundaries with little protest from the park service but as soon as they seek recognition for their work all hell breaks loose.

Why Are ICCA’s Important?

It is obvious when one looks at the sophistication of Yul-Tim and the strong religious beliefs of the Sherpa people that they have placed a high value on the preservation of their natural places. To deny the Sherpa people the ability to conserve their homeland using their traditional methods is a major breach of their rights (Stevenson, 2015). While the park service has not prevented Sherpa from practicing their traditional methods of conservation, their lack of official recognition has made it difficult for community leaders to gain support not only in a monetary form but in the shape of community involvement (Phurwa Lamo Sherpa).
While Money is required for any venture in the modern world, the most distressing aspect of the current situation in SNP is the decreasing amount of community participation and knowledge about traditional customs. Already the villages of Namche and Thame, two of the biggest villages in the region, have discontinued the practice of Yul-Tim and no longer have nauwas (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). Even worse, below the Buffer-Zone, there is not a single village that employs Yul-Tim (Phurwa Lamo Sherpa). When asked to cite the reason for this disappearance, most villagers relate that the rules enforced by the government has made it impossible for nauwas for exist. Because now the regulation of wood collection is so strict, nauwas are no longer able to access the situation and allow certain families greater access to wood (Phurwa Lamo Sherpa). As well, there is a new attitude developing in the area, much to the distress of village leaders, that the community is no longer responsible for the conservation of the environment and that the government will take care of everything for them (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa).

8 The Village of Namche is the largest village in the Khumbu valley. Due to the creation of SNP Namche has ceased the practices of Yul-Tim and there are no longer nauwas to enforce community rules. (Sivinski 2015)
This attitude is extremely dangerous when one takes a look at the actual state of affairs within the park service. In fact, the government during the month of November of 2015, (tail end of peak season) had only 15 employees actually working in the park (Manose Paudil). These 15 employees found themselves in charge of more than one thousand square kilometers of rugged mountain terrain. This is a pathetically small amount of people when one looks at the monumental task of protecting an area as big a logistically challenging as SNP. While the Army may be there to enforce rules, the lack of qualified national park employees living within the park poses a large threat if one is to think that the park service will take care of all the conservation legwork. As if to make matters worse, in many cases the park service does not have the necessary funds to perform the duties which is it was designed to do. In one case, a man by the name of Pasang Lama Sherpa has taken it upon himself to build and maintain the trail from Namche to Tengboche (one of the parks most popular routes) due to the fact that the park service will do nothing to improve the trail. He has done this task for many years without any assistance from the government, with the only reasoning for his labor being to cultivate a pure body and mind by helping others (Pasang Lama Sherpa 9, 11. 2015). Without the numerous men like Pasang Lama Sherpa residing within the park, it would surely fall into utter chaos.

9 Mr. Pasang Lama Sherpa subsists entirely of donations in order to complete his life’s work of building and maintaining an important thoroughfare within the boundaries of SNP. He completes his work diligently and with no concept of material gain. (Sivinski 2015)
Another reason that ICCA’s are so vital to the community is that they come from a culture that is already under threat of extinction. As the number of tourists within SNP rises, so too does the influence of the outside world. As the years have gone by many practices such as dances and songs have become rare with only the elder generations knowing their communal importance (Lakpa Sonam Sherpa). Along with these traditions the history of nauwas and the Yul-Tim system has been all but forgotten in many communities. The newer generations of Sherpa know almost nothing about their heritage of conservation. Given the success of these systems it is a tragedy to think that they may be lost to the past or even stuck in the older generations to rot away. When asked some older community members admit that if Sherpa lose sight of their traditional conservation culture: they will lose everything (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa).

*Residents of the Village of Buksa gather to celebrate the festival of Nigne. Part of the festivities include the performance of the Shoupro dance. At the time of this festival only the older residents of the village new the steps of the dance and decided to participate. The younger residents of the village were content to sit on the sidelines and watch the performance. (Sivinski 2015)*

---

2 When asking around one will inevitably find that young people are unable to answer a single question about Yul-Tim and in many cases do not even know of its existence.
The Solution:

While SNP may pose many problems to local communities, many of its policies have curbed the environmental destruction due to the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the area. SNP management has introduced a new more modern infrastructure in the area that has greatly improved communities' access to amenities such as healthcare and more rapid transportation (Ang-Nyma). As well, at the end of the day, the government has taken the step to designate the entire Khumbu valley a national park. This is a commitment to conservation that cannot be taken lightly. In the 21st century you would be hard pressed to find a Sherpa who is not in favor of the existence of SNP and wants to see it do so long into the future.

SNP is responsible for the creation of numerous suspension bridges which have eased the difficulty of travel in the area substantially. This particular bridge crosses the Dudh Kosi River and is one of the longest in the park. (Sivinski 2015)

However, while the park is an overwhelmingly positive force in the area, it must change to adopt the culture of the people who live within it. It is unfortunate that if one starts to do research into the inner workings of the park, they will inevitably see that it is a flawed system.
But this does not have to continue to be the case. Easy steps could be taken that would all but eliminate the plights faced by many of SNP’s residents.

The first and most effective of these steps would be to officially recognize and give status to the parks ICCA’s. This would not only unite communities in a common goal, but would most likely improve the overall environmental state of affairs within the park as well. It would also do a great deal to put an end to the internal conflict that has raged unabated within the park since the time of its creation. Additionally due to the flexibility of the Yul-Tim system, SNP’s residents would gain easier access to the resources they need while at the same time being watched to make sure they do not overconsume. It is interesting to think that an action that would have such an overwhelmingly positive effect has yet to be taken.

The second step that should be taken would be to ensure that Indigenous Sherpa leaders be installed as park wardens. While there have been Sherpa wardens in the past, there numbers have waned in recent years and they have been replaced by the usual high class Brahman elite in charge of most of Nepal’s affairs (Tenzin Tashi Sherpa). A Sherpa park warden would be invaluable if ICCA’s were to be given status and encouraged within SNP. Perhaps what has been holding SNP back for so long is that the people in charge of the area have little knowledge of the culture that lives within it. Always having a Sherpa warden would be a big step in making sure that the needs of the community are always being met.

A third and final Step that would greatly improve the situation within SNP would be to give community members prior knowledge of proposed changes within the park and its policies and the opportunity to vote as to whether or not policies are acceptable. Introducing a democratic system in which residents are informed about their situation and allowed to vote in order to decide their fate would do a lot to improve conditions within the park (Stevenson, 2015).

All in all, these three steps are simple and would do a great deal to improve the situation of those residing within the park. In addition, the consequences of failing to impose these changes would be an even further deterioration of the situation. With these two facts in mind it seems like and easy decision to enact change within the park in hopes of improving the quality of life for its residents.
In public SNP museum the Department of National park laments a supposed lack of community involvement in conservation. However it is easy to see that communities do take an active role and the above changes would do a great deal to bring their work to light. (Sivinski 2015)

Conclusion:

All in all the situation within SNP could use a great deal of improvement. The agrarian lifestyle of the parks residents has been greatly harmed due not only to the incursion of tourists in the area but also the creation of the park itself. The needs of the community have been pushed aside by the government and the current system cannot and should not be allowed to continue. All of SNP is currently under threat of both environmental as well as cultural degradation. The steps that could change the current state of affairs are extremely simple and logical and would cause a great deal of improvement. It is inexcusable for the government of Nepal to ignore this issue any longer. It is time to for the system to be changed the voice of the Sherpa to be heard once again.
Methodology:

In order to complete this paper a combination of online and field research was used. For my online resources I searched the internet in order to find many scholarly and non-scholarly articles published about the topic. After this was done I cross-referenced the articles together in hoped that I could ascertain the political leanings of the author. This method turned to be extremely effective for checking the validity of the sources used. I tried to get all of my online research done before entering the field to conduct in person interviews with sources. The goal of this method was to try and get an as accurate picture of the situation as possible before entering the area. This turned out to be extremely useful as many people in the area no longer seem to be highly educated in the methods of traditional Sherpa conservation techniques. As well upon my arrival in SNP I found that in order to talk government and park officials a research permit was required which I unfortunately did not possess. However due to my prior research I was already somewhat well versed in the political leaning of both the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and the Nepali government as a whole. Additionally I found that many of my interview subjects were reluctant to speak much and questions that demonstrated prior knowledge were useful in getting interviewees to speak about certain topics.

The majority of on the ground information gathered for this paper in respect to the perspectives of Sherpa people: was gathered through field research. For this part of my research it was necessary that I have a translator to help me locate my sources. In many cases we would arrive at a village and we would begin to ask around amongst its residents to try and find individuals who were both willing to speak and were knowledgeable on the topic. Once they were located we would ask question that were relevant to the interviewer’s position in society. For example when trying to learn about the areas religion we would find monks who knew a great deal about the topic, or we would interview community leaders on the logistical aspect of the Yul-Tim system. In general due to the time of my research being directly before winter, many of the area’s residents had either left or were unreachable at the time making my field research difficult. As well the fact that I had missed the peak season by a few weeks meant that many of the NGO offices that can be found in the area were locked up and closed by the time I got to them. As well a research permit is required to interview governmental officials which unfortunately did not have. All of these factors made the field work portion of my project very difficult.
Appendix A: Maps

Figure 1 A map of SNP that shows not only the environmental make-up of the land but the location of important religious sites and settlements. (Stevens, 2008)
Glossery of Terms:

Acronyms

- **SNP**: Sagarmatha National Park
- **ICCA**: Indigenous Community Conservation Area
- **BZUCG**: Buffer-Zone User Group
- **BZUCC**: Buffer-Zone User Comitee

Sherpa Conservation Terms:

- **Yul-Tim**: The traditional body of unspoken laws used to govern traditional Sherpa resource use. This System controls and how and where communities gather their resources and herd their animals for grazing.
- **Shingi-Nauwa**: This is the individual selected at random every year to be in charge of all laws relating to the use of forest resources within a village. This person is in charge of making sure that people do not overdraw from an areas wood resources. As well this person is in charge of all things regarding the planting and harvesting of crops.
- **Louta Nauwa**: This person is in charge of all things related to livestock. They are also in charge of making sure that animals are moved to the appropriate pastures throughout the year.

Buddhist Religious Terms:

- **Chomalungma**: The traditional Sherpa name for Mt. Everest meaning “hand of the sky”
- **Khumbu Yul-La**: Khumbu Yul-La is the most sacred mountain in the entire Khumbu valley. It is under this mountain that Guru Rinpoche was supposed to have meditated during the 8th century.
- **Lama Nati**: Lama Forests as they are known in English are important sacred forests that exist in numerous places throughout the area. These forests are under the protection of monasteries and usually the collection of wood from these areas is strictly forbidden both by park officials and the community.
Bibliography


Oral Bibliography


Lakpa Sonam Sherpa was my guide during my trek in the region. He shared a great deal of information with me throughout my trek. For the most part he had a lot to say about life in the lower regions of Solu below the national park and the touristy areas. He came from an agricultural family and as a result knew a great deal about the subject.


Furinge Sherpa was the brother of my guide Lakpa Sherpa. Furinge Sherpa is also a farmer and was therefore very knowledgeable about farming practices and the types of crops harvested throughout the year. I spent two days staying at his house where I learned a great deal about Sherpa agriculture.


Hari Magar is a member of the Nepali Army. He was one of the rare government employees that consented to be interviewed for my project. He related to me the role and duties carried out by the army in the area.


Tenzin Tashi Sherpa was extremely important for my research. He was the former head of the SNP BZUGC. As a result he had a great deal to say about the relation between the government in the area. He was also knowledgeable about Yul-Tim and taught me a great deal about the subject.
Manose Paudil. Personal Interview November, 8. 2015.

Manouse Paudil was the only representative of the park service that consented to be interviewed for my project. He related to me what employees were in the park and what their duties included. He was not from the area and therefore knew little about the traditional methods of conservation.


Pasang Lama Sherpa was a man who had dedicated his life to the construction and improvement of trails within the park. He related that lack of funds allotted to this pursuit and how he did so at his own will.


Tenzing Nuru Sherpa was a monk at the Tengboche Monetary. He related all the information regarding the mountain gods and the spirituality of natural places.


Ang-Nyma was a former leader of the village of Khunde’s BZUG. He was extremely knowledgeable about nauwas and taught me much of what I know about the system.


Kapinaza Rai was a representative of SPCC who I met in Namche. He told me about the inner workings of the SPCC.


Phurwa Lamo Sherpa is a lodge owner in the town of Pakding. She related to me the finer points in regards to the actual rules behind wood collection below SNP. She also told me about the disappearance of Yul-Tim after the establishment of Yul-Tim
Suggestions for Further Research

Further research should go into more depth about the actual social structure within Sherpa communities. It would be interesting to have this prior knowledge to look at the effects of tourism and globalization have had on the area. It would also be interesting to see if the elimination of certain traditional practices such as Yul-Tim have changed communities. One of the best ways to look at this would likely be to see whether the competition between villages and village members in the form of tourist money has influenced the way that communities interact.

Further research should also attempt to compare the effectiveness of the traditional Yul-Tim system and the newer modern forms of resource conservation imposed within SNP. While the new method is extremely effective it achieves success by the outright ban or restriction on resource collection. It would there for be interesting to see just how effective it actually is when compared to the old system that still allowed residents some freedom in the collection of resources.

The final suggestion for a would-be researcher before they travel to SNP to perform field work would be to make sure that they have a permit! Due to my lack of a research permit I found it very difficult to perform research at an official capacity. As well without a permit a person may find themselves unable to speak to and interview government officials both within the park and outside of it.