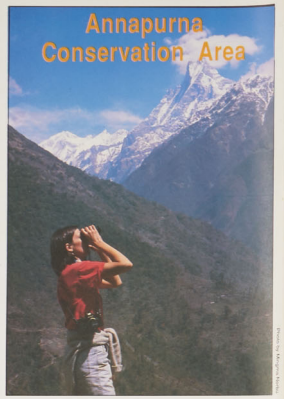

Photo by Mingma Norbu

Published by:

LAND OF DIVERSITY

Namaste!

The Annapurna Conservation Area in central Nepal is the most geographically and culturally diverse protected area in the world. Stretched over 2600 square kilometres, the Annapurna region includes sub-tropical lowlands, oak, rhododendron and bamboo forests, high alpine meadows and windswept desert plateaus. It has the world's deepest river gorge — the Kali Gandaki, lying some 6900 metres below some of the world's biggest and most scenic mountains. Annapurna I is the eighth highest mountain in the world, reaching a height of 8091 metres (26,545 feet). Machhapuchhre — the famous Fishtail — is one of the most beautiful. As well, over 40,000 people of distinct ethnic backgrounds call this area home, sharing it with numerous varieties of domestic and wild animals.

The Annapurna Conservation Area was established in 1986 as a designated multiple land use zone. It is a new concept in resource management, integrating environmental protection, sustainable development and harmonious forms of tourism. It is Nepal's largest protected area, including parts of five administrative districts -- Kaski, Lamjung, Manang, Mustang and Myagdi. Bordered on the north by the Tibetan frontier, the south by Pokhara Valley, the east by the Marsyangdi River, and the west by the Kali Gandaki River, it is a land of extremes.

Two of Nepal's most famous trekking routes pass through this area: the Annapurna Circuit, a 21 day excursion that circles the Annapurna Himal and crosses 5390 metre (17,700 feet) Thorung La (Pass), and the Annapurna Sanctuary, a 10 day journey up the Modhi Khola valley into the heart of the Himalaya. All areas are open to trekkers except north of Kagbeni and the Nar and Phu Valleys in Manang.

A CULTURAL MOSAIC

Nowhere else in Nepal can you experience such a wide variety of human culture. Walking through forests of the southern slopes or the moonscapes of the Tibetan Plateau, you can meet people from over seven ethnic groups, each with their own distinct language, customs and subsistence patterns.

A strong religious heritage pervades both the physical and cultural landscape of the Conservation Area. Temples, shrines, flags, and prayer walls mark the entrances and exits to villages or local holy places. Religion, however, is not just a philosophy but a way of life. Most people follow some form of Hinduism or Buddhism, often blended with indigenous shamanistic-beliefs and local superstitions.

What characterizes the people of Annapurna is their ingenuity and adaptability both to environmental conditions and outside cultural influences. Traditional architecture, dress, customs and subsistence activities are uniquely suited to the peculiarities of the local environment. Whether trading with Tibet or serving in armies around the world, most groups still maintain a strong sense of cultural identity.

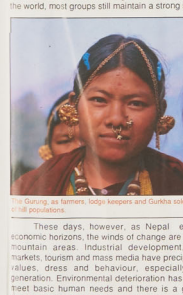

Photo by Ratan Manandhar

The Gurung, as farmers, lodge keepers and Gurkha soldiers, make up the majority of hill populations.

These days, however, as Nepal expands her social and economic horizons, the winds of change are penetrating even remote mountain areas. Industrial development, expanding consumer markets, tourism and mass media have precipitated a dramatic shift in values, dress and behaviour, especially among the younger generation. Environmental deterioration has made it more difficult to meet basic human needs and there is a general shift away from agricultural lifestyles. Social problems such as crime, drugs, and fighting are aggravated by a general loss of cultural integrity. Hopefully the time-tested strength of these cultures will endure, creating a blend of the best that both east and west have to offer.

Valley Peoples

Primarily Hindu castes inhabit the lower valleys, generally below 1800 m. They are Indo-Aryan in origin and speak Nepali as their first language. Traditionally each caste had its own profession, but many people no longer conform. The Brahmins (priests) and Chhetris (warriors) are considered the high castes. The occupational castes consist of the Kamis (blacksmiths), Damais (tailors) and Sarkis (shoemakers)

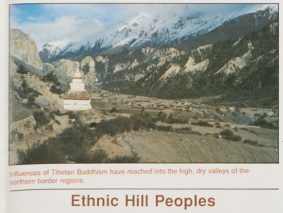

Photo by DCAP

Influences of Tibetan Buddhism have reached into the high, dry valleys of the northern border regions.

Ethnic Hill Peoples

It is commonly believed that these groups have been in the Himalaya longer than the Hindu castes, descendants of several waves of migration from the north and northeast. They are generally found from 1800 m to 2700 m along the southern slopes of the Annapurna Himal.

The NEWARS, descendants of the original settlers of the Kathmandu Valley, occupy many of the hill bazaars as craftspeople, merchants and farmers. They practice Hinduism or Buddhism, depending on their particular subcaste.

As farmers, shepherds, Gurkha soldiers and more recently lodge keepers, the GURUNG constitute the majority in the Conservation Area. They traditionally live in slate roof houses clustered high on the ridges just below permanent snowline. Good examples of traditional Gurung life can be seen in Ghandruk, Sikles and Bhujung. They practice their own blend of religion: each village typically has a Buddhist *lama* (priest), a Hindu priest and *jhankri* (shaman).

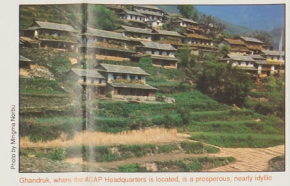

Photo by Mingma Norbu

Ghandruk, where the ACAP Headquarters is located, is a prosperous, nearly idyllic Gurung village.

The MAGARS are similar to the Gurungs, but live at lower altitudes along the tributaries of the Kali Gandaki River. They are primarily agriculturalists, but have found alternative employment in the Indian and British armies and servicing the tourist industry as porters, guides and lodge keepers. Poon Hill, the famous Himalayan viewing point near Ghorepani, is named after one of the several Magar clans.

The northern reaches of the Kali Gandaki, above the town of Ghasa, is the home of the enterprising THAKALIS. Well known for their strong trading spirit, they dominated the formerly active salt trade between Tibet and Nepal. They continue this tradition as skillful lodge operators and merchants throughout the Kali Gandaki Valley and around Pokhara.

Northern Border Peoples

These people are surely Nepal's hardiest citizens. They live in the high, dry valleys of the Tibetan Plateau, etching out a living as high altitude farmers, long distance traders, yak and sheep herders. They are Buddhists and their affinities are clearly with Tibet. Many drivers of the colourful pony trains come from these areas.

The MANANGIS reside in the district of Manang, a semi-desert environment in the rainshadow of the Annapurna Himal. Due to severe winters at such high elevations, the Manangis seasonally transmigrate to lower valleys where they carry on barter trade.

Originally from the district of Manang, the LOPA live in scattered settlements near Kagbeni. Most are Buddhists, but many still adhere to the precepts of Bon, a pre-Buddhist animistic religion from Tibet that emphasizes nature spirits and magic. One of the only Bonpo monasteries in a non-restricted area can be found up the Panda Khola in the village of Lupra.

The most recent settlers in the Annapurna Himal are the TIBETANS, refugees who crossed the border in 1959 to flee the invading Chinese. In general they are high altitude farmers or travelling merchants going back and forth from the high mountains to their refugee camp in Hyangja, just north of Pokhara.

Photo by Kevin Gresham

Chortens (Buddhist shrines), *gompas* (monasteries), and countless prayer flags and *mani walls* are passed on the Annapurna Circuit trail.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS

The vast majority of Nepalese people are dependent on forest resources to meet their daily needs. Over 90% of their heating and cooking energy comes from wood; in addition the trees provide timber for constructing and fencing, fodder for domestic animals, wild fruits and vegetables, medicines, fibres for rope and cloth, and a multitude of other essential items. Bamboo is used to weave mats and baskets, to build bridges and animal sheds. Rhododendron and pine are used to build houses, birch bark makes umbrellas and temporary dwellings waterproof, and the lealy branches of oak, sal and other sub-tropical species are the mainstay of cows and water buffalos.

40 Million Years Ago

The Himalaya's origin is complicated and controversial. Most estimates place its age at around 40 million years, making it the world's youngest and most dynamic mountain system. The generally accepted explanation for its existence is based on the theories of continental drift and plate tectonics. Moving imperceptibly northwards for thousands of years, the Indian subcontinent eventually collided with the Eurasian land mass, compressing the ocean that lay between into geological beds and forcing them upward with the continuing impact. Many fossilized remains of sea creatures called saligrams can still be found in the upper reaches of the Kali Gandaki Valley (please do not take them).

Steep and unstable, the Himalaya continue to be uplifted, compressed and folded today. With each period of movement, the rivers cut deeper into the earth's crust, exploiting faults, fractures, natural declivities or following their pre-Himalayan courses. Hot springs are a result of such activity, exposing the heat of the earth's interior to its outer surface. Human activity and the forces of nature are constantly sculpting its outside appearance: glaciers carve, smooth and polish, earthquakes trigger landslides and avalanches that sheer the mountainsides, and rains wash away thousands of tons of precious topsoil every year, the result of deforestation by human hands. The Himalaya are an open book of geological structures and processes, and there is no better place to witness such a wide range as in the Annapurna region.

Plants and Wildlife

The flora and fauna of the Himalaya show a remarkable diversity, a result of elevation extremes, climate and the function of the Himalaya as both a barrier and bridge for genetic movement. The Kali Gandaki River marks the biogeographical meeting of east and west; thus wildlife of the Annapurna area can be traced to influxes from Central Asia, India and Southeast Asia, and Europe and the Mediterranean.

While trekking in the Annapurna area, you'll pass through a wide range of vegetation zones: subtropical broadleaf forests (*Castanopis indica* and *Schima wallichii*), coniferous forests of fir (*Abies spectabilis*), blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), chir pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) and hemlock (*Tsuga dumosa*) on dry ridges and slopes with alder (*Alnus nepalensis*) along streams, and higher up temperate forests of mixed broadleaf, particularly the oaks (*Quercus lamellosa*, *Q. lanata* and *Q. semiserratifolia*) and rhododendron. Forests of birch (*Betula utilis*), blue pine and juniper characterize the subalpine zone, and still further up, the hardy dwarf rhododendron and juniper scrub represent alpine species. Groves of bamboo persist from subtropical into subalpine zones. And the rainshadow effect creates a mountain desert environment where a yellow spiny pea (*Caragana*) and low juniper shrubs meek out a dry existence.

Photo by DCAP

Lali gurans (rhododendron), Nepal's national flower, blooms in brilliant display at mid-elevations during Spring.

Mammals too generally cling to altitudinal and climatic zones. Common lower to middle range species include the rhesus macaque, the grey langur, the cats (except the snow leopard, one of the highest living animals), the wild boar, the squirrel and various rodents. At middle to high elevations, vegetative cover is less, thus animals such as the black bear, yellow throated marten, Himalayan musk deer, serow, tahr, bharal, marmot and pika are more elusive.

Photo by Kevin Gresham

The solitary snow leopard, identifiable by its size (as a large dog) and its 3 foot long tail, usually remains above the coniferous forest.

Birds of the Annapurna area are well recorded, numbering approximately 440 species. The Kali Gandaki Valley is an important migration route for some 40 species, birds which fly south from the Tibetan Plateau and Siberian steppe for winter. Some of the commonly seen birds include: kinglisher, thrush, drongo, chough, monal (pheasant), kestrel, tit, sunbird and redstart.

WEATHER

Nepal has two major trekking seasons: the Fall and the Spring. Fall is the most popular time with its clear skies and minimal rainfall. From December to February the weather turns very cold; crossing Thorung La or going up to the Annapurna Basecamp may be extremely difficult and dangerous, or altogether impossible. March through May is delightful with fewer people on the trails and the rhododendron trees and other flowers in bloom. Bird life is exceptionally active at this time. The weather is generally warmer but subject to storms and thunderstowers. From June to mid-September the monsoon prevails, drenching the southern slopes of the Annapurnas with its fury. Landslides occur and leeches abound. However this is a perfect time to be in Jomsom or Manang: the rainshadow effect of the Himalaya blocks the monsoon from the Tibetan Plateau, and these areas remain dry, clear and warm.

TREKKER SAFETY TIPS

Trekking in the Himalaya is a rigorous activity. Many problems can arise, both natural and man-made. Bad weather and trail re-routings are a fact of life, but injury, theft, or sickness can spoil the trip of a lifetime. Health, police and communication services are often days apart and unreliable, so the best solution is to BE PREPARED before you enter the mountains. Some things to keep in mind:

- Don't trek alone. Go with a friend or a guide from a reliable trekking company and always tell someone where you are going and your general time frame. Hiring someone off the street as a guide or porter is risky and should be avoided.
- Guard your personal belongings: Always lock your door in lodges and keep watch over tents, even for quick trips to the bathroom!
- Register at all ACAP and police check posts.
- Treat all water: Only iodine or certain filters are effective against giardia and other bacteria that cause the most common trekker ailment, diarrhea. Hot drinks, bottled sodas and water are safe. If you do contract a gastro-intestinal problem, drink plenty of liquids or use an oral rehydration fluid to avoid dehydration.
- Drink Up! Daily exertion at higher than normal altitudes requires great amounts of liquids, so be sure you drink plenty of water every day. When crossing passes or on hot or difficult days, avoid alcohol and caffeine from the night before to the end of that day, and of course, get plenty of rest.
- Take proper equipment: No matter where you are in the Annapurna area, be prepared for extremes in temperature and inclement weather. Clothing, shoes, and sleeping bags that are warm and waterproof are essential and should be packed to avoid getting wet. Always take a first aid kit and know its contents. Independent porters and guides are your responsibility. Before embarking on your journey, make sure they have warm clothing and proper shoes, and sun glasses if spending much time in the snow.
- Learn the symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS): AMS is a life-threatening illness that generally affects people who ascend too quickly. It can affect anyone at any time, regardless of physical conditioning or age. When crossing Thorung La (5390 metres) or visiting the Annapurna Basecamp (4130 metres), ascend slowly and allow for rest days around 3600 m and then at 4000 to 4300 m. Make a conscious effort to drink at least five litres or more of fluid per day, avoiding alcohol and caffeine. Early AMS symptoms include: headache, nausea, insomnia, lack of appetite, irregular breathing, cough or lung congestion, lassitude, loss of coordination and reduced urine output. If symptoms are multiple or severe descend immediately 500 metres or more. Continued ascent can result in death. When in doubt, DESCEND, DESCEND, DESCEND. For more information, visit the Himalayan Rescue Association at the Kathmandu Guest House in Kathmandu.
- Plan your trip well: There are several outstanding guidebooks to the Annapurna region that are available in local bookstores. It is highly recommended to bring a good route description on your trek.

For the Curious

With a little planning, you can enjoy some of the area's natural and cultural highlights in addition to its everyday beauty. Give your body and soul a rest in the hot springs at Tatopani, Chame and Bahundanda. Visit with Buddhist monks and nuns, gaze upon sacred paintings, in the numerous monasteries, or *gompas* of Manang, Braga (500 years old), Tukuche, Syang, Marpha and surrounding villages.

If you happen to be in the Thak Khola region during October-December, you might experience a *dyokyapsi*, a colourful, multi-day celebration with masked dancing held at the local monasteries. Walk the trail of thousands of religious pilgrims to Muktinath, one of the holiest shrines in the area for both Buddhists and Hindus. It is believed that bathing here will bring salvation after death. As in all religious places, be respectful: take off shoes and if able, leave a donation. At monasteries, pass all shrines on their left; do not enter monasteries or temples wearing scant clothing; never take anything, including plants and stones, from the premises, and of course, do not use grounds near sacred spots (those demarcated by prayer flags or red sindur powder, for example) as toilet areas.

Dasain and Tihar are the most important Hindu holidays, lasting several days from mid-October to mid-November. Both are celebrated throughout the hill regions with family reunions, large bamboo swings for the children, traditional foods, caroling, candle-lit nights and days to honour special animals and humans. Yartung, a Buddhist festival, is celebrated in Muktinath near the end of August-early September to mark the return of domestic animals from their high summer pastures. Horse racing, dancing, drinking and gambling make it an exciting occasion for all.

Other places to visit: Nepal Mountaineering School, Hongde. Poon Hill for fantastic Himalayan views near Ghorepani; Pipar Pheasant Reserve and Ghasa to observe some of Nepal's most interesting and colourful birds, including the national bird, the Danphe; Tilicho Lake, one of the world's highest, surrounded by breathtaking peaks and glaciers; and Ghandruk and Kuldighar to see some of ACAP's activities first hand.

Photo by Mingma Norbu

Among ACAP projects coordinated with villagers are: building of latrines and community reforestation nurseries.

EMERGENCY!

Emergency rescue by helicopter is possible from nearly any place below 5200 metres but should be only used in life-threatening situations. Rescue costs are US $600/hour and payment must be guaranteed by someone in a trekking agency or embassy in Kathmandu before the flight starts. A rescue may take 2½ hours or more and may be altogether impossible because of unpredictable weather conditions. Radio messages can be sent through the below listed contact points and should contain the following information: location of pick-up, elevation, name of injured person(s) and nationality, details of sickness, whether oxygen/stretcher/doctor are required.

Facilities and Services

Hospitals: Pokhara, Besishahar, Jomsom

Healthposts/Trekkers' Aid: Ghandruk, Manang/Hongde (staffed in trekking season only), Tatopani

Radio: Ghandruk-ACAP HQ, Kuldighar, Chame (Police), Jomsom (Police, Army and Royal Nepal Airline Office)

Airstrips: Jomsom, Hongde (Manang)

ACAP/Trekker Information: Ghandruk-ACAP HQ, Chhomrong-ACAP, Kuldighar-ACAP Research Station and Lodge, Ghorepani, Pokhara-Annapurna Regional Museum, Prithivi Narayan Campus

Police Check Posts: Dhampus, Ghandruk, Naudanda, Besishahar, Dharapani, Koto, Hongde, Jomsom, Muktinath, Tatopani.

Kerosene Depot: Chhomrong

Banks: Jomsom, Chame, Besishahar

MINIMUM IMPACT CODE

Every year, the increasing numbers of trekkers have had a great impact on the environmental quality of the Annapurna region. As visitors and friends, join ACAP in its efforts to preserve the sanctity of this region for generations to come. To step gently in the Himalaya, we ask that you :

Photo by Shreeram Bista

As visitor and friends, join ACAP in its efforts to preserve the sanctity of the Annapurna region.

Conserve Firewood: Use stoves; stay at lodges that use kerosene or fuel efficient wood stoves; travel with trekking companies that use kerosene; make no open fires — put warm clothes on instead; limit hot showers to two per week. Kerosene can be purchased at Chhomrong.

Respect the Villagers and their Traditions: Consider your appearance: women should not wear shorts or revealing blouses — below the knee skirts or dresses are comfortable and convenient, especially for toilet needs; men should always wear a shirt; outward displays of physical affection and nudity are highly offensive to local people; when taking photographs, ask permission and respect people's privacy; observe standard food and bed charges. Try to learn Nepalese customs, be friendly, patient and remember, you're a guest.

Stop Pollution: Don't litter the environment with cigarette butts, toilet paper, wrappers, bottles, cans, etc. — use rubbish pits, burn, bury or pack it out; carry a small shovel with which to bury wastes; use toilet facilities -- if none exist, make sure you are at least 20 metres from water sources.

Encourage Nepali Pride: Help dispel the myth that Western societies are affluent and without problems — give a true picture of your country, both good and bad; say "*naa raamro*" ("not good") to begging children and don't give anything — it creates a never ending cycle of dependence, decreases self-worth and does more harm than good; don't give medicines unless you can provide follow-up care — instead encourage the use of local health posts and emphasize cleanliness.

While trekking, ponder your impact on the environment and culture. Teach people the importance of respecting nature and how to conserve it. By assisting in these small ways you will help Nepal enormously.

AVERAGE TREKKING TIMES

Annapurna Circuit: Duration — approx. 21 days, easiest if starting from Marsyangdi side. Thorung La is generally closed from mid-December to mid-March due to heavy snowfall. Jeeps are available from Dumre to Besishahar. Times include walking time only and will vary if approaching from the Thak Khola side.

Destination	Hours	Destination	Hours
Dumre-Turture	2.30	Manang	.30
Paundidk	2.30	Letdar	3
Phalyasangu	2.30	Thorung Phedi	1.45
Besishahar	3	Muktinath	6
Khudi	2	Jharkot	1
Bhulbhule	1	Kagbeni	3
Bahundanda	3	Jomsom	2
Syonje	2.30	Marpha	1.30
Jagat	1.30	Tukuche	1.30
Chamje	1	Khobang	1
Tal	2	Kalopani	2
Dharapani	2	Ghasa	3.30
Bagarchhap	1	Kabre	2
Koto	3	Tatopani	2.30
Chame	1.30	Sikha	2.30
Bhratang	1.30	Ghorepani	2.30
Pisang	3	Ulleri	1.45
Hongde	1.30	Chandrakot	3
Braga	1.30	Suikhet	3

Annapurna Sanctuary: Duration — approx. 10 to 12 days. Jeeps are available from the Shining Hospital in Pokhara to Suikhet. Consult the map for the various ways to reach Chhomrong, the beginning of the Annapurna Sanctuary. Campsites and lodges get crowded in peak season, especially above Chhomrong. Stagger longer/short trekking days to avoid overcrowding. FIRES ARE NOT ALLOWED IN THE ANNAPURNA SANCTUARY -- BRING WARM, WATERPROOF CLOTHING, STAY AT LODGES OR BE SELF -- SUFFICIENT IN YOUR FUEL SUPPLY, INCLUDING TREKKING STAFF. STOVES AND KEROSENE ARE AVAILABLE IN CHHOMRONG.

Destination	Hours	Destination	Hours
Suikhet-Dhampus	1.30	Doban	1
Pothana	1	Himalaya	1
Bhichok	1.30	Hinku	1
Landruk	1	Deurali	.30
Himalpani	1.30	Bagar	.30
Chhomrong	4	Machhapuchhre BC	1.30
Kuldighar	3	Annapurna BC	1.30
Tip Top	.30		

Following the same route back to Chhomrong, then proceed to

Kyumnung	2
Ghandruk	2.30
Birethanti	3.30
Chandrakot	1
Kaare	1.30
Naudanda	1.30
Suikhet	45

Nepal is here to change you not for you to change Nepal

CONSERVATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Under the patronage of His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation is Nepal's leading non-profit, non-governmental conservation organization. It operates under a Board of Trustees with members from Nepal and abroad, chaired by His Royal Highness Prince Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah. KMTNC believes that lasting environmental protection in Nepal cannot occur without first improving the living standards of the people. With support from the Trust's international chapters and various government and non-government agencies such as World Wildlife Fund and Smithsonian Institute, the Trust coordinates a variety of programmes with the goal of conservation for development.

For more information on the Trust and its international chapters, please contact:
KMTNC PO Box 3712 Babar Mahal Kathmandu
Tel: 223-229
Tlx: 2567 KMTNC NP

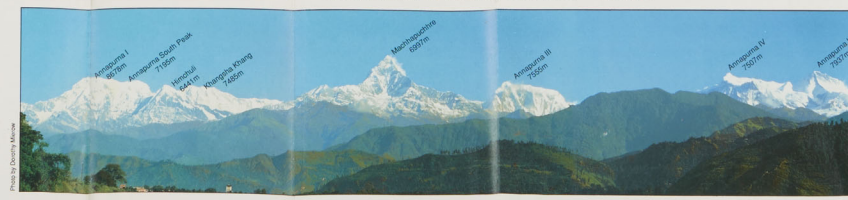

Photo by Dorothy Mercer

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ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA

SCALE 1:125000

TREKKING MAP