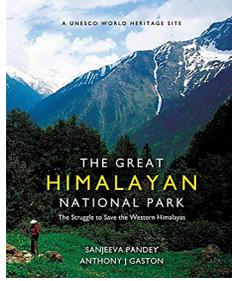


The Great Himalayan National Park: The Struggle to Save the Western Himalayas

By Sanjeeva Pandey and Anthony J. Gaston. 2019. Niyogi Books. 364 pages, 284 colour photos, and 15 maps, 54.00 CAD, Cloth.

The Himalayas: surely this is one of the most evocative names in world geography, for who has not seen inspiring images of the world's grandest peaks and heard epic tales of scaling their summits? This book is set in the Himalayas but to appreciate its significance you must lower your eyes a few degrees, focussing not on the snow-shrouded crags but on the green slopes below, on the meadows and forests. The biological richness of the Himalayas lies at these elevations, not in the awe-inspiring realm of rock, ice, and snow. The mountains' richness rests on three axes: first and most conspicuously, a vertical dimension, driven by the steep climate gradient tied to elevation that generates profoundly different habitats for a diverse suite of species. Secondly, there is a sharp north-south axis because the height of the Himalayan range makes it a barrier between two major biogeographic realms. Thus, you can have Himalayan Brown Bears (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) and Ibex (*Capra sibirica sakeen*) of the Palearctic realm living just over the ridge from Asiatic Black Bears (*Ursus tibetanus*) and Himalayan Serow (*Capricornis thar*) of the Oriental realm. Finally, there is an important west to east increase in rainfall. All three of these considerations make the area selected for the Great Himalayan National Park a geographic crossroads meriting special protection, especially given the threat of fragmenting ecological continuity. Imagine a species inhabiting forests on the south face of the Himalayas at elevations between 2000–3000 m; their geographic range is essentially a long narrow ribbon, easily severed by deforestation. Indeed, throughout the Himalayas forests at these intermediate elevations are markedly under-represented in protected area systems. These perspectives are introduced in the book's opening chapter and prominent throughout, along with the other main rationale for siting a park here: the area's low levels of human settlement and concomitant disturbance from logging and livestock grazing.

The next chapter, "Trekking", describes in lovely prose and photos what a visit to the park is like and it has inspired me to try to organize a return. (Full disclosure: I participated in two of the early surveys [spring and fall of 1980] organized by Tony Gaston that became a foundation for park creation but have



not been back since.) Unfortunately, as a 'details person' I found it frustrating not to be able to find most of the spots described or photographed on the maps; even the trekking routes are not mapped.

In "Development of GHNP", the book returns to the 1980s and the creation of the park. Some of this chapter is down in the weeds of the requisite steps that are specific to India's governance but of wider interest is how park development was advanced with the local population. Thoughtful park design mitigated some potential conflicts, i.e., by delineating a core area that contained just three villages (120 inhabitants) and then along the western boundary creating a 230 km² Ecodevelopment Zone that held 160 villages with 14 000 people. Traditional rights to collect herbs for personal use became a problem when this morphed into commercial sales on which a thousand households were dependent, and inevitably these people became very agitated when this commerce was terminated. The key to recovery came in the formation of 95 Women's Saving and Credit Groups (a large number to accommodate both different villages and different social strata) that earned income from vermicomposting and other activities. Further insights into park-people relations are covered in "People and the GHNP", which has a potpourri of sections including religious traditions (sacred trees and groves), education (from 1989 to 2002 the only school in the park was in a cave), species targeted by herbalists, and the creation of a support organization, Friends of GHNP, with the Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*) as its mascot. The Friends group took the lead in applying for UNESCO World Heritage Site status for the park and adjoining protected areas, collectively an area of 2854 km², thus garnering formal recognition of the global significance of this place.

The next three chapters focus on the park's natural history, the first a seasonal chronicle beautifully illustrated with flower photos, followed by two overviews of the park's birds and mammals with special attention on charismatic species like the pheasants and carnivores. In the final chapter, "Future of Biodiversity in the Western Himalayas", the authors ruminate on the on-going process of managing the park in a way that will further the interests of the local people while maintaining its unique biological heritage. This challenge will unfold in the face of ever-changing threats, such as tourism pressures from the millions of Indians who seek cool, pleasant playgrounds to escape Delhi and other cities.

In summary, this book shares many attributes—such as wonderful photographs and writing—with other volumes that have been written to celebrate the natural wonders of the world's special places. It differs from most analogous books in the depth with which it tells the story of all the hard work that underlies protecting such places—from foundational science to pure politics. I particularly enjoyed the distillation of this that is captured nicely in the Foreword and Afterword, written by Gaston and Pandey respectively, in which they give personal accounts of

the decades of work they have devoted to this unique place. All in all, it is a tale that should be of interest to anyone concerned with protected area creation and management, especially in places where the livelihoods of local people are directly and tightly tied to natural resources.

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